

## **LEARNING CONTRACTS: Sharing Responsibilities With Learners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Present day educators are of the opinion that meaningful second language learning should be learner-centered, autonomous, co-operative and reflective. By choosing and carrying out activities that allow learners to play an active role and use the target language in a meaningful way in the classroom, learners are expected to acquire more skills in the language (Nunan, 1988; Sheils, 1988). According to Sheils (1988) and Holec (1981) an effective second language program should promote learner autonomy and self-direction so that the learning process can be extended beyond the four walls of the classroom. One of the ways of promoting learner autonomy is through the introduction of **Learning Contracts** in the language class. The focus of this paper is to discuss the advantages and implications of using **Learning Contracts** in the ESL/FL context. To strengthen the argument for **Learning Contracts**, a case study of two courses conducted by the Faculty of Language Studies, UKM, where learning contracts have been used on a trial basis is cited. The paper also provides some useful guidelines for teachers to try out learning contracts in their language classes.

The English language teaching scenario in Malaysia centers on a common syllabus and a central evaluation system dictated by the national curriculum. Teachers are left with little or no flexibility to create or choose their own syllabus. Besides this, the other realities that we have to take into consideration when discussing the ELT situation in Malaysia would be the large classes (average 40 or more students), inadequate time allocation for teaching English (200 minutes per week) and the wide differences in proficiency levels. All these have led to a gradual decline in students' general proficiency and performance in the English language. There is an earnest effort by policy makers, education planners, curriculum developers, teacher trainers and English language teachers to check this decline. Various ways and means are constantly explored to promote English language usage and acquisition among Malaysian students.

Even though there are several limitations to innovations and experiments by teachers and teacher trainers to introduce major changes in the Malaysian ESL program, these practitioners can still investigate the possibilities of introducing new elements in the existing program to promote better learning. Terms such as **learner centeredness, co-operative and reflective learning, learner motivation** are often found in our documents and literature but they are seldom given importance in the ESL classroom. Choosing and carrying out activities

that would allow the learner to play an active role in using the target language in a meaningful way in the classroom, will enable students to acquire more skills in the language (Nunan, 1988; Sheils, 1988). An effective second language program should promote learner autonomy and self-direction so that the learning process can be extended beyond the four walls of the classroom and provide the motivation, which is often missing.

Such a language learning experience can promote co-operation and teamwork among learners so that the weaker ones can benefit from the better learners (Johnson et al., 1991). It should also empower the student to make certain decisions about the language learning activities he/she is going to undertake and be responsible for the outcomes. This will provide the "cognitive motivation" which is believed to increase the effectiveness of learning, enabling learners to be more responsible for their learning (Dickinson, 1995). In other words, elements of **learner training** should be introduced in the ESL classroom to wean students away from being totally teacher dependent. This is in line with the Ministry of Education's policy to introduce learner training in Malaysian schools (Compendium Vol. II-1991 p.1). By enabling students to be independent learners, it is believed that language learning can be extended outside the classroom with limited assistance from the teacher. This element of independence and sharing some of the responsibilities in learning is also stressed in the National Philosophy of Education.

Lee (1998) in discussing a case study in Learner Training suggests that if learner training activities which include **learning contracts** can be incorporated systematically in the classroom, these can help students become more aware of the learning process, more ready to take charge of their own learning and empower themselves to make their own changes to the process whenever necessary.

Learner training involves both Methodological and Psychological preparations. Methodological preparation would entail providing the learner with the various methods and framework to manage the learning process without the constant interference of a teacher. Psychological preparation on the other hand, would be to convince the learner that he can and will be able to manage the learning process without the help of the teacher. This is the actual process of weaning the student away from total teacher dependence to self-dependence. Both Methodological and Psychological preparations complement each other and have to be introduced gradually over a period of time. As Pennycook (1997) suggests, "to develop student autonomy in language learning is a matter of handing over the reins, giving students greater control over the curriculum, giving them greater control over resources, of letting them negotiate what, when, how they want to learn". The question is, how do we develop this

autonomy in our classrooms? Several ways have been suggested, one of which is the use of learning contracts.

### **What is a Learning Contract?**

A learning contract is a pledge made by a learner to his teacher (or to himself when he is totally autonomous) and a pledge by the teacher in return. It contains details of what will be learned, when it will be learned, and what criteria will be used to evaluate what has been learned. According to Hammond and Collins (1991), it is like a curriculum with statements of objective, teaching methods, timetable and assessment methods but these are rephrased to focus on the learner rather than the teacher. In their opinion the major strength of a learning contract is that it provides greater autonomy and power for the students by allowing them to plan, manage and assess their own learning. Dart and Clarke (1991) hold the same opinion regarding the benefits of the learning contract. They see the use of learning contracts as a way for greater self-direction by allowing students to control their learning experiences to meet their own needs and interests, and to give them the opportunity to develop skills necessary for educating themselves. According to McGarrell (1996), learning contracts are written commitments learners make throughout a course to specify their learning intentions for each of several contract periods which enable them to make relevant choices from their learning options.

Teachers too have important responsibilities in implementing learning contracts in the ESL classroom. First and foremost, they should understand that they are a party in the contracts and sign them in front of the student. Secondly, they should honor the contract and carry out their part of it seriously and sincerely. For example, if the teacher had agreed to read an essay and give his comments on a specified day, he should complete his task as agreed. Any failure on the part of the teacher will shatter the trust and confidence of the learners in the learning contracts.

### **Why Use Learning Contracts?**

As we have seen above; learning contracts can provide a greater sense of autonomy to the students, which in turn may motivate them to take a more active role in the language learning process. Another important reason for using learning contracts is to help students cope with the management of the learning process during the transition period from teacher-directed learning to self-directed learning so that learning will become a life-long process. This indeed, is the ultimate goal of the education system in Malaysia. As we have seen

earlier, in the teacher directed learning situation, the planning, management and assessment aspects of the learning process are totally under the control of the teacher with the students having no part in them at all. However, in the self-directed learning situation, the students will be responsible for all these aspects of the learning process. The transition period during which the students are going to move from a totally teacher directed learning environment to a more autonomous learning environment, is not an easy one. During this period, the students need a structure, a framework for planning, managing and assessing their own learning. This can be provided by learning contracts.

### Other Ways of Using Learning Contracts

The learning contract can be used for various purposes. In an advanced learning situation, where the learners are pursuing a course away from the institution, a learning contract can be drawn to cover an entire course and can be enforced over a long period. At school level, where pupils may not be able to manage a long-term plan, it could be utilized as a daily "work contract" (Rogers, 1983). Alternatively, learning contracts can be drawn up to cover certain language programs, such as an intensive reading program or the 'process approach to writing' program. Greenwood (1988) demonstrates how learning contracts can be used in a 'developmental reading program' involving middle and junior school pupils.

According to Greenwood, students appreciate the freedom and independence provided by the learning contracts. He suggests the use of three different types of learning contracts in the development of independent learning. During the initial stages, the contract drawn between the teacher and his pupils is known as a **non-negotiable** contract. In this type of contract, almost all the terms are clearly specified by the teacher. The purpose of doing so is to allow the students to gradually adjust themselves to work on their own but with the teacher's guidance. After the students have gained some confidence in managing their learning, the **partially negotiable** contract is introduced. This type of contract contains almost equal parts of negotiable and non-negotiable sections. This will enable the students to see themselves as equal partners in some of the decision-making processes. When the students are very familiar with contract learning and are able to draw up their own contract, the more **negotiable** contract is introduced. The third kind of contract is largely negotiable but there are still some aspects, which are compulsory for the students to do. (Refer to Appendices 1 – 3 for examples of the three kinds of contracts.)

Dickinson, (1987) provides another example of a learning contract (language skills contract) primarily used in the Scottish Centre for Education Overseas. In

this type of contract where a student undertakes to acquire certain linguistic skills (learning objectives) within a relatively short period of time (a month), the student would negotiate with his/her teacher and draw up a contract towards this aim.

### **Experiment with Adult-learners**

A small-scale experiment was conducted with a number of undergraduates in the Language Faculty of UKM. Learning contracts were introduced in two courses on a trial basis during the first semester of the 1998/99 session. One of the courses was a content course, Teaching of Literature in English (VB 2473) and the other was an English for Specific Purposes course called English for Business 1 (VG 2013).

### **Background of Participants**

The students who took the VB2473 course were from the Faculty of Education, UKM. Even though all the students were majoring in TESL, very few of them had any interest in Literature in English or in teaching it. Therefore, their motivation was low. Some of the students would not participate in any class activity unless forced to do so. In other words, they were not the kind of active participants a teacher would like to have in a class. The other group of students (28 of them) was from the Faculty of Economics. This was a mixed ability group with the majority of below average language proficiency level. Although they understood the needs and the importance of English in the commercial world, they were not extremely motivated. Therefore, participation in class activities and project work was, on the average, poor.

### **Students' Initial Response to Learning Contracts**

At the beginning of the semester, when the teacher talked about learning contracts and how they would be used in class, there was very little enthusiasm from the students. After much encouragement, all students from both the classes agreed to participate in the program. Students in the literature group were given only the non-negotiable contracts whereas students in the Business English course were given both the negotiable and the partially negotiable contracts. The teacher made sure the entire exercise was treated very seriously and signed all the contracts in front of the students.

## **Students' Views on the Use of Learning Contracts**

Towards the end of the semester, most of the students involved in the program were interviewed to obtain their views and opinions about the use of Learning Contracts in the courses. The following are the major findings from the interview:

- a) Almost all students from both courses felt that the Learning Contracts were useful in disciplining them to complete the tasks within an agreed time frame.
- b) Students felt that they were more involved in the course than before because they were allowed to voice their views and opinions before they signed the agreements. However, students from the VB2473 course felt that they should have been given more freedom to decide what they would like to work on and how much they could do within a specified period of time.
- c) Students from the VG2013 course felt that Learning Contracts were very useful because they were able to negotiate with the teacher and decide on their undertakings and the order they chose to do them.
- d) Students from both courses indicated that they would like to sign more learning contracts for other courses if given the opportunity.

## **Advantages and Limitations of Using Learning Contracts**

- a) As mentioned by the students, learning contracts helped them complete the tasks according to the time schedule they had agreed upon.
- b) The contracts also gave them a sense of autonomy and partnership in the learning process.
- c) Generally, there was keener participation from all students including the weaker ones. They were eager to prove to their peers that they too, could honor their agreements.
- d) To what extent the use of learning contracts had improved students' performance (in terms of grades) in both the courses could not be determined because there were too many variables involved and the duration of the courses was also too short.

- e) It could be concluded that the learning contracts served a better purpose in the ESP and language proficiency courses because there was more flexibility and room for negotiation between the teacher and the student.
- f) The main limitation of the learning contracts was the teacher had added responsibilities because he/she had to read all the documents and include in writing his/her commitment to the contracts before signing them.

The implication from the above discussion is that the teacher can decide to introduce any form of learning contract at any stage of the learning process as long as he/she has a clear objective for doing so. Learning contracts are also flexible in the sense that they allow the teacher and the student to design them in whatever way deemed suitable.

As mentioned earlier, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia is fully aware of the need to experiment with various methods and approaches in English language teaching to meet the ever-intensifying challenges of TESL. One such experiment is the setting up of self-access centers in schools and teacher training colleges to facilitate self-directed learning. For this purpose, the services of foreign as well as local consultants are sought. However, the setting up of self-access centers with adequate self-directed learning materials alone will not create autonomous learners. Learners should also be trained to use these facilities effectively. The introduction of learning contracts can be a crucial part of such training. Through learning contracts, learners can be trained to identify suitable materials, set their learning objectives and fix a time frame to work on the selected material. The learners should also be rewarded for the successful completion of a learning contract.

An argument against the introduction of any form of autonomous learning in Malaysia is that the idea of autonomy and independence is from the West and therefore, is not suitable in the Malaysian context. According to Little and Dam (1998), autonomy is a universal human attribute and seeking to foster learner autonomy in a second or foreign language classroom, is merely responding to one of the defining characteristics of humanity. Therefore, introducing the use of learning contracts in Malaysian schools is a definite possibility. It may take some time and effort to implement this change, as it is not easy to move away from the existing teacher monopolised classroom environment.

### **Guidelines for Using Learning Contracts:**

Below are some suggestions (adapted from Hammond & Collins, 1991 and Greenwood, 1988), to help teachers successfully introduce contract learning in

their situations. I believe that these can help to reduce some of the anticipated problems in contract learning.

- a) First and foremost, do not be over ambitious when drawing up the contract. In other words, do not include too many skills and exercises in the contract. Make sure the contract period does not exceed a fortnight during the initial stage. For a student who has never experienced learning contracts before, managing a long-term contract could be difficult and boring.
- b) Do not force students to sign a contract if they are not prepared to do so. Let them observe the others and be convinced that it would benefit them.
- c) Until students are ready to draw up their own contracts, do not force them to do so. Prepare a ready-made contract (non-negotiable) during the initial stages and move on to partially and negotiable contracts (also ready-made). Finally, when the students are truly familiar with the learning contracts, allow them to prepare their own contracts.
- d) Have a credit system whereby a certain number of points would be awarded for every successfully completed learning contract. For the non-completion of a contract or a contract which has exceeded the time frame, a penalty should be imposed. This will motivate students to participate more seriously.
- e) Always give the impression that this is an important and serious learning activity and students should not take things lightly.
- f) If the teacher has also agreed to perform a task under the agreement, for example, agreeing to mark an essay within a particular period, he should never fail to comply with the agreement.
- g) Provide adequate information about the learning contract and how the program is to be carried out. It is better to provide each student with a handout, so that they will know exactly what they have to do.
- h) Design a simple and effective filing system to store and retrieve the contracts.
- i) Make sure there are enough resource materials. Train students on how to retrieve materials in the library or the self-access center (if there is one).



## Conclusion

Learning how to learn is an important and integral part of language learning. However, this aspect is often neglected not only in the language classroom but also in the curriculum and ESL syllabus. It should not be left to teachers to discover aspects of learner training or autonomous learning in the syllabus and curriculum. It should be made explicit. Teachers should also be exposed and trained to plan and introduce learner training in stages in the teaching process. The greatest achievement of a teacher is not to impart as much knowledge as possible to his/her students but to develop them into active, effective and efficient learners so that learning becomes a life-long process. Finally, a word of caution when drawing up and implementing learning contracts is that, these contracts are meant strictly for an educational purpose as a learner training strategy. As such, they should not be treated as legally binding documents.

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## Appendix 1: Non-Negotiable Contract

Non-Negotiable Contract Course Code: VB2473 Sem. 11 1997/1998

Ref: VB2473 (B.Ed.Tesl) Contract Date 24/11/97-6/12/97

I ..... of Group....., hereby agree to complete the following tasks by 21/6/99. I understand the contract is worth 10% of my total marks for the semester.

1. Write out a lesson plan for a 40-minute class period for one of the three main genres of Literature. It can be either small L or Big L. I will specify the proficiency level of my students and a short rationale for my plan. (10%)

I further agree to complete my tasks according to the schedule that I have drawn up. I also understand that I am free to plan my schedule and make amendments with the consent of my tutor. I understand a heavy penalty will be imposed if I do not meet the set deadlines.

.....  
(Signature of Student)

I agree to provide specific instructions and input for the above assignments. I will be available for consultations at the times that I have specified. Work will be graded and feedback will be promptly provided.

.....  
S. Nackeeran.

## Appendix 2: Non-Negotiable Contract

Non- Negotiable Contract Course Code: VB2473 Sem 11 1997 / 1998  
Ref: VB2473(B.Ed.Tesl-) Contract Date 17/1/98 – 6/2/98

I..... of Group ....., hereby agree to complete the following task by 21/6/99. I understand the contract is worth 20% of my total marks for the semester.

1. Based on what I have learned, I will design a Test which consists of 4 sections (focusing on the 4 genres taught). (20%)

I further agree to complete my task according to the schedule that I have drawn up. I also understand that I am free to plan my schedule and make amendments with the consent of my tutor. I understand a heavy penalty will be imposed if I do not meet the set deadlines.

.....  
(Signature of Student)

I agree to provide specific instructions and input for the above assignment. I will be available for consultations at the times that I have specified. Work will be graded and feedback will be promptly provided.

.....  
S. Nackeeran

### Appendix 3: Partially Negotiable Contract

Partially Negotiable Contract  
Ref: VG2013-Business English - Contract Period: 21/6/98-8/7/98

Now that I understand my learning contract guidelines, I....., hereby agree to complete the following tasks within the period mentioned above.

#### **a. Non-negotiable**

1. Job Application (10%)  
a) Cover letter/resume
2. Write a goodwill letter (10%)
3. Complete the job application letter from the web page and e-mail it to the tutor. .. (5%)

#### **b. Negotiable**

1. Prepare meeting notes for a mock meeting
2. Read the article on Marketing Ethics and summarize it
3. Write a letter of adjustment

#### **c. Others**

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....

(Total marks: 25%)

.....  
(Signature of Student)

.....  
(Tutor)