

Students can be led to Knowledge, but . . .

Can they be made to “Drink”?

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Developing ways to motivate students both in and out of class is a challenge faced by teachers at all levels. But teachers are not the only ones who benefit by fostering motivation. In fact, when working in retail, the ability to motivate the customer is often the key to the sale. A well known way to accomplish this is to have the customers fill out their own purchase orders. By writing down their their desire to buy, the customers were, in effect, solidifying their motivation to make the purchase. Adapting this idea into the language learning classroom is the subject of this paper. Every week, after class, students made a written promise, vowing to study a certain amount of time every day. At the end of the term students were then surveyed about their reaction to the promise. The results and interpretation of the survey are included in this paper, along with a discussion of the potential value of this practice.

INTRODUCTION

In any language classroom, though there are many variables that can affect language acquisition, there are three components that all have in common : the teacher, the material, and the student. Two of these components, of course, are directly influenced by the instructor. Training, experience, imagination, and the aid of others can have a great impact on how teachers teach, as well as the materials chosen for the class. However, while teaching and learning can be considered two sides of the same coin, it must be remembered that they are on opposite sides. While good teaching can facilitate learning, whether or not learning actually takes place is something the teacher has no control over. Learning will not occur unless the students themselves make a conscious effort to learn. This makes for an ironic situation, because unless the students have some motivation to learn, it won't matter how much experience and effort the teacher brings to the classroom. It won't matter how perfect the materials are for the lesson to be taught. If the students have no desire to learn, they won't.

We have all heard the old saying, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink,” and usually, it is used to refer to someone's stubbornness. And by “stubbornness”, we tend to mean a refusal to act, or a refusal to change one's mind. While there are many stubborn students, as

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there are teachers, few would find it natural to relate being stubborn with a lack of effort in the classroom. Yet, the relationship is apparent.

The instructor comes to class with the training, the experience, and the materials, all aimed at helping students increase their foreign language ability. The students, on the other hand, are the ones who are exposed to this language learning environment. And while on the surface, their role might appear to be a passive one, in fact, it is the students who must be the most active. They have to recognize that learning requires effort, and then push themselves to acquire the knowledge and skills being taught. Those who refuse to expend that effort, refuse to push themselves to learn are, in a way, being stubborn. It is here that teachers often face their biggest challenge : getting the students to change an attitude they might not even be aware of, and fostering their desire to learn, and their willingness to expend effort in the process. This desire is what is known as motivation, and it comes in two types : extrinsic and intrinsic.

Extrinsic motivation is that which is fostered through a desire for some kind of external reward. While the reward itself is usually a physical object (a new job, a special prize, etc.), it could also be something less tangible to the naked eye, such as praise or public approval. This type of motivation views the process as the means to an end. Extrinsic motivation can be visualized with the idea of “the carrot and the stick.” Dangling a carrot in front of a horse might get the horse to move forward, but he won’t be moving because of a desire to move, rather he will be moving forward only because he wants that carrot. The weakness of this type of motivation is apparent : if interest is lost in the reward, then no more effort will be expended in the process of achieving that reward.

Intrinsic motivation differs from extrinsic in that it comes entirely from within the individual. There are no external rewards to be achieved, only internal ones. People with intrinsic motivation perform, study, act, etc. not so much because of the promise of a pot of gold at journey’s end, but because they enjoy the discoveries they make along this particular journey’s path. So really, intrinsic motivation can be likened to a fire that burns within the student.

When it comes to any kind of classroom situation, there is no bad type of motivation. Teachers are pleased whenever they see any type of student motivation. And it could be said that fostering motivation is an integral part of the teaching profession. It can be relatively easy for teachers to foster extrinsic motivation. Through the promise of prizes, grades, or a host of other “carrots”, students can be motivated to learn. But depending on instructors to continually foster extrinsic motivation saddles them with a heavy responsibility. And in the end, it is not really the teacher’s responsibility to make the students learn. It is the students themselves who shoulder that burden. If the students can be made to recognize their own responsibility, they might become more motivated to learn.

Research has shown that intrinsic motivation is a much more powerful force than extrinsic (Brown, 2001), so it makes sense for teachers to try to develop methods to foster it in students. Kumaravadivelu (1994) wrote about how learner autonomy could help develop intrinsic motivation. By becoming autonomous learners, students begin to reflect on past learning experiences. A benefit to this is that they also begin to plan for future action (Cottarall, 2000). For the past several years, I have been researching simple methods to develop autonomous learners.

In an earlier study, in an effort to help students reflect on their past experiences, I have made use of the Participation Card. This is a simple card that has student grade themselves on the non-quantifiable aspects of every class. Students are asked to grade themselves on items such as their level of preparation, participation, and effort in listening, speaking, and group work. The rationale behind the card was that by looking at themselves with a slightly critical eye, they would recognize their own responsibility in the class. By grading themselves, it is hoped that week to week, they would strive to work harder so they could grade themselves higher. And indeed, research conducted has shown that these cards do seem to be effective in helping students motivate themselves to try harder (2003).

Yet the Participation Card is rather limited in scope. It seeks to only motivate students while they are in class. When one considers that most classes conducted in Japan meet only 90 minutes per week, one can see that there are still more than 165 hours remaining that the Participation Card has no relation to. Obviously, finding a tool that will help students motivate themselves out of class would be a useful addition to any teacher's repertoire. This is where the idea of having student make a promise comes in.

In his 2001 book, *Influence : Science and Practice*, Robert Cialdini describes a standard sales practice of having a customer fill out a sales agreement rather than having the salesman do it. By having the customers do this, the salesmen found that there was a dramatic drop in the number of cancellations caused by the customer having second thoughts. The reason for this is that by writing something down, the mind makes a much stronger psychological promise to follow through with what was written. So by filling out the sales form, customers were actually solidifying their own commitment to buy the product, and were thus, much less likely to back out later.

In the spring of 2006, I decided to adapt this idea and put it to the test in the EFL classroom.

METHOD

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to see if psychological characteristics of commitment could be

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utilized to get students to follow through on self-made promises to study. The basic research question was: By making a simple weekly written promise to study every day, can students motivate themselves to study outside of class?

Treatment

In addition to performing a self-evaluation by scoring themselves on a Participation Card at the conclusion of every class, students were further instructed that they must make a promise to study every day, outside of class. The promise came in two types.

Promise Version 1 (PV 1) was a fill in the blank type:

- Date : ___ Last week, I studied for ___ a day, so I kept/broke my promise. I will study ___ minutes a day until our next class.

Promise Version 2 (PV 2) was much the same, only in this instance, it was completely hand written:

- Date : ___ I will study for ___ a day until our next class.

The following week, they wrote on their card whether or not they had kept their promise.

Students were told that they should promise to study whatever amount of time they felt they could afford to spend on a daily basis. They were not given a minimum amount of time to study per day. If they thought they could only study a few minutes a day, that was fine. It was entirely up to the individual.

Participants

The students who participated in this study came from two classes conducted at a private university located in the Kansai area of Japan. Both classes were required Speaking classes containing 21 first year English majors each. One class used PV 1, while the other used PV 2. The study was conducted during the spring semester of 2006.

Instrument

To evaluate the value of these promises, a six item survey was handed out during the final class of the semester.

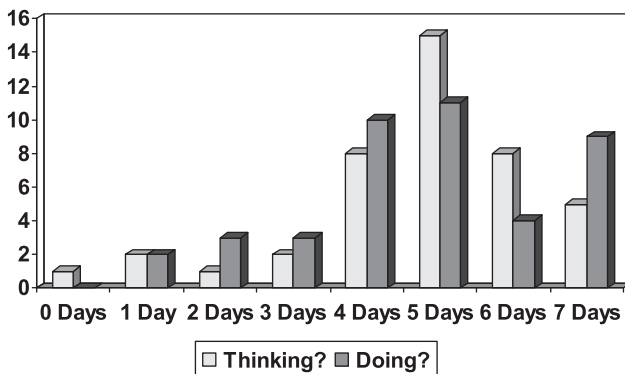
Survey: Every week, at the end of class, you made a promise to yourself to study every day until our next class:

1. On average, how many days a week did you think about the promise you made to study?
_____ (0 days --> 7 days)
2. On average, how many days a week did you study English outside of class?
_____ (0 days --> 7 days)
3. I believe I studied more outside of class because I made this promise every week.
A) Strongly agree B) Agree C) Disagree D) Strongly Disagree
4. I felt that it was important to keep my promise to study.
A) Strongly agree B) Agree C) Disagree D) Strongly Disagree
5. I felt bad when I “broke” my promise to study.
A) Strongly agree B) Agree C) Disagree D) Strongly Disagree
6. How often did you “keep” your promise to study?
A) Every week B) Almost every week C) About half of the time
D) Only a few times E) Never

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following graphs illustrate student responses to these questions. Each graph is followed by a short discussion.

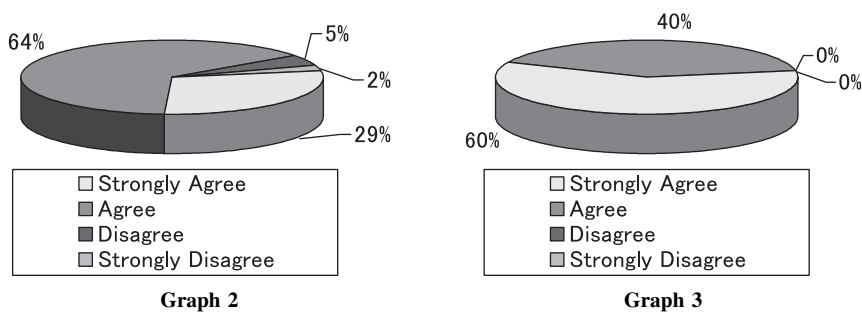
Compared to students at most western universities, Japanese university students can be considered especially busy. With up to 16 different 90 minute classes per week demanding their attention, it is no wonder that students spend little if any time engaged in studies that are not relevant to a specific assignment or quiz. While keeping this in mind, it was hoped that the promise would help to spur students into devoting some of their out-of-class time to their English studies.



Graph 1

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Graph 1 looks at the responses to the first 2 survey questions : “On average, how many days a week did you think about the promise you made to study?” And, “on average, how many days of week did you study English outside of class?” Roughly two-thirds (almost 67%) of the 42 students surveyed said that they thought about their promise 5 or more days per week. And of those same students, a slight majority of 57% replied that they actually studied 5 or more days per week. While this relationship could be coincidental, the written promises were clearly on the students’ minds.

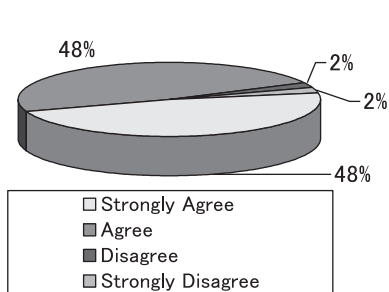


With Graph 2, students were posited the statement that they felt they studied more outside of class because they had made this promise every week. 93% of the students agreed. While only a few students were studying English every day (as indicated in Graph 1), that so many felt that they were studying more because of the promise they had made is a very encouraging result. Again, it must be remembered that this particular English class was competing against time requirements for up to 15 other courses. That the act of writing a simple promise can be so effective in getting the students studying indicates that once they are made aware of their own responsibilities in the learning process, they are more than willing to apply the effort necessary.

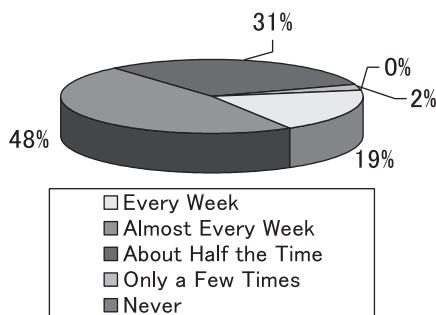
Graph 3 represents student responses to statement 4 in the survey : “I felt that it was important to keep my promise to study.” Surprisingly, 100% of the students agreed with this statement, with 60% strongly agreeing. One should remember that the origin of this idea regarding promises was based on psychological principles, so a high percentage was to be expected. However, it might be a rather unexpected realization that the tactics applied by salesmen can also be employed with effectiveness by classroom instructors.

From the time children learn to speak, they learn that promises are important. They carry some weight, and should not be made lightly. A promise should never be just words with no force behind them. With Graph 4, levels of agreement to the statement “I felt bad when I ‘broke’ my promise,” are represented. Again, at 96%, the students were in almost total agreement with this statement. While the

act of making the promise was forced upon the students, the actual time they were committing to was entirely up to them. Perhaps because they had the freedom to choose exactly how much time they could afford to promise, with no minimums, and the freedom to choose just how and what they were going to study, the act of making the promise held real power, as opposed to that of just a last minute task to be completed before the end of class.



Graph 4



Graph 5

Question 6 of the survey asked students how often they kept their promise to study. While 19% said that they had kept their promises every week, 48% of them said that they had kept their promises almost every week. As seen in Graph 5, almost a third of the students said that they had kept their promises about half the time. It is obvious that a clear majority of students were more inclined to keep their promises as opposed to breaking them. And as for those students who did break their promises, it should be remembered from Graph 4, that upon doing so, 96% did feel bad.

CONCLUSIONS

Summary and Discussion of Research Findings

This paper is part 2 of an initial exploration into the idea of having students make a promise to study as a method of motivating them to spend time out of class on their English studies. The results shown here closely replicate the findings of part 1 of the study, done with OGU students. They indicate that once students actually make a promise to study, they will then follow through on their promise. With this group of students, 93% felt that they studied more outside of class because of their promise than they would have otherwise, while 100% felt that it was important to keep their promise to study. When there are no specific reasons to study, the promises seemed to help students become more autonomous as learners

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With this current project, the analysis of these survey items was done without regard to the two different types of promises the students were making. For the most part, the variation was in terms of degree between the two groups of students. However, in question 2, out of the 9 students who said they studied everyday, 7 (78%) came from the class using PV 2. With question 4, while all of the students agreed that it was important to keep their promise, 81% of the PV 2 students “strongly agreed” with the statement vs. only 38% of the PV 1 students. Regarding feeling bad about breaking their promise, 62% of the PV 2 students “strongly agreed” with the statement, as compared to only 33% of the PV 1 students. So in this survey, both promise versions seemed to have been meaningful to the students. But when comparing them side by side, there is an indication that the act of writing out the promise (PV 2) carries more emotional weight than just filling in a number of minutes (PV 1) the student intends to study.

Follow-up

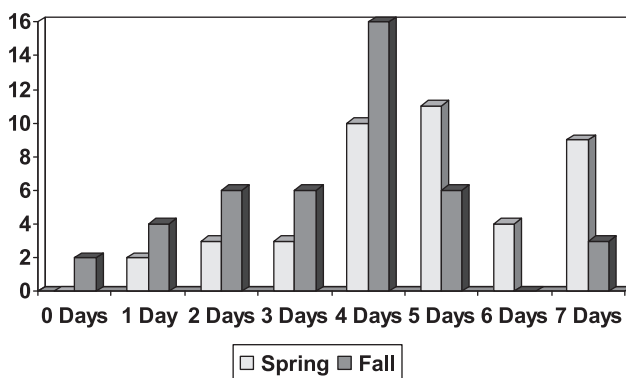
As stated earlier, this study was conducted during the spring semester of the 2006 school year. During the fall semester, no more mention was made of the students being required to make a promise to study. However, at the end of the fall semester, students were given a 3 item survey that again asked them to think about their promises :

1. On average, how many days a week did you study English outside of class this semester?
_____ (0–7 days)
2. I believe I studied more outside of class LAST SEMESTER because of the promise I made to study. a) strongly agree b) agree c) disagree d) strongly disagree
3. I spent more time studying when I made a promise than I did when I didn’t make a promise. a) strongly agree b) agree c) disagree d) strongly disagree

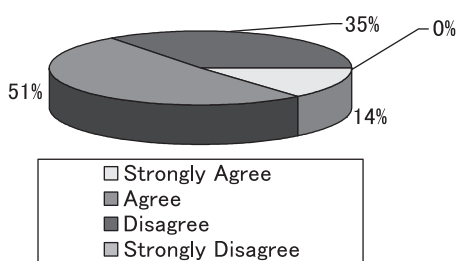
Graph 6 compares the days studied outside of class during the spring semester with that of the fall semester.

Looking at this graph, it is clear that there is a great difference between the two semesters. Whereas in the spring semester, 57% of the students studied 5 or more days per week, in the fall, that percentage dropped to roughly 21%. While there are many more variables at play that could have an influence on this number than just the promise, or lack thereof, almost 29% of the PV 2 students were in this group, as compared to only 14% of the PV 1 students.

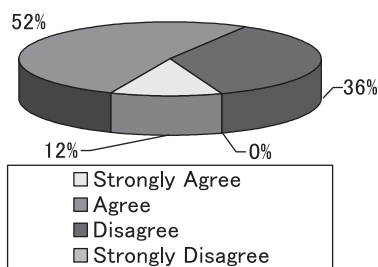
As to the statement, “I believe I studied more outside of class last semester than I did this semester,” 65% of the students agreed (Graph 7). And of those students, 64% thought that the reason



Graph 6



Graph 7



Graph 8

they had studied more was because of the promise they had made to study (Graph 8).

Limitations of the Current Study

The author readily acknowledges that there are several limitations to this study, chief of which was the lack of a control group. Without knowing the study practices of non-promise making students, it is difficult to say with any certainty if the promise was the impetus behind getting these students to study outside of class. Another limitation of this study lies in the fact that only a small number of students participated. A larger sampling, with a wider variety of students would provide more concrete data as to the true effectiveness of having students make promises.

Final Thought

While student motivation is something teachers continually seek to instill, it should be kept in mind that students who motivate themselves will be able to carry their learning far beyond the confines of the classroom. Having students write out a promise to study, as basic as it sounds, has been shown here to be a valuable tool in getting students to actually study outside of class. Further research will

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be conducted, but in the meantime, it does appear that if you can get students to lead themselves to knowledge, they will allow themselves to drink, and drink deeply.

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