

〔論文〕

Clarity, Contracts and Student Performance

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Introduction

When teachers utilize student contracts to clearly explain expectations regarding class behavior, rules, participation and attendance, dramatic improvements can be achieved. Students who clearly understand every rule and expectation become more relaxed, confident and likely to participate in learning activities. This paper briefly describes the value of clear expectations through the use of student contracts, detailed daily evaluation techniques and adequate test preparation time. A detailed comparison of twenty English classes over two semesters will demonstrate how using these simple teaching tools can produce significant improvements.

Contracts

One of the best ways to help students understand what a teacher expects is through the use of student contracts. Throughout their pedagogical evolution, student contracts have been known by a variety of names such as "learning contracts", "learning plans", "learning commitments", "study plans", "learning agreements", or "self-development plans" (Codde, 2006). At the most basic level, a student contract is a simple document explaining the teacher's expectations and class rules. For the purpose of this study, expectations regarding attendance, attitude, participation and behavior were described in detail so that every student clearly understood the basic class requirements. To avoid

confusion, contracts were written in both English and Japanese and students read the contracts out loud on the first day of class. Students then signed their contracts as a written promise to adhere to the teacher's rules and expectations. Although the contracts used in this study were relatively simple, they produced dramatically positive results.

Literature Review

A review of the literature demonstrates the numerous benefits to using student contracts. A study conducted at The Worcester Polytechnic Institute in association with The Academic Technology Center (2008) found that "the use of learning contracts leads students to become more self-directing and more responsible for their own learning". In a separate study, Woodbury (2009) found that 76% of his students devoted more time and effort to the class which used student contracts as opposed to his previous classes which did not employ the contract system. Students in Woodbury's contract classes also professed that additional time invested in independent study helped them to understand and retain difficult information more effectively. A majority of Woodbury's students also admitted that the contract learning system was a motivating factor in their success. According to Knowles (as cited in Codde, 2006) student contracts provide a wide variety of benefits. To begin with, contracts help teachers deal with the countless differences among large groups of students. University classes

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are often filled with a variety of students who have vastly different backgrounds, interests, prior experiences, learning styles, strengths, weaknesses, life patterns, outside commitments, and learning speeds. These many differences can be dealt with much more effectively when teachers employ a contract system. Contracts can level the playing field and make everyone play by the same rules. Student contracts also “increase student motivation for learning, facilitate the development of mutual respect between the educator and participants, provide for more individualized mode of instruction, and foster the skills of self-directedness” (Codde, 2006). When teachers respect students and treat them as responsible adults, the students respond with a reciprocated respect and act accordingly. Krivanek (2000) contends that “the main benefit of a learning contract is that it compels people to think about what they are going to learn. In addition, a contract gives them a more active role in determining the outcome of their training” This is particularly true in smaller classes where students have the opportunity to decide how and where they wish to focus their studies. Codde (2006) describes contracts as an effective method to get students more actively involved in their studies as opposed to simply being passive recipients of information. Finally, while a verbal contract may satisfactorily explain a teacher’s rules and expectations, Krivanek (2000) contends that the written method is much more effective and valuable when dealing with “problem” students. Written contracts leave no room for argument and force problem students to follow the rules or suffer the consequences. Contracts can be a motivating factor in any student’s success.

Procedure

This study was conducted over two semesters from April 2008 to January 2009 in twenty English as a foreign language classes at Kurume Institute of Technology. Class sizes ranged from

ten students to fifty students with the larger classes in the first semester. In the first semester, students did not receive written student contracts. The teacher simply explained his rules and expectations verbally in both English and Japanese. English explanations were written on the white board and students were told to write all the rules and expectations in their notebooks. Unfortunately, despite being told what to do, many students did not follow these instructions. Many students did not even have notebooks. Some students copied the rules on a loose piece of paper but then left it behind after class. Some students ignored the teacher, refused to follow the instructions or did not understand what was required. In the second semester, however, every student received a pre-typed contract in both English and Japanese on the first day of class. Students read the contracts as a class and then signed and dated the contracts as an agreement of their understanding and commitment. All signed contracts were then collected by the teacher. Clear explanations and a signed agreement to follow the rules produced significantly improved results not only in class behavior but also in final test scores.

The second difference between the two semesters was the daily grading procedures. In the first semester, each student received a daily performance assessment of either “S” for Satisfactory or “U” for Unsatisfactory. This two choice grading system was not detailed enough and some students received satisfactory grades even though they did not produce satisfactory performances. In the second semester, each student received a daily performance assessment of either A, B, C or D. Compared to the first semester’s rather limited two option system, the second semester’s four option system was much more effective and motivating to the students’ overall daily performance. At the end of each semester, the teacher evaluated the daily performance reports for each student in conjunction with their final test scores and

attendance records to establish their final grade.

The third difference was the amount of class time spent on test preparation. In the first semester, the teacher designed a test which incorporated a semester's worth of lessons into one hundred elementary English questions. Although all the information was covered in class, it is possible that some students were not certain what to expect from the test so were therefore unable to adequately prepare. In the second semester, the teacher made sure to schedule one final lesson solely for the purpose of test preparation. Clear explanations of the final test's structure and content helped students prepare more effectively and produce noticeably improved results.

Results

The dramatic differences in final test scores between the first and second semester classes can be seen in the graphs provided. The mean score in the Oral English final exam improved from 58.13 in the first semester to 68.89 in the second semester - a 10.76% overall improvement. In the English for Science and Technology final exam, the mean score increased an impressive 18.25% from 66.3 to 84.55. In the Oral English final exam, the number of A grades increased by 6% over the two semesters. The English for Science and Technology class produced a dramatic 38% increase in A grades received while the percentage a D grades decreased 28%.

Triangulation of data was achieved through the combined efforts of the researcher and a student assistant. Together, the researcher and assistant graded, checked and double checked all of the students' test scores. After all the final scores were calculated, the researcher and assistant input the final scores into the computer to create graphs. The researcher and student assistant created all the final graphs as a team.

In addition to the improved final test scores, field note observations showed a dramatic improvement

in student attitude and classroom behavior. Students in the second semester were much more willing to participate in classroom activities and English discussions. Students appeared much more confident and relaxed. Attendance rates also displayed dramatic improvements. The vast majority of students in the second semester came to class on time, prepared and ready to study.

Discussion

While these results are impressive, they must be understood within the context of this particular study. While the second semester classes all produced higher test scores, each class in the second semester had far fewer students than the first. It is quite possible that the smaller class sizes and individual attention available to second semester students was a contributing factor in their success. The second difference was the amount of time in class spent on test preparation. Second semester students were provided one full class as a test preparation lesson whereas first semester students were not. While the use of contracts in the second semester may have been a significant motivating factor, contracts used in conjunction with additional test preparation time possibly contributed to the higher scores in the second semester.

Conclusion

Class participation, attitude, effort, comprehension and final test scores can all display noticeable improvement when students understand exactly what is expected from them. One of the best methods to effectively communicate teacher expectations and class rules is through the use of student contracts. Student contracts can be a simple written, signed agreement between the teacher and student regarding class rules, attendance and participation. Outlining exactly what is expected creates an atmosphere of clarity, trust, respect and increased confidence. When students are

confident in their understanding, they are less anxious and more likely to participate in class activities. Relaxed students who freely participate can ultimately learn more through shared speaking practice with their peers. Increased confidence is reflected not only in class participation and attitude, but also in the students final test scores. Students who have a clear concept of what to expect in their final exam will be able to prepare more effectively. This study demonstrates that clear expectations through the use of contracts and additional test preparation time can help students improve their final test scores. These improvements have the potential to build student self confidence and renew their interest in learning English independently. Increased self-confidence and a revitalized interest in independent English study have the potential to help students throughout their entire lives.

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