

Goal-Setting in EFL: Is it really useful?

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Abstract

This article reports on a study conducted to ascertain student attitudes with regard to the use of goal setting in the university foreign language classroom. Thirty-four non-English major freshmen participated in the 4-month study. Results show that although students found some difficulty in remembering to try to achieve their goals, they found goal setting useful in helping them to see progress on measurable goals, to focus on specific language areas, and to feel more motivated to use the target language.

この論文は外国語学ぶ大学のクラスでゴールセッティングの方法を使うと学生の学習態度がどのように変化するかを研究したものです。4ヶ月研究期間で34人の英語が専門でない学生が参加しました。何人かの学生がかれらのゴールに到達を努力を思い出すことが難しかったにもかかわらず、ゴールセッティングすると語学学習の中の特別な一つのターゲットをきめて集中でき、ゴール（目標）までの到達程度がみえるとより高いモチベーションで英語を使いたいと感じました。その結果、ゴールセッティングは役に立つことわかりました。

Introduction

The use of goal setting in business and other organizations has been well researched. There is also evidence of its application and efficacy in language learning. This preliminary study on student attitudes regarding the use of goal setting in the English language classroom was conducted over 15 weeks with 34 freshmen at a Japanese university. The purpose of the study was to gain some insight into student attitudes toward setting goals in order to help them make progress toward improving their English language skills. This technique is based on comprehensible output theory, goal setting theory, noticing, and the concept of learner autonomy. After a description of how goal setting was used in this study, I will present the results, discuss their relevance to language teaching, and will consider points for further research.

Background

Goal Setting

The term “goal” has been defined as “attaining a specific standard of proficiency on a task, usually within a specified time limit” (Locke et al 1981). It has been observed that individuals with specific goals which challenge them will do better on work tasks than those who are simply told to do their best (see goal setting theory, Locke and Latham 1990). People who are committed to their goals have also been found to have a better chance of reaching their goals, no matter who has chosen the goal.

There are certain conditions that will help the individual to attain the set goal. These are having strategies available to achieve it, having adequate ability, an acceptable level of difficulty of reaching the goal, a meaningful purpose for doing it, useful feedback, and finally, some kind of reward for attainment of the goal.

Feedback gives the goal-setter real time assessment on how closely they have reached their goal. If the individual is not content with the results, has “high self-efficacy,” and determines to improve in future through setting new goals, performance will improve (Locke and Latham 1994, p. 19). The *self-efficacy* concept of Bandura’s social cognitive theory refers to “individuals’ perceived capabilities to attain designated types of performances and achieve specific results” (Pajares 1996, p. 546). Self-efficacy affects the level of difficulty of the goal which an individual sets as well as the amount of effort exerted and persistence toward attaining the goal (Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons 1992, p. 664).

Learning style differences have also been shown to affect goal setting behavior (Oxford and Shearin 1994). “Learning style differences, based on personal preferences, are reflected not only in the selection of goals but also in the behaviors use to achieve those goals” (ibid, p. 19).

In the current study, students were free to choose their own language learning goals that were challenging, useful, within their ability, and attainable within one class period. The students were also able to discern the extent to which they achieved their goal (feedback) and were allowed a reward of their choice.

Goal Setting in the Language Learning Context

According to Krashen (1985), learners need comprehensible input and opportunities for negotiation. He states that production is not directly involved with acquisition. Swain’s comprehensible output theory (1985, Swain and Lapkin 1995) states that it is not enough for a learner to have input alone. She posits that learners must produce the language because in this way they will be required to think about how the language is structured. According Schmidt and Frota, attending to language features must be done consciously before they become intake (items held in memory which may or may not later become part of the learner’s interlanguage system) (Ellis 1994). They hold that learners “notice the gap” between the language they currently produce and the structures they would like to produce, and this awareness may lead to intake.

Goal setting can be used individually. Learner autonomy is one of the key aspects of the learner-centered classroom (Nunan 1988). The learner is an active participant in the decision-making process. Goal setting can play an important role in allowing students to take control of their own learning by establishing targets that they themselves see as pertinent to making progress in the language.

By encouraging learners to choose their own goals, they draw their attention to features of language they would like to improve and make a conscious effort toward producing those features. Such features are not limited to grammar and vocabulary, but can also include paralinguistic items. Language learners need opportunities to practice their chosen feature several times and *in context* during a specific time period. However, the practice of goal setting *in* the classroom can easily be continued *outside* the classroom and can be used anywhere and at any time, assisting the truly autonomous language learner.

Goal setting in language learning can have positive effects on motivation as well. When students do not perceive progress, they may become less motivated (Nunan 1999, p. 233). However, when students have a record of goals successfully completed, this may allow them to develop a sense of ownership over their own learning. Dornyei (1994) suggests that the satisfaction from goals achieved contributes to the student’s

intrinsic interest and that “attainable subgoals can also serve as an important vehicle in the development of the students’ self-confidence and efficacy” (p. 276). In addition, there is evidence that instructing “low-achieving” learners on how to set short-term goals has beneficial effects on “their sense of cognitive efficacy, their academic achievement, and their intrinsic interest in the subject matter” (Bandura & Shunk in Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons 1992).

Pilot Study

An initial pilot study was conducted in 2009 with 6 groups of freshmen university students, none of which was majoring in English. Permission was granted by the participants in writing for their results to be used for the purposes of this study. The 116 students were given instructions for goal setting in the first three weeks of a 15-week semester. The goal setting purpose and process were discussed, and examples of clear goals were given on a handout.

A clear goal is one that:

- 1) consists of a specific communication feature of the student’s choice
- 2) is attainable within a limited amount of time (e.g. during one task, or during one class period)
- 3) is challenging
- 4) is useful

The learners were asked to set a language learning goal before class each week, and at the end of each class they were allowed time to think about the extent to which they had achieved their goal for that day. No further instruction was given past the third week. At the end of the semester, the students were given a questionnaire to assess their own progress and to reflect on the usefulness of goal setting related to language learning.

The results of the questionnaire are as follows:

Q1-Q6 were marked on a 5-point Likert scale with 5= always, 1=never

Q1 Before class, I chose my goal	4.34
Q2 I thought carefully about the goal I chose	3.59
Q3 I chose goals that were not listed on the sheet	2.22
Q4 During the semester, I was careful to choose a variety of goals (for example, listening goals, pronunciation goals, vocabulary or fluency goals)	3.14
Q5 During each class I remembered to try to achieve my goal for that day	3.63
Q6 I actively helped my classmates to achieve their goals	2.92

Q7-Q9 were marked on a 5-point Likert scale with 5=strongly agree, 1=strongly disagree

Q7 I understand how setting goals can help me to improve my skills in English	3.68
Q8 I think setting a goal each week helped me to improve my skills in English	3.83
Q9 I think goal setting was useful this semester	3.84

Question 10, an open-ended question, asked for the reason why the student gave their answer to Question 9. There was some variety in these answers, although a pattern did emerge. Many of the students found that they often were so involved in conversations or in other activities that they forgot to actively try to achieve their goal. One student observed, "Even if I set my goal, I didn't try very hard." Several others reported that they did not reach their goals during the semester, or that "choosing the goal every time is difficult."

Most, however, commented that goal setting was useful for a variety of reasons. Some comments reflected that goal setting created student autonomy and motivation (all comments verbatim):

I think that we can have our goals in our mind because it were chosen by us and it were concrete things.

I can raise motivation by setting some goals.

My will change enthusiasm. English enrich with the enthusiasm.

Because if students have their goals, they can make effort to study English to achieve the goals.

Setting a goal and sharing that goal with someone else, helps to keep this student committed:

I have promised so I should do that try my best.

Others observed that having a goal helped them to focus better:

I can study with a definite aim every week.

We can concrete measure to try to achieve our goal.

I could have a realization of the goal through expressing a concrete number.

I could improve my weak point by being aware of my goals, and I got better skills in English by setting higher goals for me.

Goals can help students to establish positive attitudes:

I have an aim in English this semester. Thanks to setting goal, my attitude changed.

I become active in order to achieve the goal.

One student observed that there are different things to set goals toward:

I can try to use English in various ways every time.

Still others expressed gratitude at having a concrete purpose for each class.

If I didn't set a goal, I don't want to speak English.

Upon reviewing the results of the pilot study, several questions arose, and these formed the basis for the current study.

Research questions

In this study, several questions are being considered: 1) how would a more consistent training in goal setting affect the learners' attitudes toward their own learning, 2) would such training have an effect on their confidence in their English language skills, and 3) might their goal setting in class lead them to set goals outside of the classroom?

Methodology

The study was conducted in 2010 with two groups of freshmen university students, one group (N=17) majoring in psychology and the other (N=17) in humanities. Permission

was granted by the participants in writing for their results to be used for the purposes of this study. Two other groups had originally been chosen for participation in this study, but due to a scheduling error, data could not be collected from one of the groups, and it was eliminated. In order to have the same numbers of participants in each group for purposes of data analysis, one of the two test groups was randomly chosen for inclusion in this study.

The control group of humanities majors were not given any instruction on goal setting and were not asked to set goals during the semester. Both this and the test group were given a simple questionnaire at the beginning of the study to be used as baseline data. Both were given the same questionnaire in the 15th week, and the test group was given an additional, more in-depth survey.

The test group of psychology majors was given instructions for goal setting in the first three weeks of a 15-week semester. The goal setting purpose and process were discussed, and the same examples of clear goals were given on a handout as in the pilot study.

Participants in the test group were asked to set a language learning goal before class each week and to write it down on a chart which included a check sheet, asking if the student a) knew how to do it (i.e. how to achieve the goal), b) had a strategy to remember to try to reach the goal, c) wanted to do it, d) could do it in a 90-minute class, and e) saw value in trying to reach the goal. Further instruction or assistance in setting a goal was given each of the following weeks. At the end of each class the students were allowed time to think about the extent to which they had achieved their goal for that day, and were asked to make comments on their reactions to achieving or not reaching their set goal. They were also encouraged to give themselves a small reward for achieving their goals. In one class, the instructor provided stickers if the successful students wanted to choose one, and several did. At the end of the semester, the students were given a questionnaire to assess their own progress and to reflect on the usefulness of goal setting related to language learning.

Results

The sample consisted of 34 respondents. No determination was made to determine the gender of the participants. A t-test was conducted on all questionnaire items to determine differences in means for results at the beginning of the semester and those at then end for each group. The results, shown in Table 1, were significant and meaningful for four items. The results for question 1 indicated that the control group more than the test group felt greater confidence in using correct English grammar. The results of questions 5 through 7 indicated that the test group felt slightly more comfortable maintaining conversations in English than did the control group, and that they reported writing down language learning goals as well as other goals in their lives.

Table 1 Means and standard deviation results for questionnaire items

Questions	Control group		Test Group	
	April	July	April	July
2. I am confident in my pronunciation in English.	Mean = 3.06 SD = 1.14	Mean = 4.18 SD = 1.15	Mean = 2.35 SD = 1.32	Mean = 3.18 SD = 1.13
	p = 0.02		p = 0.06	
3. I believe I have a high level of fluency in English.	Mean = 3.35 SD = 1.08	Mean = 3.46 SD = 1.33	Mean = 2.63 SD = 1.06	Mean = 3.47 SD = 0.87
	p = 0.04		p = 0.30	
4. I am confident in my listening	Mean = 3.24	Mean = 2.88	Mean = 2.47	Mean = 2.94
	p = 0.01		p = 0.02	

4. I am confident in my listening skills in English.	Mean = 3.24 SD = 1.35	Mean = 2.88 SD = 0.99	Mean = 2.47 SD = 1.33	Mean = 2.94 SD = 1.39
	p = 0.39		p = 0.32	
5. I have no problem keeping a conversation going in English.	Mean = 2.59 SD = 1.46	Mean = 3.59 SD = 1.12	Mean = 2.24 SD = 0.97	Mean = 3.06 SD = 0.96
	p = 0.03		p = 0.01	
6. I regularly write down my language learning goals.	Mean = 3.29 SD = 1.31	Mean = 3.41 SD = 1.42	Mean = 2.53 SD = 1.12	Mean = 4.00 SD = 1.12
	p = 0.83		p = 0.001	
7. I regularly write down other goals in my life.	Mean = 3.88 SD = 1.69	Mean = 4.53 SD = 1.23	Mean = 2.88 SD = 1.32	Mean = 4.12 SD = 1.36

Note: 7-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree

Results of the open-ended Question 10 (the reason I answered Questions 9 this way is because:) were varied yet mirrored the results of the pilot study:

I think the goal is very useful, but we can't make new goal each class, so it's hard to set own goal.

I couldn't use the goal sheet usefully.

As I concentrate on conversation, I almost forgot my goal in each class.

I sometimes set goal, "Don't stop conversation." I didn't forget this goal, but I forget the other goals which I set.

時分の目標について考えるよい機会になった。(This was a good chance for me to think about my own goal.)

やる気がでた。(It motivated me.)

ゴールがあることで自分のすべきことが具体的に分かったから。(I answered that way because I realized concretely that if I have a goal, I should try to achieve it.)

Setting goal give me a duty to achieve it and I have only to concentrate on it.

具体的なゴールを設定することで、常にそれを意識して、英語で話そうと努力できるから。(By setting a specific goal and always concentrating on it, I can make an effort when I speak English.)

By setting goal, I can try to improve my week (sic) point. For example I try to ask partners many questions, and improve my pronunciation.

会話や聞き取りがただその場で達成するためのものではなく、それを通して能力向上につながる助けとなったから。(I answered that way because it's not only doing the conversation and listening activities, but [goal setting] helps us to persist in making progress in them.)

It should also be noted here that no students commented on receiving rewards for their successful attempts at reaching their goals.

Discussion

Given the small sample size, care should be taken in reaching conclusions. However, some useful results are indicated. Regardless of specific instruction, assistance, and opportunity to set language learning goals each week during the semester, there appears to be no difference in the results between the control and the test group with regard to the students' confidence in various features of their language skills.

With regard to how goal setting affects the learners' attitudes toward their own learning, summarizing the written comments from Question 10, we find that even though some students found it difficult either to set a goal or to remember to achieve it, others found that goal setting actually gave them another resource for improving skills

that they chose to focus on. Although at times attempts at achieving their goal may have come from a sense of “duty” or “obligation” (which came from the student her/himself), there was an overall feeling of a greater ability to achieve progress through setting specific, measurable goals.

The results of the test group questionnaire show there was much greater awareness of setting the goals themselves, which is rather obvious from the study methodology. However, learners in the test group reported that they were more likely than the control group to regularly write down other goals in their lives. This finding is somewhat surprising because the students were not at any time instructed to do so. By practicing this technique inside the classroom, the learners may have found a tool to help them in their own lives outside the classroom in the future.

Limitations and questions for further research

There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample sizes in the two groups are rather small. Second, the items on the questionnaire are too limited and do not delve deeply enough into students’ attitudes, or could be approached in a different manner, resulting in greater clarity of meaning. Third, during the semester, further care in assessing individual students’ goals might have aided the learners in setting goals that were at their own level, making sure that the students did not have unrealistic expectations which might result in a negative perception of their ability if the goals were not achieved. This would, in turn, affect their capacity for reaching their goals.

Nevertheless, the results of this study raise several questions that might be investigated in further research around the use of goal setting in the language learning classroom. For example, what role, if any, does gender play in determining the efficacy of goal setting in language learning? In what way could learners be assisted to remember to actively try to achieve their goals? And finally, how would goals set by the instructor, instead of the students themselves, affect the achievement of goals and student attitudes toward goal setting?

Conclusion

Although there are limitations to this study, there is some indication that students who set their own goals for language learning see value in doing so. They reported that setting goals gave them a concrete method of measuring their progress. Many felt more motivated in the class because they had established goals for themselves. Finally, learning to write down specific goals in the language classroom may lead learners to use goal setting in other areas of their lives.

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