

English Language Teaching and Learning: To Contract or Not to Contract

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Abstract: In ESL teaching and learning context, there have been continuous efforts in utilizing several teaching approaches to develop autonomous, independent and active learners, especially in higher learning institutions in Malaysia. In view of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's initiative to adopt the learning contract approach for the teaching and learning of undergraduates, an action research was conducted to explore the feasibility of learning contract in a language course in UKM. The data comprises of self-reflections, focus group interviews, instructor feedback as well as a pre- and post-tests results. This study details the implementation process of the learning contract in a workplace communication class of 31 students and highlights student feedback on their reaction towards such an approach. Findings indicate the positive aspects of the learning approach from the students' perspectives despite some reservations from those who are less inclined towards this approach.

Key words: Student centered learning, learning contract, language learning, course, UKM, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning play a pivotal role in imparting knowledge, providing learning environment and producing effective learners. In accomplishing these responsibilities, effective teaching and learning approach need to be employed. Many higher learning institutions in Malaysia are attempting innovative methods to traditional methods in order to provide better learning environment and opportunities for students in higher learning institution.

The traditional lecture method of Teacher Centered Approach allows only the lecturers or instructors to play the active role while the learners take the passive role in the teaching and learning process. The knowledge is imparted to learners by lecturer who is the sole source of information. It is the lecturer who makes the decision of what is to be learnt, how it is to be learnt and when it is to be learnt. Therefore, learners are dependent on the lecturer for information or knowledge as they lack the autonomy and opportunities to be engaged in their learning.

There is a need to shift the teaching method from teacher centered to student centered. This paradigm shift to Student Centered Learning Approach should allow students to be active learners and develop them to be independent and autonomous learners (Barr and Tagg, 1995). Through this approach, students take active role in acquiring knowledge and become responsible for their own learning.

Contract learning is considered as one of the methods for promoting and developing independent learning. Contract learning is an instruction strategy that has been used for many years in education and also in the teaching of the English language.

The learning contract: The learning contract is a written document of agreement between the instructor or teacher and the student. According to Anderson *et al.* (1994), a learning contract is a formal written agreement between a learner and a member of the teaching staff which details what is to be learnt, the resources and strategies available to assist in learning it, what will be produced as evidence of the learning having occurred and how that product will be assessed. It also specifies a commencement and completion date for the activity. Boak (1998) defines a learning contract as a formal, written agreement between a learner and a tutor about what the learner will learn and how that learning will be measured.

Learning contract also serves as a tool or a strategy in a teaching and learning environment. According to Knowles (1986), learning contract is an alternative way of structuring a learning experience. Knowles defines a learning contract as; an alternative way of structuring a learning experience. It replaces a content plan with a process plan. Knowles suggests that a learning contract comprises of five elements:

- The knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to be acquired by the learner (learning objectives)

- The objectives that are to be accomplished by the learner learning resources and strategies
- The completion target date
- Evidence to be presented to demonstrate that the objectives have been completed (evidence of accomplishment)
- Validation of evidence (criteria and means of validating evidence)

Several studies have shown that contract learning is an effective teaching method in improving motivation, confidence, responsibility and empowerment (Chan and Chien, 2000; Lemieux, 2001; Williams and Williams, 1999). There have also been studies which indicate the positive effects of learning contract in promoting self-directed and autonomous learning (Caffarella and Caffarella, 1986; McGarrell, 1996).

Studies on learning contract in language learning:

Sidhu *et al.* (2011) conducted a study on the use of learning contracts in ESL class of 42 student respondents in an urban secondary girls' school. This study reveals that the learning contract is an effective tool in promoting the sense of empowerment among language learners. The findings show that students appear more confident in planning and organizing their learning process.

A study conducted by Ismail *et al.* (2008) explore the use of learning contracts among 38 1st year undergraduates enrolled in the language consolidation course. The preliminary findings from the study suggest that the learning contract benefited the learners in English language learning and has helped learners to be resourceful and independent learners.

Aly (2006) examined the effectiveness of using the contract learning strategy on 41 graduate students' achievement and attitudes towards English language. The students were enrolled in the special diploma (Curriculum planning and development section) studying the ESP readings course. The findings of this study revealed that the students had positive attitudes toward English language and motivated to learn the language as the result of using the learning contract in learning the language.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia is currently initiating its teaching and learning paradigm to Student Centered Approach via the learning contract. The implementation of the learning contract started in the co-curricular activities in early 2011. The second stage of implementation is carried out with the general education courses that include the teaching and learning of language proficiency courses.

In view of this, an action research is conducted to explore the feasibility of learning contract with language

courses. It aims to investigate students' feedback to the contract learning approach in learning English and how it has helped promote their learning. The study also intends to investigate teachers' response in implementing such an approach. This study describes the implementation process for a learning contract. It also presents students' perspectives of the language learning process through the learning contract.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An action research approach is adopted in the study. The aim of this research is to investigate the feasibility of learning contract explored in workplace communication 1 and to measure ways in which learning contract promotes students' language learning ability.

The subject respondents: The sample for this study is of two groups of students who have enrolled in ZZZE 3012 workplace communication 1 course in semester 3, 2010-2011 session; a control group and the experimental group. There are 31 students in the experimental group from the Faculty of Science and Technology. Out of the 31 students, 27 are females and 4 males. They have all obtained MUET bands of 1-4.

Two teacher instructors are involved in the teaching of the experimental group. Both are female English language instructors with >20 years of teaching experience.

Data collection: The research data is collected from the following instruments:

- Pre- and post-tests evaluation
- Learning contract documents
- Student reflective diaries
- Student focus group interviews
- Field note observation of the instructors
- Audio/video recordings of student evaluation performance

For the purpose of this study, the data presented are from the focus group interview and instructor observation notes. The focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the semester to obtain feedback about students' attitude towards learning contract, the benefits and difficulties of using contract learning in the course. A total of 7 student respondents from the experimental group were selected based on their responses on the self-reflections. The interviews were carried out with two groups of respondents and two researchers were involved in the interviews. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

The researchers ensured the students that the interview session was to get their personal opinions in which they could do in English or in Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) and that their responses would be confidential.

The procedure: The research is conducted in the 3rd semester of session 2010-2011.

Phase 1; pre-test

Pre-test 1; role play: Students from both experimental and control groups are asked to work in groups of 3-4. Each group is given a simulated task sheet. They are given a few minutes to prepare and then they carry out the task. Each group presentation is recorded and assessed using the assessment scale provided in the course booklet.

Pre-test 2

E-mail correspondences: Students from both experimental and control groups are asked to send an email correspondence reporting on an event which they have been involved. They are required to describe the event, the role they carried out for the event and the outcome of the event. Each correspondence will be assessed.

Phase 2

Intervention (learning contract): This phase runs for 7 weeks. The intervention is conducted based on the following procedures:

- Students are informed of the learning outcomes of the course
- Students are briefed of the learning contract
- Students are then to decide suitable learning components to achieve the learning outcomes listed in the course
- Next, the students prepare the learning contract. Teacher is consulted in drafting the learning contract
- The learning contract is signed once both teacher and students agree with the content of the learning contract
- Students keep a copy of the contract for reference
- Students carry out the learning components stipulated in the learning contract
- Students are allowed for renegotiation of contracts through conferencing sessions if the need arises

Phase 3; post-tests: The post-tests for this research follow the current evaluation components of the course. The selected three evaluation components to be considered as the post-tests are:

Interpersonal communication (Sketch): Students present a sketch depicting a usual scene at a workplace.

Email correspondence of a case study meeting: Students send an email to report and express their overall views of the outcome of a case study meeting.

Job interview: Students conduct themselves professionally at a job interview.

Implementation of the learning contracts: For the 7 weeks of the course, the students were required to write an individual learning contract based on the course learning outcomes. The learning outcomes of the course are; carry out effective conversations at the workplace, write effective resumes and cover letters, conduct themselves well at a job interview, demonstrate effective skills in managing meetings. The four evaluation components are the sketch (interpersonal communication), job interview and the case study. Initially, the students were to write only one learning contract for the course. However after discussion, the students decided to write three separate learning contracts according to the learning outcomes of the course.

Figure 1 shows the procedure of implementing the learning contract in the course. During the 1st week of the course, the course briefing and input on interpersonal communication section were conducted. Then, the instructor briefed and explained the students about the learning contract and benefits of the learning contracts in language learning. To assist and guide the students in writing their individual learning contract, the instructor gave an example of a completed learning contract and a learning contract template to students. Using the template given, students wrote the learning contract for the interpersonal communication component, discussed with the instructor and submitted their learning contract by the end of the week. Two pre-tests are role play and e-mail correspondence.

In the following week, students planned and prepared for the interpersonal communication component on their own. There were no class meetings and consultation sessions for the short sketch and learning contract were carried out upon requests by the students.

The evaluation on the sketch was conducted in the 3rd week. After the evaluation, the students wrote their learning reflection on their experience of independent learning via learning contract.

During the 4th week of the course, class meetings were carried out. For the 1st meeting of the week, the instructor explained in details on the job interview

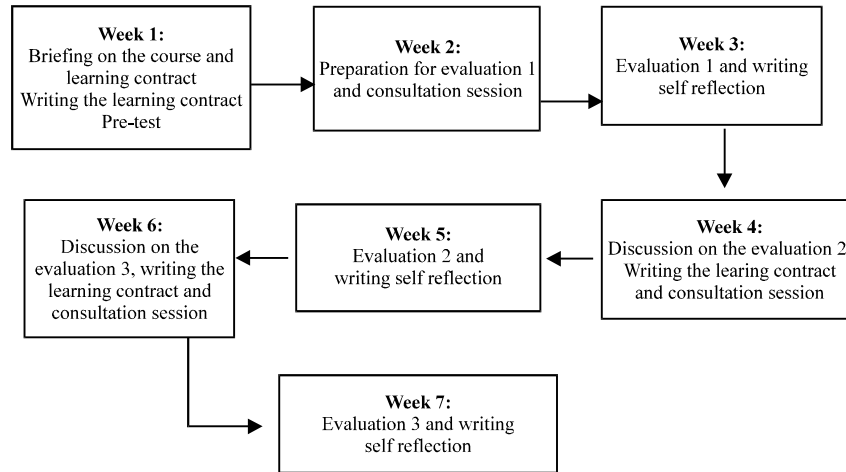


Fig. 1: Learning contract implementation procedure

component and then the student wrote their learning contracts for this component. In the 2nd meeting, the students consulted the instructor on the preparation of the job interview and the learning contract.

The students went through the job interview evaluation in week 5. For this evaluation, another instructor carried out the interview session with the students. After the evaluation, the students wrote their learning experience in the self-reflection form. In week 6, students planned and prepared for the meeting component and consultation sessions were carried out. The final evaluation was carried out in week 7. After the evaluation, the students wrote their learning experience in the self-reflection form.

RESULTS

The study presents the findings gathered from the interview data and instructor's reflection notes.

Attitudes towards learning contract: The majority of the students understands the concept of learning contract and indicates that it is a good alternative learning approach. They are aware of the aims and the implementation procedure of the learning contract in the course. The instructors also felt that a comprehensive briefing on the aims and the procedure of the learning contract was vital in ensuring the understanding of the concept and preparing the learning contract.

Attitude towards teaching and learning through learning contract: With regard to the use of learning contract, most students and instructors show positive attitude

towards this approach. Both students and instructors felt that this approach allows students to be active and resourceful in their learning. It is interesting to note that some students felt that learning contract is effective for hard working students as they are more proactive and are more motivated as compared to those who are less inclined towards this approach. Learning contract may not be effective to these students for several reasons as some students may procrastinate and hand in a cut-and-paste work.

Improvement in skills: Most of the students state that they have improved in all skills. They believe that they have improved in reading as they read the information in English and learn more vocabulary too. Having the sources in English helped them improve their vocabulary.

The improvement in writing is seen through the reduce errors in their writing as they write more. A student mentions that she learns from her friends who are proficient in the language as she initiates to get feedback from friends to help edit her work assignments and she finds that she learns.

Majority say that they improve much in speaking because of the consultation. They point out that most of the time in class, the instructor speaks and they listen. On the other hand, during consultation, they are expected to be the one to speak as they need to give explanation to the instructor what they had done and why. However, a few students believe, they have only improved in reading but not much in speaking. A few students also admit that through this learning approach, it enhances their information search skills.

Motivation and confidence: The student responses reveal that the use of learning contract enhances students' confidence in using the language. Some students report that they became more confident in writing due to a lot of writing and corrections through consultation. A few mention that learning via learning contract promotes confidence in communicating. They had to communicate with various people and sources in getting information or seeking help to complete the tasks. They believe that by communicating more in English, they gradually gain self confidence.

According to the students, the learning contract process motivates them to be more active in getting their knowledge and information. There is no spoon feed of knowledge for them as they are responsible for their own mode of learning. They prefer this method of learning as it encourages them to seek for knowledge rather than being spoon fed and the sense of being university students.

Instructors also noticed that students' motivation and confidence had increased through the process. Towards the end of the semester, the students were more confident in explaining their plans and strategies during the consultation sessions.

Independent learning: Most of the students comment that learning via the learning contract allows them to be independent learners. They prefer the freedom given of choosing the strategies and resources for their learning. They attempt various strategies and resources and feel satisfied with what they have done. They do, however, initiate to consult friends, workplace experts, family members and in search of reading materials and participate in events related to the tasks.

The instructors agree that this approach has increased students' autonomy and independent learning. It is demonstrated in their strategies and resources employed in accomplishing the learning outcomes. They use other sources other than the instructors' input for knowledge or information.

Despite of the positive comments of several students, it is important to note that there are students who express uncertainties towards the effectiveness of contract learning. A student states that she prefers face-to-face meetings and learning contract time to be equally divided. Another indicates the preference of going to class as she believes this provides her with more knowledge. She admits that it is easier when getting information and knowledge just from the instructor.

Difficulties in learning contract: Despite the benefits mentioned in using learning contract, some difficulties

faced in the process were revealed. For example, in terms of writing the learning contract, a few students expressed difficulties in coming up with the evidences as proofs of their learning. In addition, students also stated that preparing the evidences to be shown to the instructor was a tedious task as they had to print or copy the materials to be submitted as evidences of learning.

The instructor also observed that students were not clear as to how to fill in the learning contract form initially but were clearer and better at filling it in when they were more familiar with the concept.

DISCUSSION

Students' understanding of the idea of a learning contract has facilitated the implementation of this approach in class during the experimental period. Similarly, teacher understanding of the approach has also contributed to the feasibility of this implementation. The understanding of both parties especially from the students is crucial to the implementation and has generated a higher level of willingness on the part of the students especially. It is also observed that students depend on their own skills and ideas to access different sources and be proactive at the same time become autonomous and self reliant. They appear more mature and creative in content as compared to others in previous semesters.

With regard to students' perception of their level of improvement, the finding reveals that those students who are keen with this approach seem to be the ones who feel that they have improved in all skills as compared to those who are less keen. This perhaps explains that learner motive in learning may contribute to his or her own achievement in learning. It also indicates that the intrinsic factor of a student's motivation and awareness of this form of learning tend to indicate positive responses.

The learning approach has similarly raised students' level of motivation towards learning. Those who are keen towards this form of learning have expressed their satisfaction towards this autonomous learning. This indicates that another contributing factor to the success of such learning approach, i.e., a raise in student level of motivation.

From the comments and observations mentioned above, it is evident that the learning contract helps most of the students to have the sense of responsibility of their own learning and independent. The findings of this study are supported by other studies on the positive effects of learning contract in promoting self-directed and autonomous learning (Anderson *et al.*, 1994; Caffarella and Caffarella, 1986; McGarrell, 1996). They are

more in control of the planning and organising of their learning process as mentioned by Sidhu *et al.* (2011).

The findings also show that students who are more hesitant towards this approach tend to experience anxiety and become less prepared for this shift of learning approach. It is understandable as these students have been conditioned by years of traditional teaching and learning method in which the focus has always been on the teacher rather than the learner. They find this a new experience and appear alien to them when they are required to be more responsible in acquiring knowledge and making decisions.

With respect to administering and overseeing students' learning process, this approach can be quite tedious and time consuming tasks to the instructors. The instructors must be available at times when students want to confer. This is rather demanding on the part of the instructors. Although the consultation time is negotiable, it can be quite hectic to try slot in times to accommodate student meet at individual or group basis.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have shown the positive attitude towards learning contract in the language class. Both students and instructors acknowledge the benefits of using the learning contract in learning the English language.

Both students and instructors agree that the use of learning contract promotes self-directed and independent learning. It offers students the opportunities and flexibility to plan, decide, select strategies and resources for their learning process. Students indicate that they now have a greater sense of autonomy and control when engaging in a learning contract.

It seems that language learning can be more interesting and meaningful to the students via learning contract. There is an increase in confidence and motivation in learning. Students also become active and resourceful learners as they resort to variety of resources other than the language instructors as the source of information and knowledge. Both students and instructors agree that these are the strengths of the learning contract.

Despite the positive attitude towards learning via the learning contract, some findings of this study show that some students are less ready to learn via this method. There exists to a certain extent a level of hesitant. They prefer to be dependent on the instructors for knowledge and learning experiences. These maybe due to years of exposure to the traditional Teacher Centered Approach where a more of student guidance in the learning process.

On the whole, learning contract can be a potential tool for promoting independent learning in the English language course. There are, however, contributing factors such as learner motive, learner value of the learning, learner beliefs and learner level of commitment that need to be taken into consideration or addressed when implementing such an approach. Other than that an instructor needs to also consider the level of willingness amongst the students as this is proven to vary between individuals. The study has indicated that in implementing learning contract in language courses, students need to be briefed clearly on the aims and the benefits of learning contract in their learning process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations are put forth with regard to the implementation of the learning contract in the language teaching and learning. Respondents suggest that learning contract should be implemented to other faculties besides co curricular activities and language courses. This shows that the students see the relevance of learning through this method and to be carried out in subject content courses too.

They also suggest that consultations should be enforced to ensure that students meet the instructors to discuss their research. They believe that if consultation is not enforced, some of the students are not bothered to see the instructor which they believe is a disadvantage to the students. Consultations should be done in class and during class time with appointments made before any consultation sessions.

Peer evaluation is also good, according to the students as this will reduce the possibility of having sleeping partners while working on the LC. Writing journal is also suggested as respondents believe that it is a good idea to keep track of what they do which could be used as evidence. Students also recommend that in implementing such an approach, it is crucial to get immediate feedback from the instructors to facilitate their learning. This would ease their anxiety of waiting for feedback on their research. This predicament is also observed by the instructors. This clearly shows that instructors' feedbacks are expected and crucial to the students in their learning process as face-to-face time is limited in this teaching and learning approach.

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