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Abstract

There is agreement among language educators that the process of language teaching and learning should aim to develop autonomous language learners. While the advantages of autonomy seem to be quite obvious, fostering autonomy in practice can prove to be difficult for some language learners. This paper describes the use of learning contracts as a strategy for enhancing learner autonomy among a group of ESL learners in a Malaysian university. Through learners' account of their experiences with the contracts, the study concludes that the learning contract has potential use for language learning and that learners' positive learning experience remains the key to the success of any endeavour seeking to promote learner autonomy. The paper ends with some implications for teachers and learners who wish to use the contracts as a strategy for language teaching and learning.

Keywords: language learning contracts, learner autonomy

Background

Over the years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of learner autonomy and the role of the individual language learners in directing their own language learning process. In fact, there is agreement among language educators that the process of language teaching and learning should aim to develop autonomous language learners. In practice, however, it is not always clear how to support learners in this role and whether they are prepared to assume it. This is just like the proverbial thirsty horse being led to water and not drinking, learners who are led to self-access learning opportunities do not necessarily become autonomous learners. This analogy serves as a background for the purpose of this study which is to explore the use of learning contracts as an English Language teaching and learning strategy to promote learner autonomy. The study focuses on learners' experience in using the learning contracts for language learning and looks at the extent to which the contracts could be viably used to develop learners' ability to become more autonomous language learners.

Review of Related Literature

Learner autonomy is described by Holec (1981) as the capacity to take control over one's own learning. Most experts agree that autonomy is not taught or learned. Instead, Benson (2011) says, it is fostered or developed through initiatives designed to stimulate autonomy among learners. In the Malaysian context, many of our language learners do not naturally have this capacity yet and need explicit instruction to develop it. This creates the need to find practical ways to develop their potential as autonomous language learners so they can learn and appreciate the language, and at the same time, sustain their interest in the language learning process. Developing learner autonomy through learner training does not entail radical departure from common practice and can in fact take place in the existing classrooms. According to Thang (2009), the most important concern in the training for such autonomous skills is that learners display desires and initiatives to think for themselves. One method of training that has shown potential in developing learner autonomy is with the learning contract.

The use of learning contracts is an option for promoting autonomy in language learning. The learning contract is a formal, written agreement negotiated between the learner and lecturer about what the learner will learn and how that learning will be measured. It has been described in various ways: a diary, a log, a journal, and a reflective tool. However, according to Sliogeriene (2006), what distinguishes the contract from other documents is that it focuses on ongoing learning issues over a period of time and that there would be some intention of learning from the process of writing the contract or from the results of preparing it. This suggests that the learning contract can be used to personalize learner training and learning experience. Other researchers seem to agree. Codde (2006) adds that the learning contract allows learners to structure their own learning and become active learners in the process of education. Knowles (1981) also suggests that the contracts enhance learners' sense of perspective and ability to make judgments about themselves as well as their learning. Learners accomplish this based on their accumulated experience, combined with their inherent autonomy and need for establishing clear goals. This, Knowles believes, can be implemented in teaching and learning situations. Nunan (2004) further says that learners' potential, experience and prior knowledge in learning can be structured in a learning contract that offers a way to replace the content plan with a process plan. A process plan is a series of actions to be carried out with the aims of supporting teaching and learning initiatives while a content plan is sequence of topics to be covered (Council of Europe, 2001).

In view of what is discussed so far, the rationale for using the learning contract is to make the language learner an active participant in the actual language learning process, even at the lesson planning stage. How this can be done is further elaborated by Brewer, Williams and Sher (2007). They contend that learners put their experience, knowledge and capability to use when creating and implementing their own learning contracts. As learners' capability and confidence grow, so will their ability to be resourceful, and their repertoire of language activities. The expectation is that through the learning contract, language activities are designed to assist learners in progressing to the next level of independent learning activities. With the above discussion serving as a point of contention, the following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What are the significant experiences of the learners when using the learning contracts?
2. How viable are the learning contracts for enhancing learner autonomy among ESL learners?

Methodology

Data Collection

To generate data relating to learners' significant experiences and the viability of the contracts, this study employed a mixed-method approach. The qualitative approaches included the use of the learning contract, learner conference and focus-group interview while in the quantitative approach, a survey questionnaire was used.

First, the learning contract was developed as a way for learners to document their plans and language learning activities. The contract was chosen as an instrument to collect data because throughout this study, learners used the contracts to give a first-person account of their language learning plans and process. Therefore, the learning contracts provide an insight into the processes of learning which would otherwise be impossible to obtain in any other way. The learning contract developed for this study was adapted from Masdinah (2005). There were four components in the contract that learners needed to specify: learning objectives, resources and strategies used, materials used and comments. To guide learners in planning their own learning contracts, the following questions were posed to them: What do you want to learn? How are you

going to learn it? What strategies and resources would you use? The components of the contracts are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Components of the Learning Contracts

<i>Specific language learning objectives</i>	<i>Resources and strategies</i>	<i>Materials used</i>	<i>Comments</i>
What am I going to learn?	How am I going to learn it? What am I going to use?		

In the first week of the project, learners attended a briefing where samples of previously completed learning contracts were shown to them. As the learners developed their learning contracts, they set about to carry out the language activities that they had planned. At the end of the tenth week, they submitted their contracts and five completed activities to the researcher.

Secondly, learner conferences are held between the learner and the lecturer to get language learning advice or consultation. The goal of such meetings is to offer opportunities for contact between lecturer and learners, thus creating more opportunities for extensive and regular meetings to extend the influence of the language learning environment beyond the class. Throughout this study, learners attended learner conferences where they discussed and refined their learning contracts with the lecturer (one of the researchers). During the conferences, they specified their learning objectives, learning materials, strategies, and then worked with their lecturer to agree on what was going to be produced, how much and the duration. The product was evidence that each specific learning objective had been achieved. The evidence could be a piece of written work, a presentation or other demonstrations that were achievable and accessible.

Thirdly, the focus group interviews were done towards the end of the semester. Two sessions of interviews were carried out to ensure the issues related to the learning contracts were adequately discussed and explored. The first session of the focus group was carried out to find out more about the participants past English Language learning experiences, perceptions of learning English independently and motivation levels after using the contract. Data from the first session of the focus group interview were used as a basis to draw up questions for the second interview that focused on how the learning contract help learners with their language learning or where the contract failed them. To minimize problems in discriminating voices when transcribing data, the number of participants in the focus groups of this study was limited to six.

Finally, a three-part questionnaire was developed to collect learners' perceptions regarding the use of the learning contracts for learning language independently. The

questionnaire was adapted from Cotterall (2008), Masdinah (2005) and Lai (2008), and was piloted before being administered to the learners in the last week of class. The results were expected to reveal broad tendencies of learners' perceptions which could be used to complement the qualitative data.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were tabulated and presented in descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from the contracts, transcripts of the learner conferences and focus group interviews were thoroughly read and carefully coded into significant themes through the content analysis method. Both types of data were analyzed separately but were triangulated to give a richer and more comprehensive account of the study.

Participants

The participants in this study were an intact group of 141 first-year ESL undergraduates. From that total number, 22 of them participated in the learner conferences and interviews as fully-informed consenting volunteers and gave full permission to the researcher to use their learning contracts.

Limitations

Bearing in mind the size and the voluntary, rather than random, nature of the sample, the results of the study may not be generalized to the other groups of learners. In addition, the results of the study are based on self-reports, thus, the findings and interpretations should be treated as suggestive rather than conclusive. The researchers were also aware of the problems that could occur in situations where the researcher provided an insider view as a one sided-view would cause bias in interpreting findings. Therefore, to overcome this problem, the steps were taken to combine the major methods of data gathering. Learner conferences, focus group interviews and learning contracts, together with the survey questionnaire, were combined to provide a multiple data-collection procedure to increase the depth of understanding of this investigation.

Findings and discussion

Data gleaned from the interviews, conferences and learning contracts offered meaningful insights into the learners' experience and knowledge in formulating and carrying out the contracts. Several significant learners' experiences emerged from the data and are presented in

four categories: perceived gains, sources of motivation, challenges and utilization of the learning contracts. Findings related to the viability of the contracts are categorized into three themes: cognitive, affective and social. All these emergent categories are discussed below in conjunction with findings from the questionnaire.

Perceived Gains

Perceived gains are opportunities for learning afforded by the learning contracts. Based on the data collected from the questionnaires, from the different learning opportunities they experienced, the learners perceived the following as the three most significant learning experiences they gained using the contract for learning English: 1) the contract made them feel motivated to learn; 2) the contract made them feel successful in their learning and; 3) the contract helped them monitor and measure their progress in learning. In the questionnaire, the learners were asked if they considered they were successful in their language learning after working with the contracts. Out of 141 learners, 107 learners or about 75% disclosed that they strongly agreed and agreed to this perception. In all, thirteen out of the twenty five volunteers also mentioned feeling happy, satisfied or proud with their language learning. This implies that the feeling of being successful in learning is a powerful motivating factor for developing autonomy in learners because then they would persist until a goal is accomplished. It seems the implicit and explicit training introduced with the learning contract helped to raise the learners' awareness about self-directed work but it was, without a doubt, their positive experience with the contracts that led them to take more responsibility and put them on the path to becoming more autonomous learners.

Sources of Motivation

Sources of motivation relates to the drive or interest of the participants, which leads them to be more willing to take responsibility of the outcome of their learning. According to Scharle and Szabo (2000), motivation and responsibility can mutually reinforce each other. This reinforcement appeared to be evident in the learners' experience with the learning contract. The findings of this study showed that the learning contract motivated learners to be involved in their learning process through increased responsibility for the learning choices they made. The following excerpts from an interview (S-F7) and a learner conference (S2-C3) demonstrated this:

Yes...the contracts made me work harder..it becomes a reason for studying. It's a goal to achieve...it helps me study.

(Interview S-F7)

I'm happy and relaxed when I work on the contract activities. ..I can continue with it... I don't mind if you give the work or I do something of my own, I can focus in my contract. Next, I want to concentrate on grammar and writing... I want to try website and book.

(Learner conference S2-C3)

As the data analysis showed, perceived gains and sources of motivation in the learners' experience with the contracts were characterized by a metacognitive awakening involving both knowledge and skill. Rivers (2001) and Cotterall (2008) argue that such experience created a learning environment that is conducive to metacognitive awareness. Thus, these features of their experience with the learning contracts seem to be potentially instrumental in fostering the development of their potential as autonomous learners.

Challenges

The list of challenges and hindrances presented here highlights what learners deemed as the most difficult experiences they had with the learning contracts. For example, in the questionnaire, the learners were asked if the learning contracts helped them with consistent feedback. Close to 43% of the learners disagreed or were neutral with the statement. This indicated the learners' mixed perception towards the effectiveness of the contract for self-evaluation. The following excerpts (S9-L1 and S9-L2) were extracted from two contracts and revealed the challenges the learners faced (Table 1). It can be seen that the resources, strategies and materials that this learner had selected were lopsided against the objectives he planned.

Table 2. Excerpts S9-L1 and S9-L2

Source	Objective	Resource & strategies	Materials	Comments
<i>Contracts</i> S9-L1	Grammar Spelling Speaking	Lyrics of music Find the grammar, spell it back, rewrite it back and find it on the Internet	Lyrics of music for the Beatles & Madonna	None
<i>Contracts</i> S9-L2	Speaking and vocabulary	Hear music everyday Sing together & understand it Speak with friends Memorize five words everyday Find in dictionary, memorize, find meaning	Music lyrics on my phone Music on the Internet Dictionary, Friends	This has improved my speaking.

For his first contract (S9-L1), the learner had attempted to focus on a broad range of objectives that included grammar, spelling and speaking. Then, his choice of resources and strategies for achieving those objectives such as using lyrics to “find the grammar, rewrite or spell it back” appeared to be unplanned, but focused narrowly on grammar and writing only. His learning objective for speaking was not accomplished.

These reports of challenges learners faced bring to mind a situation that was observed by Siddhu (2009). She noticed that it was her learners with limited proficiency who felt that the plans were partially successful in helping them correct and check their own work. In this study, it also appeared that some learners had problems conceiving the connection that was established between the aims, the learning materials and evidence which they were asked to submit. Thus, when the learners were required to articulate information regarding their learning objectives in the contracts, they did so mechanically, resulting in statements and reflections that were, at best, mediocre and at worst, vague.

Usefulness

How useful are the learning contracts? Learners were reported to give more emphasis in using the learning contracts for organizing and monitoring their language learning activities in comparison to planning and evaluating. The following excerpts from the interview illustrate this:

For BEL we do form many other sources....newspapers, books.... I think with BEL the contract helped because it goes with the book BEL we can't learn from books we must learn from other sources. It's everywhere.

(InterviewS-F8a)

We do an activity but we don't record. I do a test and I get results which is not good. I feel I have worked so hard so I can check...the contract can help me trace to see what I did wrong. Objectively.

(Interview S-F8b)

Thus, it can be said that they seemed to express more confidence in using the contract to keep track of the language activities, different language skills and strategies they have tried than in utilizing it to evaluate the work they had done and to plan the next one.

Viability of the learning contracts

Before going further into the discussion on the viability of the learning contracts, the table below merits a quick look. Table 2 shows the number of submitted learning contract activities. It

is encouraging to note that about two-thirds of the total number of learners submitted more than the minimum five activities required by the lecturer. The rest of the learners submitted five activities as part of their contract work. This implied that the learners had the ability to create more learning opportunities for themselves and seem willing to do so if they were given the freedom to choose what to learn.

Table 3. Number of activities submitted by the learners

Number of activities submitted	5	6	7	8	9	10	>10
Percentage of learners who submitted (%)	31.82	9.09	13.64	0	18.18	9.09	18.18

There were a number of pragmatic, affective and social factors that could perceptively explain the extent to which the learning contracts are viable for enhancing learner autonomy among the learners. It appeared that the learners used the learning contract as a pragmatic tool for managing their learning. For example, in the excerpt S13-C3 below, the learner related the use of the contracts as a way to organize learning resources and to learn why he has some problems in learning.

When I compare this to the last contract, I finished the comments. I looked at which ones I think I should carry out and the ones that helped me, I did it again. Then the ones I think don't help me a lot, I stopped doing the activity already. The activity with the verbs don't help. It only concentrated in certain things only.

(Learner conference S13-C3)

Other pragmatic reasons also shaped the way learners select a learning contract activity. This is an important function of the learning contract as it established certain expectations of the learners like keeping to a set deadline for completing an activity or ensuring the contents of the contract were followed as discussed and agreed upon.

Apart from that, a number of affective factors also emerged in the way learners develop and used their contracts, for example, focusing on the activities which they would enjoy the most or selecting learning materials that were the easiest to accomplish or formulating learning goals based on the interesting activities that can be carried out. The following excerpts exemplify this. Excerpts S25-C2 and S20-C3 were extracted from a learner conference transcript:

Speaking...to improve speaking is the easiest. My speaking is not the best but I like to learn more speaking... I want to learn speaking through lyrics... I enjoy learning through songs.

(Learner conference S25-C2)

I like to read and find the meaning of the words. Vocabulary... I like to do simple exercises on grammar...I don't like write essays but I know I must do this... I like to write about facts... I don't like to create stories... I don't like story books... I like magazines and short articles... I get these articles from the library and the Internet.

(Learner conference S20-C3)

Finally, the data also revealed that the learning contract was developed based on social reasons. According to Gao (2010), the development of learning strategies does not happen in isolation and is highly affected by the social context in which they occur. The learning contract is no exception. The emergence of this socio-cultural factor can be due to the contract being used as a ticket to gain acceptance to join the group. In this study, it appeared that the contract acted like an invisible twine that bound these learners together as a group, working towards a common goal. It seemed personal relations with friends through the learning contracts turned out to be so rewarding that social goals became the main concern and took precedence over academic goals. There were many examples throughout the interview that showed the level of cooperation among the learners as they relied on themselves and on each other, not only for resources, but also for feedback. One of the excerpts (S5-C2) is reported below:

I see that my friends can sing songs in English so easily but I can't do that. I can only sing in Malay...my friends can memorize the English songs...it is difficult for me...my friends said that if I wish to improve, then I should try and memorize English songs, look at the sentences and many more...so I will try...may be Scorpions songs...their lyrics have meaning.

(Learner conference S5-C2)

In all, the discussion of the findings has shown that the learning contract is viable as a strategy for developing autonomy among ESL learners. This has been exemplified through learners' account of their experiences which were shaped by their perceptions on perceived gains, sources of motivation, challenges and usefulness of the contracts. The discussion has also shown that several pragmatic, social and affective factors underlie the way they plan and carry out language activities with the learning contracts.

Implications

There are a few implications for developing learner autonomy with the use of learning contracts. Firstly, a learning atmosphere that provides social support would produce a multiplier effect especially on fledgling autonomous learners. This is especially crucial when they are faced with a novel or unfamiliar method of managing learning like the learning contracts. This study brought to light an important concern with regards to self-directedness and continual learning. In order to sustain learners' interest in doing self-directed learning, there must be adequate support for their effort. With the learning contracts, it is equally important to encourage a supportive language learning atmosphere that can extend beyond the language classroom. Secondly, providing learners with training in language learning strategies is a way to equip them with an array of learning strategies that they can draw upon in different situations to help them learn more efficiently. In this study, it can be said that most of the learners who made use of different learning strategies, did not actually plan for them. Instead learners seemed to have stumbled upon the strategies they used. Indeed, when the data are reviewed, there appeared to be no conscious reporting of the scheme of language strategies. However, there were instances where learners wanted to know more about strategies to help them manage their self-directed language learning. Thus, to optimize the use of the learning contracts, it would be helpful to include strategy training at the start of the course and review strategies used with the learners from time to time. Learners could also be asked to report on the usefulness of certain strategies.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper, an example of the horse taken to the river to drink is quoted. The horse must lower its head to take in some water or he will remain thirsty. The analogy shows that language learners must be guided as they seek to develop their ability to become autonomous. The analogy also serves a word of caution that learner autonomy will also fail if the horse is not thirsty at all. In other words, a learner who does not find learner autonomy an appealing goal, would unlikely be motivated to participate in the efforts towards assuming greater responsibility for learning. The study has perceptively shown that the learning contract has potential in language learning as a way to develop autonomous language learners. However, it is still learners' positive learning experience that remains the key to the success of any endeavour

seeking to promote learner autonomy.

Notes on the Contributors

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