

# **A Promise to Thyself**

**Margaret C. KIM**

## **Abstract**

Student motivation is one of the main challenges teachers face in the classroom and much research has been conducted to find ways to increase it. The main purpose of this research was to see if promises could be used as a means to increase students' desire to study. Students were asked to "promise" the amount of time they would spend studying English outside the classroom. By making a promise in written form every week, it was hoped the students would be motivated to follow through. This paper contains the results and interpretations of several surveys given regarding the promise, and concludes with a discussion of the implications that can be drawn from this study.

**Key words:** student motivation, contract learning, intrinsic learning, learner autonomy

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Motivation**

According to Dornyei (2001), "One of the most influential paradigms in mainstream motivational psychology has been offered by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vallerand, 1997), which includes the well-known distinction between intrinsic motivation (i.e., performing a behavior for its own sake in order to experience pleasure and satisfaction such as the joy of doing a particular activity or satisfying one's curiosity) and extrinsic motivation (i.e., performing a behavior as a means to an end, that is to receive some extrinsic reward such as good grades or a raise in salary, or alternatively to avoid punishment). The theory places the various types of regulations on a continuum between self-determined (intrinsic) and controlled (extrinsic) forms of motivation, depending on how 'internalized' they are, that is how much the regulation has been transferred from outside to inside the individual."

It's relatively easy for the teacher to foster extrinsic motivation because they control the grades and can offer other rewards. As long as the students desire the prize offered, it's fine, but if there is no desire, then there is a problem. Teachers have more responsibility, because not only do they have to develop the lesson, but also some prize that the students will accept. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation is not a function of the teacher because it must be nurtured from within oneself. According to Brown (2001), intrinsic motivation is much more powerful than extrinsic motivation. As a result, students with intrinsic motivation outperform students with extrinsic motivation. So the question teachers must ask themselves is, "what can I do to increase the intrinsic motivation of my students?"

According to Kumaravadivelu (1994), learner autonomy can help in developing intrinsic motivation. Reflection of past experiences through self-evaluation and self-assessment are some of the most important aspects of learner autonomy (Cottarall, 2000). One way developed to help foster this learner autonomy was the Participation Card. It was developed by School for International Training (SIT) in Yokohama, and used as a tool to allow students to evaluate themselves. Students are asked to grade themselves at the end of each class in 5 separate categories according to their performance during class that day. The 5 sections are preparation, speaking, listening, English use, and group work. The participation card was a written record of their actions and attitudes in class, and gave them a chance to take responsibility for their own learning. Having the students assess themselves at the end of each class was used as a means to enhance the students' own

motivation. In previous research I was a part of, it was shown that out of 181 students, 90% felt the participation card helped motivate them to try harder in class (2003).

Using the participation card as a tool to enhance motivation was effective in the classroom, but how about outside of the classroom? For students, attending English class only once a week for 90 minutes, 14 times a semester wasn't enough to encourage them to study on their own. How could I motivate the students outside the classroom as well? This is where my current research, the "promise" to study English outside of the classroom applies.

The "promise" came about by reading about the psychology of the salesman in *Influence: Science and Practice* by Robert Cialdini. In this book, he relates the practice of salesmen having the customer fill out their own sales agreement by hand. By having the customer do this, they found that there were consistently fewer cancellations. This happened because the customer, by writing out the agreement, became more psychologically committed to the purchase. This led my fellow researcher, Ross E. Miller, to wonder if this idea of a simple written contract could be applied to EFL students. In this contract they would make their own promise to study English outside of class. This idea was used in my EFL classes at Kobe College in the spring semester of 2006.

## **METHOD**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to see if the students could be induced to study English more outside of the classroom by having them make a written promise. By having a commitment in writing, did it weigh as a psychological factor to them? While there were several styles of written learning contracts employed, all were combined with self-evaluations as tools to see whether or not these could help foster motivation to learn from within the students themselves.

### **Participants**

This study was conducted using university students from Kobe College, a private women's university in the Kansai area of Japan. A total of 46 students were surveyed. The students were first year students in a year-long general English course called Communication in English that met once a week for 90 minutes. This freshman course is a requirement for all majors.

### **Weekly practice**

At the end of each class, the students were given their participation cards which

included their self-evaluation on their performance that day, along with the promise form that they had to fill out. There were 3 versions of the promise that were chosen for each of the 3 classes. Version 1 was a follow-up from the previous week because they had to circle whether they had kept or broken their promise as to how many minutes a day they studied within that week. Version 2 and Version 3 asked how many minutes they will study until the next class. The only difference being between these two versions was that in Version 3, they had to completely hand-write the promise.

## **The Promise**

### **Promise Version 1 (BL class)**

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

- **Promise Version 2 (BK class)**

- **Date: \_\_\_\_ I promise to study for \_\_\_\_ minutes a day until our next class.**

- **Promise Version 3 (completely hand – written) (BJ class)**

- **Date: \_\_\_\_ I will study for \_\_\_\_ minutes a day until our next class.**

The amount of time they wrote down for their promise was completely up to them. It didn't affect their grade in any way. Students were free to write any amount of time they wished. What the students chose to study outside of class was decided by them. In conversation with some students, it was mentioned that they studied for the TOEIC, watched English movies, read English books etc.

## **Instruments**

A 6 question survey was given to the students at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester of the 2006 spring term to measure the effectiveness of the promise.

### **Survey about the Promise**

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

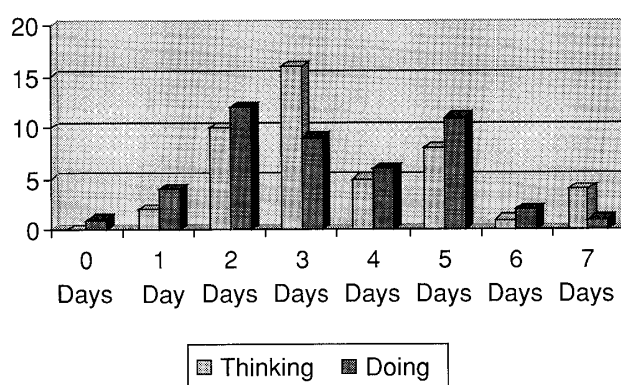
1. On average, how many days a week did you think about the promise you made to study? \_\_\_\_\_ ( 0 days-- > 7 days)
2. On average, how many days a week did you study English outside of class?  
\_\_\_\_\_ ( 0 days-- > 7 days)

- 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 results of student surveys focusing on the use of basic learning contracts will be discussed. Below are the graphs representing the answers of the 46 students who took the survey.

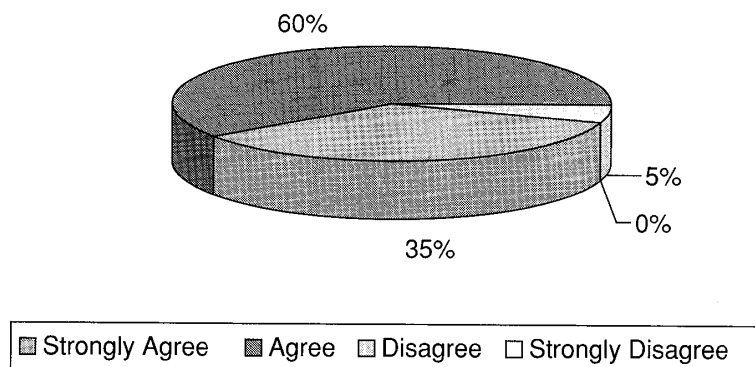
Graph 1 gives the answers to question 1 and 2 : “On average, how many days a week did you **think** about the promise you made to study?” and “On average, how many days a week **did** you study English outside of class?”



According to the results of the survey, 74% thought about the promise for 3 or more days, while 52% actually studied outside of the class for 3 or more days. This indicates that while they are not studying everyday, a high percentage is at least contemplating it. A positive sign is that every single student thought about the promise at least some time outside of class.

### Graph 2

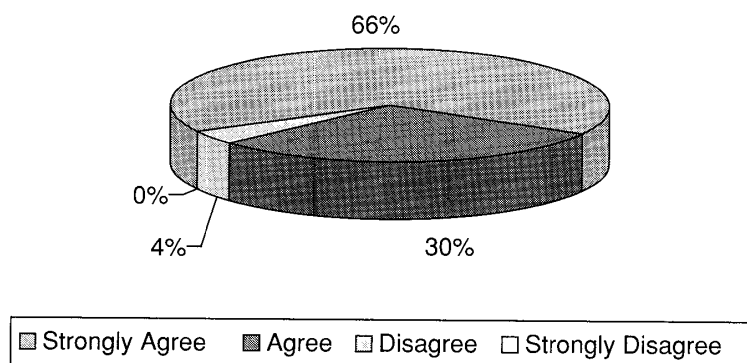
Graph 2 is based on question 3 in the survey: "I believe I studied more outside of class because I made this promise every week."



The graph shows that almost all of the students believed in the value of the promise. 95% of the students felt they studied English more outside of class because they made their promise. This is a strong indication that having this contract was an important factor to a clear majority of the students.

### Graph 3

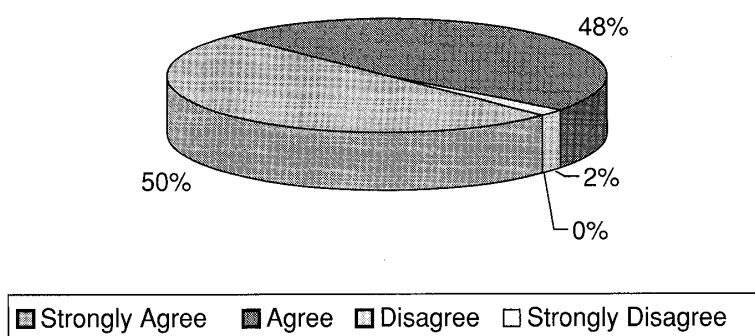
Graph 3 looks at the responses to question 4 : "I felt it was important to keep my promise to study."



In this graph, 96% of the students felt some psychological responsibility to keep their promise to study. This falls in line with what Cialdini mentioned in his book. As the goal of this project was to try to capitalize on psychological truths, it is very encouraging (though perhaps it shouldn't be too surprising) that the tactics used by salesmen can apparently be applied in the classroom.

Graph 4

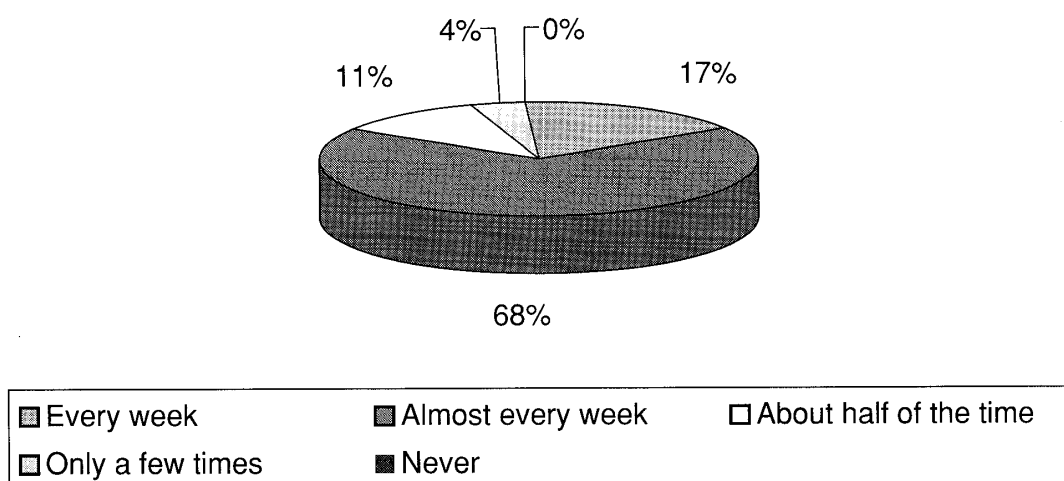
This graph displays the answers to question 5 : “I felt bad when I broke my promise to study.”



In the survey, a dominant majority of 98% of the students agreed that they felt bad when they broke their promise. It's a positive sign that almost all of the students recognized that making a promise is important. The students were free to study any kind of English outside of the class, and were not limited to homework assigned by the teacher. Not having strict limitations on what to study could have made them feel more responsible for their personal promise.

Graph 5

The final graph in the survey illustrates the answers to question 6 : “How often did you keep your promise to study.”



More than two-thirds of the students answered that they kept their promise almost every week, while 17% kept it every week. This shows that a high 85% overall were inclined to keep their promise a majority of the time. Only 15% broke their promise half

the time or more. It should be remembered that 98% of the students mentioned that they felt bad when they broke their promise (Graph 4 ).

## Conclusions

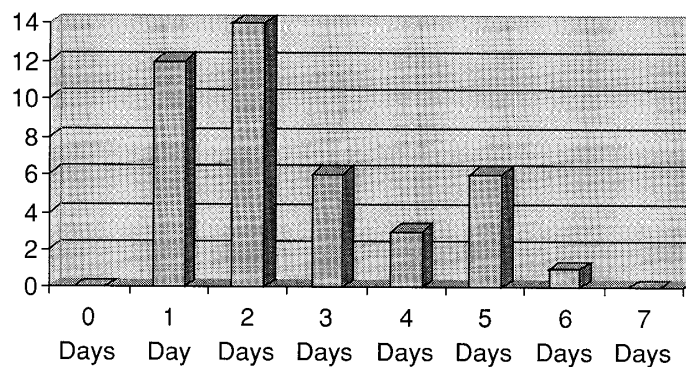
### Follow Up

As a follow-up to this research, this end of the year survey about the promise was given to 42 students. It must be emphasized that the students didn't use the promise during the second semester. The graphs below represent the results of each of the 3 questions.

#### Survey Given at the End of the Final Semester

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



Graph 6 shows the results to Question 1 : On average, how many days a week did you study English outside of class THIS SEMESTER? \_\_\_\_\_ ( 0 -- > 7 Days)

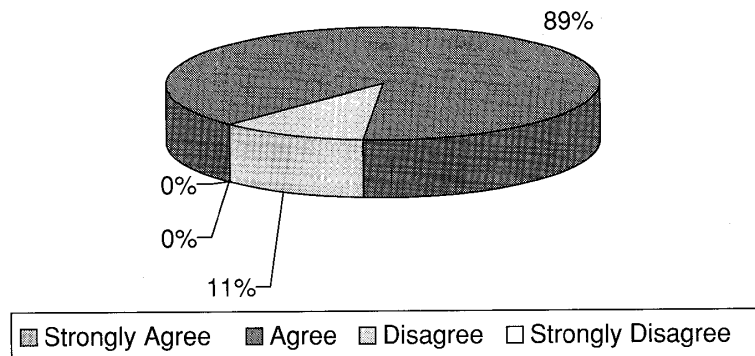
Only 21% of the students studied English 3 or more days outside of class during the week. This compares to the 52% of students who did the same during the first semester.

Comparing the 1<sup>st</sup> semester results to the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester results, 52% of the students studied English 3 or more days outside of class during the week, to only 21% of the



students during the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester. This gives us a difference of 31% less than the last semester of students who didn't use the promise.

Graph 7

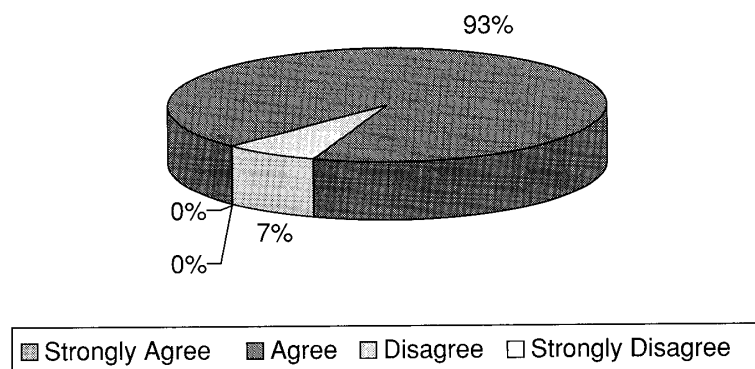


Graph 7 represents Question 2 of the survey: I believe I studied more outside of class LAST SEMESTER because of the promise I made to study.

This graph shows that 89% of the students agreed that they studied more outside of the class when the promise was written. This answer seems to provide an explanation for the 31% drop seen in the previous graph.

For the teacher, this simple task of creating a written promise as a contract can be seen as an effective tool.

Graph 8



In Graph 8 , the answers to Question 3 are shown: I spent more time studying when I made a promise than I did when I didn't make a promise.

The importance of making a promise, let alone the negative guilty feeling of breaking it can be applied in this question. The high majority of 93% of the students agreed that they studied more when making a promise. One can say that being involved by means of writing their promise gave them more responsibility in their learning process. The students are given their promise at the end of each class, so there is a record of each week's time they studied outside of class. This gives them a chance to reflect on their written promise.

### **Summary of Research Findings**

The findings of this research seem to indicate that the value of the promise was an important factor that motivated the students to study outside of the classroom. In graph 2 and 3, an overwhelming 90% of the students replied that having a written promise helped them to study. Moreover, three-fourths of the students kept their promise to study during the week. We must take into consideration that these 1<sup>st</sup> year students have a busy schedule of an average of 15 classes per week. Moreover, unlike intensive English classes that meet 2 or 3 times a week, this Communication in English class only met once a week for 90 minutes. Considering how busy they are with extra-curricular activities like clubs, circles, and adjusting to their new class schedules and surroundings during their freshman year, their lack of concentration and motivation may be understandable. Therefore, having this written agreement as a means to motivate them throughout the week is shown to be an effective tool in this research.

I didn't go into details regarding the differences between classes using the 3 promise versions in this paper. However, when looking at just one question, 92% of the Promise Version 3 group (BJ class) studied 3 or more days a week, compared to 58% for promise version 2 (class BL) and 50% for promise version 1 (BK class). This is a significant difference in numbers. So, among the promises, it seems the more effort required to completely hand-write the promise led to more effort expended outside of class in keeping the promise.

### **Implications for Further Study**

Because there are many sources of motivation, a more detailed study, with a larger variety of students and class types, as well as a control group, is needed to identify the true value of the Promise.

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