

Exploring the Use of Learning Contracts among Low English Proficiency Rural Learners

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the use of learning contracts among low English proficiency learners in a Malaysian rural secondary school. The objectives were to explore the learners' experiences in using the learning contract and to study the impact of the learning contract on them. The participants consisted of four students and a teacher in a rural secondary school in Sabah, Malaysia. After a week's training, the learning contract was administered for five months. Data was collected through reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed using content analysis and thematic coding. The findings showed that the learners' experiences and impact of the learning contract were positive. The learning contract helped to improve language skills and learning skills as well as increase motivation. The roles of peers and teachers were also discussed in the findings.

KEYWORDS: learner autonomy, learning contract, low English proficiency, rural learners

Introduction

Finding ways to help weak ESL learners in the classroom, especially learners from rural areas, is one of ESL teachers' major concerns. Low English proficiency learners are often distinguished by their academic performance in tests, examinations or classroom learning tasks (Hsu & Sheu, 2008). Most Malaysian rural ESL students possess low proficiency levels. The failure rate in English subject is high in rural areas (Wahab, Sawran, Hamid & Ayub, 2004) and the school's location is one of the contributing factors to the high failure rate. Problems stemming from the remote location such as lack of exposure, facilities and even teachers contribute further to the problem. However, despite problems related to the learners' remote location, based on experiences and observations as a teacher, most weak learners possess the desire to improve yet they are hindered by the lack of learning know-hows and the inability to use English language learning strategies, in which their repertoires are limited, to passive learning strategies such as memorization (Ho, 1999). Hsu and Sheu (2008) found that weak learners are lagging in terms of aptitude, learning strategies, beliefs and learning behaviours compared to good learners. To address this issue, a practical approach is needed to encourage these learners to acquire learning how to learn skills and to take their learning beyond the classroom walls.

The use of the learning contract in the education field, commonly used at tertiary levels (Ismail & Alauyah, 2012; Jumali et al., 2013; Mohammed 2010; O'Halloran & Delaney, 2011) has been known to be positive. A learning contract, according to Hammond and Collins (1991) is a "detailed statement prepared by the learner, usually with the support of a mentor or facilitator and it is developed after learning needs have been diagnosed" (p. 131).

Although the learning contract has shown positive outcomes in language learning for university students (Atiq & Normah, 2012; Ismail & Alauyah, 2012; Ya'acob, Othman, Kamarulzaman & Mokhtar, 2012) and adult learners (Anderson, Boud & Sampson, 1994; O'Halloran & Delaney, 2011) limited studies have been carried out at secondary school levels except for Sidhu et al. (2011) who studied the learning contract in an urban all girls secondary school. Apart from the gap in participants' demographics, studies involving the learning contract also lack exploration in the experiences of limited English proficiency secondary students. Previous studies on the learning contract are also lacking in rural learners' perspectives as most studies were focused on urban contexts (Ismail & Alauyah, 2012; Sidhu et al., 2011; Ya'acob et al., 2012).

Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of low English proficiency learners in using the learning contract. The objectives of this study are:

- a. To explore the learners' experiences in using the learning contract.
- b. To study the impact of the learning contract on low English proficiency learners.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- a. What are the learners' views and/or experiences in using the learning contract?
- b. What are the impacts of the learning contract on low English proficiency learners?

Methodology

Research design

This qualitative research takes the form of an ethnographic study. The rationale of employing the qualitative method is to enable the researcher to explore the experiences and views of the learners involved in this study in a richer, more in-depth manner.

Background of population and participants

Four Form Four students, comprising of two female students and two male students, were selected using purposive and convenience samplings. The school selected for this study was a rural secondary school located in a rural town near Keningau, Sabah. The participants were identified as low English proficiency learners based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012. For this study, the selected participants ranged from novice-mid to novice-high in the proficiency continuum. The four students involved were given pseudonyms, namely EA (female), KM (female), MH (male) and SZ (male). A teacher was also involved as an informant.

Data collection and procedure

The instruments used for this study were reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. The reflective journals were used to find out the learners' experiences and views as they utilised the activities in the learning contract. Considering that the participants were low English proficiency learners, they were allowed to use Bahasa Malaysia when writing their journal entries at the early stages of the contract and were encouraged to use English as the study progresses. The students were asked to write in the journal every two weeks regarding their views and experience while using the learning contract.

The semi-structured interview was conducted at the school library at the end of the contract to elicit more information on the learners' and teacher's views after utilising the learning contract. The interviews which lasted between 20 to 30 minutes each were audio recorded with the participants' permission. Like the journals, the participants were allowed to use Bahasa Malaysia to express their views during the interviews. Additional data was also taken from the researcher's observations and field notes.

The learning contract was administered for five months (refer to Appendix A) and was referred to by the participants as the "learning contract programme." The learning contract was constructed by first identifying the students' proficiency level through their scores in the English subject examination. Next, their language learning needs were identified together with potential English language learning activities that could aid the learners to improve their proficiency levels. Then, the contract's learning assessment strategies were determined. Finally, to complete the construction of the contract, the duration of the contract was set. The contract was written in simple English, however to ensure students understand the details and contents of the contract, the teacher involved also explained the contract to the students using Bahasa Malaysia.

Prior to entering the learning contract, the participants attended a one-week training and were briefed on the learning contract, selection of the learning activities and how to carry it out (see examples of activities in Appendix B). During the one week training, the researcher, the teacher and the participants gathered and discussed the participants' goals. Part of the consultation was to guide the participants on how to utilise the learning contract to help them achieve their goals, and to do that, both the researcher and teacher suggested the activities for the participants to include in their learning contract. The participants also selected several activities that they found could aid them in achieving their goals, apart from adding on learning activities that interested them. The training week also included planning and organising the learning activities into learning schedules, considering the level of guidance needed by the participants due to their low proficiency levels. At the end of the one-week training, the participants signed the contract, witnessed by the researcher and the teacher.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using Creswell's (2014) six steps in analysing and interpreting qualitative data. Firstly, the data was prepared and organized according to emergent themes. A preliminary analysis of the data was done through reading in order to obtain a general sense of the data. The data was then reduced, indexed, coded and categorised according to themes using a thematic framework (Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor, 2003). The data was presented verbatim in the following manner:

Participant's entry (EA, Interview)

EA represents the participant's pseudonym. "Interview" stands for data collected from an interview. English translations were provided for entries that used Bahasa Malaysia.

Findings and discussion

The findings of this study indicated that the participants experienced and viewed the learning contract positively in which improvements were seen in the participants' language skills and learning skills. The improvements also caused an increase in motivation in the participants. The roles of the teacher and peers were also found to be influential on the outcome of the study.

Improvement in language skills and learning skills

The participants observed improvements in both language skills and learning to learn skills. They found that their skills in writing, reading, speaking and listening have improved albeit at different levels for each learner. In terms of writing skills, SZ, for instance, observed that he improved in writing as he found that his "essay become better than before". To illustrate further, SZ recalled that prior to the learning contract, his "essay less with new words", implying that in the past, his essays were simple and peppered with wrong usage of grammar and vocabulary. From the researcher's observation, SZ's essays, despite following the correct context and format of writing, had poor grammar structure especially in terms of tenses and subject-verb agreement, added with poor usage of sentence structures. During the study, one of SZ's selected activities for the learning contract was listening to English songs and writing down new words in a notebook. In his journal, SZ wrote that he used Bruno Mars songs since he "already know the songs like Bruno Mars" and used phrases and words derived from one of Bruno Mars' song like "rain beats like bullets" in his essay. As he observed this improvement, he expressed in the journal that he "feel excited, like I feel confident to write an essays."

KM also realised that her writing skills seemed to improve. Like SZ, writing seemed to be difficult especially with her insecurities in grammar and lack of vocabulary. However, after doing one of the learning contract activities, which is "practicing grammar using workbooks", she found that she knew how to use the infinitive -to and the verb be correctly. She illustrated her difficulties and observed improvement in writing in the following journal extract:

"The difference that I see in myself before I'm started the programme is I'm just have a little bit confident when I use my own words. I'm still do not know how to use the perfect word. For instance, if we using 'to' we have to used original word. When we used 'was, is, are, were' we must use -ing. Hahaha... it was a simple ways ins't? I always confused with the using of past tense and present tense. I knows that practice make perfect. After that, I don't have any idea when I started wrote my first paragraph. To me it's soo hard to write an essays. But now, I feel that I can do better from before this."

(KM, *Reflective Journal*)

In terms of speaking skills, a typical weak ESL learner tends to avoid using the English language especially when it comes to speaking the language. In this study, the data suggest that some of the learners found that they were “braver” to use the English language when speaking to their peers and teacher. For instance, EA wrote in her journal that “whenever I try to speak in English, I still not sure how to express the beautiful word(s)”. It could be implied that although EA had the interest to speak in English, she seemed inhibited because by “express” she meant that she did not know how to use and pronounce some English words. However, she claimed that after starting the learning contract, she saw improvement in her speaking skills:

“but after I started this programme I more fluent and I already knew how to speak in English without afraid and feel shy.”
(EA, *Reflective Journal*)

From EA’s entry, it could be implied that she felt more confident and undaunted to speak to others in English. In MH’s case, based on the researcher’s and teacher’s observations, he was the least enthusiastic about activities in “speaking in English to others.” However, after the learning contract duration, he expressed himself through the following entry:

“Aktiviti yang telah membantu semasa menjalankan program ini pembentang BI tentang novel “The Curse” kerana saya boleh belajar bertutur atau bercakap BI dengan lebih baik. Bagi saya aktiviti ini berkesan terhadap saya atau mungkin berkesan kerana saya terpaksa belajar bercakap BI sebelum membentang.” (The activity that helped during this programme is (being) a presenter (for a classroom presentation) on “The Curse” novel because I can learn how to speak in English better. To me, this activity is or could be effective to me because I was forced to speak English before presenting).
(MH, *Reflective Journal*)

MH seemed to have some doubts pertaining to the activity that he found helpful. Nonetheless, it seemed that despite his uncertainties, he did imply that he at least put in effort to force himself to speak in English even though it was for a classroom presentation. A typical weak learner would, in his or her power, avoid using the language in classroom assignments such as presentations. The researcher looked back into her own experience of conducting classroom presentations in a weak learner class. Even though the presentation was merely a session of “show-and-tell” and a prepared script was given for the learners, most of them would be absent on the presentation day. When the researcher taught MH in the previous year, he would be one of the students who would provide excuses and would even deliberately be absent from school. However, during an informant check session with the teacher, the researcher asked about the said presentation. The teacher mentioned that not only was MH present during the presentation, he did deliver his part with the help of a prepared, written speech. It was not certain whether the script was written by him or by a friend, however it did prove that despite being less enthusiastic about the speaking activity, he at least had the effort to try.

Although the learners implied that they had observed some improvement in the writing and speaking skills, there seemed to be little mention of reading and listening skills. Nonetheless, the teacher mentioned that MH and KM displayed improvements in pronunciations when reading aloud:

“Her (KM) reading – her pronunciation is getting better...MH shows some improvement in reading and his pronunciation is getting better...”
(Teacher, Interview)

The teacher seemed to imply that both KM and MH improved in terms of pronunciation and fluency. From the responses above, it could be concluded that the improvement was due to some activities in the learning contract. The teacher mentioned about how KM seemed to benefit from such activities:

“When I asked her, she said she practiced from listening to music and singing. She watches English series too. She said listening to music and watching tv series are part of her contract’s activities.”
(Teacher, Interview)

In terms of listening skills, most of the participants utilised activities such as listening to and singing of English songs. These participants seemed to believe that the two activities had directly and indirectly helped them improve in their listening skills. EA illustrated this in her journal entry:

“Moreover, I realize listen to English songs can make my English more progress. As a result, I could sing along to English songs, after I listen English songs, that steps make me feel better because I know a lot of English songs, then I can sing along to English songs.”
(EA, Reflective Journal)

SZ also mentioned about how listening to English songs helped him indirectly in the listening skills and how he used some acquired vocabulary in his writing:

“I also listening English songs everyday for instance (new words that I found contoh), Jessie J (Price tag), Michael Jackson Billie Jean, Bruno Mars (Just the way you are). I like the Bruno Mars lyric when I see her face... (I think I can use the words in essays).”
(SZ, Reflective Journal)

From the journal entries of EA and SZ, the participants hinted that indirectly, listening to and singing of English songs had helped them improve their listening skills and gained new vocabulary for them to use in writing.

Based on the findings, the learning contract has helped the participants improve in the four language skills. Such improvements were aided by new repertoires in their learning skills through the use of strategies such as listening to songs. The improvement in language skills also brought confidence to all the learners. Hence, it could be implied that the participants experienced the learning contract as a tool that assisted them in assessing and monitoring their progress in learning. A similar observation was also seen in Ismail and Alauyah (2012), in which one of the perceived gains from the learning contract was that the participants found it a helpful tool that measured and monitored their progress in learning.

Increased motivation

The findings revealed that the participants displayed an increase in motivation in addition to increase in confidence. Gardner (1985, p.10) defined language learning motivation as “the extent

to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity.”

EA, during the duration of the contract, found herself to be more consistent in her studies. She seemed “pumped-up” when studying English and trying to improve:

“...the progress that I achieve made my studies more consistence... Apart from that, I feel like much of different, I will not stop to study English and always improve my writing and speaking.”
(EA, *Reflective Journal*)

KM found out that using the learning contract increased her determination to improve her grades. KM expressed that her goal was “my responsible to make it”, implying that her goal was her own responsibility and she expressed her intention to improve her grades, saying that she “has to push” herself to get good grades for the SPM examination.

Similarly with KM, SZ’s motivation came in the form of self-determination as seen in his effort to complete one of the tasks in the learning contract:

“So hard to join the song to sing. But I ikut saja apa yang itu lagu cakap. I do the activity about in the morning and I will stop on the afternoon and then continue in the evening. A long time, I’m serious to follow the song to sing, although I think so hard but I can do the best... I read the novel for two hours and awhile stop to relax. After that I continue to read until evening...”
(SZ, *Reflective Journal*)

SZ aptly described that the learning contract “build my confident, motivate me.” The learning contract seemed to act as a vessel that helps learners develop their drive or determination to pursue their language learning goals. The findings confirmed the learning contract’s ability to encourage motivation in learners. This observation is seen in other studies such as Ismail and Alauyah (2012) which also found that the learning contract motivated their participants by increasing their responsibility over the choices they made in attempting to achieve their contract goals. A similar finding was observed in Aidora and Tan (2013) in which the participants’ motivation was sustained by an increase in positive attitudes and confidence.

The roles of peers and teacher

When facing new learning conditions, learners tend to work together with their peers. In this study, the participants seemed to rely on their peers to support them as illustrated by MH. He mentioned that studying with friends was the easiest way to “force” him to study the subject:

“Kadang2 langkah yang sangat mudah untuk memaksa saya belajar BI ialah belajar dengan kawan2 semasa sekolah atau masa subjek BI. (Sometimes, the easiest way to force me to learn English is to study with my friends at school or during the English subject period).”
(MH, *Reflective Journal*)

Being the weakest learner in the group, MH had informed the researcher about his weaknesses in understanding the English language. He expressed that to help himself, he asked the opinions of his friends especially on how to write English sentences. Some participants regarded the presence of their peers as a source of information, encouragement as well as motivation. Through peer

interaction, the participants especially MH, became more engaged in the learning process as they asked for assistance from friends with better English proficiency. Working with their peers also increased the weak learners' participation in the learning process because they were also required to contribute something in their collaboration.

However, peers could also affect the learner negatively. For instance, when asked about which learning activities in the learning contract that they found challenging, KM expressed that she felt speaking English and writing a note in English difficult because of the social consequences that she might face:

"The activities that I find challenging me is ...speak English to my close friends, write a note to a friend in English and lastly is speaking with other teachers...I'm admitted that it's so difficult to do this activities...I don't (know) why? Maybe this kind of activities is so general (public) and I felt I'm so scared to speak in English to the other people...I'm really felt ashamed...because I think if I speak to my friend maybe they would feel that I show off my ability in speaking in English then they would dislike me or hate me..."

(KM, Reflective Journal)

SZ also felt likewise. When doing one of the activities such as speaking English to friends, he was "afraid my (his) friends will laugh" at him. KM and SZ expressed that they felt insecure whenever they attempted the speaking activity. They felt that the social implication of speaking English to their classmates was being an outcast for being a snob. The feelings of insecurity and the social implication were confirmed by Lee's (2003) study in which such phenomena surfaced due to the diverse sociocultural identities in Malaysia in which some societies or cultures seemed piqued by the use of English, and this could sometimes lead to marginalization and alienation of the users. Although it seemed that this insecurity and social implication might not be directly related or caused by the learning contract, it hindered the participants' goal to complete the activity within the stipulated time.

Apart from the fear of being an outcast, being a teenager exposes them to threats of vulnerability. In the participants' world, some peers could affect their motivation and self-esteem through subtle bullying as illustrated by EA. She expressed that one of her peers told her that she was "not the best in English" and it seemed that this "friend's" words affected her self-confidence and dampened her spirit to achieve one of her goals, which is to be the best in English for their class. Although EA believed that she had the right to set an ambitious goal for herself, her friend's words seemed to make her doubt her abilities. Nonetheless, despite such negativity from her peer, EA was optimistic towards her efforts in improving herself. EA also mentioned the need to have someone as a guide, which indicated the importance of having a figure, be it a peer or a teacher, to go through the learning process because "it's so hard to (go) through alone."

In the context of the learning contract, the influence of peers could both encourage and discourage the learners. As the participants committed themselves to do the learning activities to help them achieve their goals, they highlighted the importance of having friends that could motivate, aid and encourage them. Working with peers created an opportunity to make their contract learning process a dynamic environment to work in. Nonetheless, negative peer influence which was experienced by EA, is an unavoidable situation. Despite the negativity, it provides a learning experience as learners need to learn from their peers in order to grow as an individual and shape their personality as they mature.

The participants expressed that the role of the teacher was required when providing feedback and assessment on their work and progress. The teacher's support served as a form of scaffolding in order for these learners to be more autonomous. The learners viewed the teacher's responses and feedback as additional help. For example, EA found that the teacher's feedback on her grammar helped her remember one of the basic grammar rules which was the Subject-Verb agreement. Her teacher's feedback also reminded her not to repeat the error:

"...my teacher have comment about my grammar for example, past tense to present tense and how to put (s) if the describe singular or plural. So far, I already overcome them when teacher tell us about the step to make sure all of us not mistake to put (s) on the word."
(EA, *Reflective Journal*)

Apart from being a source of feedback, the teacher was viewed as a source of motivation and encouragement as she acknowledged her students' progress and encouraged them to advance to the next stage. In KM's entry, she said that the teacher seemed to provide her with encouragement because she received good marks during the first semester examination. It could be implied that in order to expand the effectiveness of the learning contract in promoting autonomy, the teacher became involved in their learning process by providing feedback to the learners' tasks. Mohammed's (2010) case study confirms this finding as the study implied that one of the main contributors to the success of the learning contract used in her study was the instructor's active role as a facilitator of learning which encouraged learners to be more engaged, creative and active in their learning experience.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that the learning contract had provided the learners with a structured way to study on their own as a complementary practice to their lessons in the classroom. The learning contract also played a supportive role in helping the learners to improve their skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking as well as grammar and vocabulary. In addition to providing a structured study plan, the learning contract also improved the learning to learn skills of the students. This was done through a series of language learning strategies provided with the learning contract that gave the participants additional learning repertoires which were active and customizable for the learners. The improvements mentioned above increased the learners' confidence and their motivation. The learning contract also revealed the importance of support from teachers and peers. Several recommendations could be made, firstly, the learning contract could be turned into a module which could further extend its potentials to other low English proficiency learners. Secondly, since this study only took approximately five months, reconsidering the duration of implementing the learning contract could be needed to see significant improvement in terms of English proficiency. This exploration provided some insights on the voices of limited proficiency learners when facing new learning experiences. From their voices, it could be implied that with adequate training and relevant tools, these learners can be aided. This study revealed that the learning contract is an interesting alternative methodology for ESL teaching and learning that is capable of aiding low proficiency learners to improve language and learning skills as well as increase their motivation and encourage teachers and peers to play a role or be more involved in the learners' English language learning process by providing support, encouragement and feedback.

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Appendix A The Learning Contract (simplified version)

MY LEARNING CONTRACT	
I, _____, promise to do all the learning activities that I have selected to help me achieve my learning goals. I will do all the activities (see attachment) from _____ to _____. I will also consult my teacher from time to time to report about my progress and/or to ask for help in my learning activities. I will also record my experiences in a journal every two weeks starting from the date of this learning contract's commencement.	
My goal by the end of this contract is to	

Student's Signature :	_____
Student's Name :	_____
Date :	_____

Appendix B Examples of learning activities for the learning contract

Listening and Speaking

1. Listen to English songs at least one every week.
2. Sing along to English songs.
3. Speak English to my teacher and close friends or ask your teacher a question in English.

Reading

1. Read poems or inspirational quotes once a week.
2. Read a short story at least once a week.
3. Read subtitles of an English drama or movie on the television/cd/dvd.

Writing

1. Write an English essay (individual exercise).
2. Write the journal in English.
3. Write a note to a friend in English.

Vocabulary and Grammar

1. Get a grammar revision book and do at least one exercise everyday.
2. Do at least one rational cloze exercise everyday.
3. Learn and jot down new vocabularies learned from the radio, television or books, etc. Use at least one new word in your essay.

Author Information

Jacinta Karen Juin believes that encouraging learners to be autonomous is one of the ways towards successful English language learning. She has just graduated with a Master of Education (TESL) from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi and her research interests include weak ESL learners and literature for Malaysian students. She is currently teaching English at SM. Ken Hwa, Keningau, Sabah.