

## LEARNING CONTRACTS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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*The paper presents the problem of control in self-directed language learning. The necessity for the registers of learners' progress is expressed both by teachers and students and the conclusion to frame learning process is drawn. On the basis of some widely spread methods fostering the development of self-directed language learning, that is problem-based learning, project method, case-based learning, several registers for students progress could be introduced in second language learning environment. The article analyses learning contracts as one of the forms to structure the learning process and to register the progress students make.*

**Keywords:** learning contract, self-directed language learning, responsibility.

Under the influence of a vast majority of ESP teaching methods students are introduced with different forms of learning and assessment. Much of this learning takes place at the learner's initiative, even if available through formal settings. A common label given to such activity is self-directed learning. In essence, self-directed learning is seen as any study form in which individuals have primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and even evaluating the effort. Most people, when asked, will proclaim a preference for assuming such responsibility whenever possible.

In Lithuania there has been a great interest expressed in the implementation of self-directed language learning. However, there has been much disappointment in this field as the lack of teacher's control and too much independence lead students to dissatisfaction with their own studies and unstructured learning.

**The object of our research** was the learning contracts in self-directed language learning as a form of structuring language learning. Having chosen this object, **the aim of the research** was to analyze the necessity

for this kind of the register of progress in self-directed language learning.

**The methods of the research** include the analysis of methodological references, a quantitative research, statistical data analysis (SPSS-statistical package for social sciences).

The paper explores **the problem** of framing learners' control in self-directed language learning. Therefore, the main **hypotheses of this article** are: 1) despite being autonomous in self-directed language learning students need teacher's control in their studies; 2) students' progress should be registered in some form to foster responsibility for their studies; 3) the usage of new methods of learning enhances the dialogue between a teacher and a student.

There are many forms of registers but the most widely used in autonomous language learning are learning journals and learning contracts. They could be of various shapes and size: tapes, video, electronic form, paper. Generally speaking, what distinguishes a learning contract from other writing is that it focuses on ongoing issues over time and there will be some intention to learn from either the process of doing it

to descriptive statements, to elaborate explanations of process and product, to electronically submitted forms.

The use of learning contracts with adult learners has gained cogency during the past decade. Research on self-directed learning has resulted in the search for appropriate learning resources and guides. The work of Knowles (Knowles 1975) and others related to andragogy has resulted in a need by many teachers of adults to provide some mechanism for learners to build on past experience and determined needs as they carry out learning activities. Finally, the emergence of non-traditional learning programs has mandated that some vehicle be available for learners to mix experience with actual learning endeavors. Thus, in response to these many needs the learning contract method was developed.

An extended description of how to complete and utilize a learning contract is shown below. A blank form is provided in order to help both teachers and learners to imagine what it could look like. In reality a learning contract can take on many shapes and forms. The intent of using learning contracts in a learning endeavor is to provide a vehicle whereby you can personalize the learning experience

**Learner:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Course:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Instructor:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Contract Grade:** \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

While trying to classify the reasons for writing a contract the stress could be put on four means of learning from them:

Firstly, students learn because contract writing is a process that accentuates favorable conditions for learning

Secondly, contract writing encourages reflection and reflection is associated with deep approaches to learning, or with deep learning. In deep learning, the intention of the learner is to develop a personal understanding of the material and to relate it to what is already known. The freedom of journal writing can support the learner's attempt to understand. Thirdly, writing in a learning contract encourages metacognition, it develops metacognitive skills which are generally divided into two types: self-assessment (the ability to assess one's own cognition) and self-management (the ability to manage one's further cognitive development) (Rivers 2001: 279–290). Successful learners employ a range of metacognitive skills and effective teachers of young adults attend to the development of these skills. Hacker (Hacker, Douglas 98: 1–23) concludes that definitions of need include “knowledge of one's knowledge, processes and cognitive and affective states” and “ability to consciously monitor and regulate one's knowledge, processes, cognitive and affective states”. It is likely that much free writing in contracts will contain some metacognition and if contracts are structured, then metacognition can be built in.

Lastly, the act of writing is associated with learning or the enhancement of learning. There is a considerable literature on the relationship of writing to learning, how it forces a learner to clarify his or her thoughts, how it is a powerful form of feedback to the learner, how it focuses attention and tells the learner if s/he does or does not understand.

Learning contracts help students to develop their ability to reflect. Daudelin (Daudelin 1996: 70) defines reflection as “the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the

development of inferences”. Students have to connect learning to their experience and situations already familiar to new assignments.

Besides the ability to reflect, learning contracts develop critical thinking by requiring students to engage course material at higher cognitive levels as learning contracts give the possibility for students to move through all levels of Bloom's taxonomy. As students have to be involved in a four-stage process-articulating a problem, analyzing and searching for possibilities, formulating and testing a theory to explain the problem and acting, they can practice reflection in two ways identified by Seibert (Seibert 1999) cited in Varner Peck (Varner, Peck 2003: 52–77). Coached reflection as is a structured approach that guides a person to think through their experienced and to identify what they learned from it. Reflection -in-action is unstructured, spontaneous reflection that occurs in the midst of engaging in a challenging experience that includes not only insight into the experience but also an action component.

Along with the help for students to achieve learning outcomes, learning contracts could be used as assessment tools. There have been a lot of arguments whether to grade learning contracts or not, if yes, then what to grade? If it is to be graded, certain evaluation should be clearly thought over.

### Evaluation criteria

- Understanding: Contract entries should demonstrate knowledge and comprehension of the material about which you are writing.
- Application: Contract entries should make an explicit (that is, not implied) connection between subject of the entry and personal experience.
- Analysis, assessment, and action plan: Contract entries should include analysis of personal experience using the elements of the concept(s) being discussed, and a

**Table 1.** *Correlational subordination of external factors of autonomous language studying*

	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Design</i>	<i>Structure</i>	<i>Authority</i>
Motivation	1,000				
Responsibility	,646**	1,000			
Design	,529**	,422**	1,000		
Structure	,308**	,196*	,218**	1,000	
Authority	,167*	,132	,176*	,502**	1,000

\*\* correlation is significant at 0,01 level

\* correlation is significant at 0,05 level

conclusion or evaluation based on the results of the analysis. Contract should offer recommendations or devise action plans based on the conclusions of the analysis.

- Professionalism: Contracts should be free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors and readability problems.

All contract entries must be typed (word processed). Entries are typically about three typed pages in length. The journal is confidential between you and the professor.

Lerning contracts may have a lot of advantages:

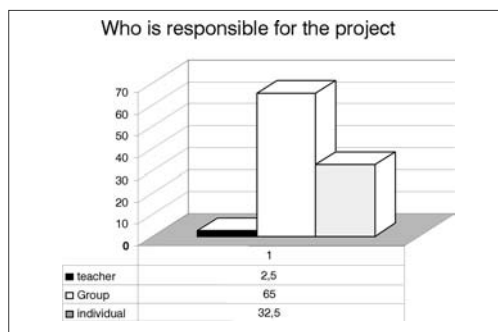
- They encourage independent learning – learners have to write their own contracts and they can monitor the process and do it at their own pace.
- Writing a contract also provides a focusing point, an opportunity to gather thoughts and to see the whole system of the gathered information.
- Learning contract enhances learning skills because it forces the learner to cope with piles of information or material.
- Learning contracts structure the learning process and provides control in autonomous language learning where a learner is supposed to study on his/her own.
- Learning contracts help the learner to see his/her weak points, to assess the progress and to project his/her future activities.

Research findings. The diagnostic form is designed to assist students in assessing their level of competence and need to be related to pos-

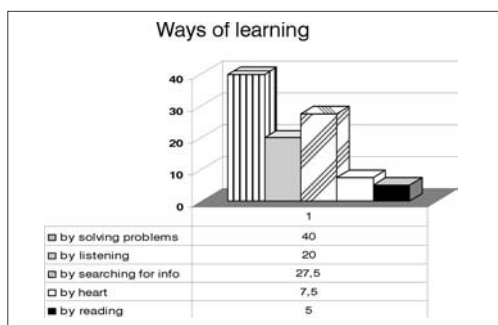
sible content areas for the course, for personal study, and for assisting in the construction of a learning contract. The information will help teachers identify and develop many of the professional competencies required to be an effective facilitator of self-directed and individualized adult learning.

Having evaluated some external factors influencing students' learning, we can see (table 1) that there is a strong correlation between structure and authority and students' motivation and responsibility. It means that students need teachers' assistance in their learning process ( $r = .502$ ) and the more motivated they are the more self-directed they can be ( $r = .646$ ). Statistically significant correlation between learners' motivation and the sense of responsibility was found ( $p = .000$ ;  $r = .646^{**}$ ). Statistical significance between learning motivation and students' need for autonomous studies was established with the help of ANOVA ( $p = .02$ ;  $r = 3.742$ ). A conclusion was drawn that students' wishes and needs to work independently depend on their motivation, attitude and responsibility. The higher motivation, the more autonomous learning students want to have in this learning process.

The variable of responsibility was measured from the point of view of the project work. It was interesting to notice that 65 % of respondents stated that the group was responsible for the results of the project and 32.5 % of students stated that each individual was responsible for the success or failure of the project (Fig 1).



**Fig 1.** *The responsibility of students in autonomous language studies*



**Fig 2.** *Ways of learning preferred by students*

Analyzing the reasons for the failure of the project-based case study, 52.5 % of respondents stated that the presentation of the collected material caused a lot of problems and was the main reason for failure. 28 % made a remark that they felt the lack of time. It means that a lot of students cannot cope with the quantity of material they get today and cannot manage the time. It means that to structure their learning is of great importance in autonomous language studies. 10 % of students were willing to be occupied with some other activities. After the longitudinal experiment students stated that one of the most enjoyable way of learning (Fig 2) is learning by solving problems (40 % of respondents) which fosters critical thinking.

## Conclusions

Generalizing students' answers, it could be said that:

- despite being autonomous in self-directed language learning students need teacher's control in their studies;
- students' progress should be registered in some form to foster responsibility for their studies;
- the usage of new methods of learning enhances the dialogue between a teacher and a student;
- significant connection between structure and authority and students' motivation and responsibility.

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## MOKYMOŠI KONTRAKTAI STUDIJUOJANT UŽSIENIO KALBĄ

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*Straipsnyje nagrinėjama mokymosi ryšių, kaip vieno iš efektyvių būdų kontroliuojant mokymosi procesą, taikymas užsienio kalbos kontekste. Kaip parodė tyrimo rezultatai, studentams yra reikalingas dėstytojas, kuris galėtų atlikti konsultanto, informacijos tiekėjo ar partnerio vaidmenį naudojant naujus mokymo metodus, kurie skatina autonomiškumą ir norą patiems vertinti ir kontroliuoti savo studijų eigą. Atliktas tyrimas leidžia teigti, kad studentų mokymosi pažanga turėtų būti fiksuojama ir registruojama ir vienas iš efektyviausių būdų, skatinančių studentų atsakomybės jausmą, yra mokymosi kontraktai. Respondentų atsakymai rodo, kad naujų metodų, tokių kaip projekto metodas, bylų (atvejų) analizė, naudojimas užsienio kalbos studijų kontekste skatina dėstytojo ir studento dialogą ir suteikia studentams visavertės akademines studijas aukštojoje mokykloje.*

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** mokymosi kontraktas, savikryptinis mokymasis, atsakomybė.

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