

Three Conceptual Orientations of Learner Goal-Setting

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to investigate the extent to which goal-oriented self-checklists foster motivation and autonomy in EDC learners. A secondary area of exploration is to examine the effect of performance avoidance strategies on student attitudes to goal-setting. Over two semesters of a full academic year, EDC students in 24 classes (n=164) independently set themselves function goals and communication skill goals to be completed in an extended discussion. At the end of the semester students participated in a questionnaire which recorded their attitudes towards the activity. Results were analysed using SPSS software to calculate the frequency of responses and test the internal reliability of the data collected. Findings indicated that although goal-setting internally motivated students to perform better in discussions, there was a mixed response to developing learner autonomy, and also that goal-setting was not always being used in a positive manner.

INTRODUCTION

The conceptual focus of this piece of classroom research looks primarily at learner motivation and autonomy, and more specifically how these attributes can be developed in EDC students through the implementation of goal-setting oriented self-checklists. In addition to these positive concepts, aspects of performance avoidance in which tasks are performed for more negative reasons will also be examined.

Motivation was first introduced in connection with language learning in studies by Gardner that identified learner motivation in two categories: integrative, for instance the desire to adapt to the culture of a social setting; and instrumental, for example learning a language to get a better job (Gardner, 1959, pp. 12-13; 1985, p. 11). Gardner's theory, particularly the instrumental orientation of motivation, has proven durable in the field of ELT and has been developed considerably by Dörnyei (1994 p. 280) into a wider general framework of language learner motivation that includes aspects such as group goal-orientedness.

Individual level goal-orientations of learner motivation in the classroom context gained currency in the ELT field, largely as a result of Ames and Archer's study which identified that Mastery Goals, including such learner characteristics as progress and challenge, were effective in sustaining student effort levels and development (Ames & Archer, 1988, p. 264). These findings echoed those of motivation studies in areas such as industrial psychology which established Goal Setting Theory under the premise that challenging goals elicit high levels of performance in individuals, particularly when coupled with feedback to track progress (Locke & Latham, 1990 p. 241). This prompted ELT researchers to consider ways that goal-setting in conjunction with instrumentality could be used in the classroom to motivate learners whilst cementing goal-setting itself as a core issue at the heart of motivation in language learning (Oxford & Shearin, 1994, p. 19). In the view of many EDC instructors, goal-setting through formative feedback has proven to be a very successful method of improving student performance in extended group discussions (Brinham, 2013, p. 14; Kuromatsu, 2013, p. 155; Ragsdale, 2013, p. 206).

A more recent model for explaining levels of motivation in individuals is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), defined by Deci and Ryan (2002, p. 5) as "human tendencies

towards active engagement and development'. In other words, SDT examines the process of will-power in individuals, or in the ELT context, language learners. An advantage of SDT is that it avoids the dichotomy that exists in other theories of motivation that categorise cases as one or the other: internally *or* externally motivated, motivated *or* unmotivated. Instead, SDT places them on a continuum in which intrinsic motivation (self-determined) and amotivation (nonself-determined) sit either side of the varying degrees of extrinsic motivation (Ibid, 2002, p. 16). Thus, intrinsically motivated and autonomous learners are those that complete activities autonomously out of their own individual interest or satisfaction, without need for external regulation. Perhaps the most cited study in which SDT has been applied specifically to EFL research conducted by Noels et al (2000, p. 75) found that learner motivation can be accurately assessed by SDT and that the process creates a clear distinction between extrinsic, intrinsic and amotivation in responses.

On top of more conventional approaches to investigating motivation and autonomy, an added aspect of this study will attempt to examine *performance avoidance goals*. Goal-setting is usually associated with positive characteristics of learner behavior, but students' goals may not always be positive in nature, such as completing a task to a high standard to avoid appearing inept and save face. Woodrow (2012, p. 196) includes a performance avoidance goal orientation in her study which was found to be positively correlated to task goal orientations (e.g. liking tasks that involve thinking hard) normally associated with intrinsically motivated learners. Drawing on this method will allow me to approach measuring the concept of motivation from another perspective. Furthermore, performance avoidance goals are relevant and consistent with the face-saving mechanisms employed by Japanese learners of English, characterized by their tendency to limit anxiety by avoiding making mistakes (Cutrone, 2009, p. 59).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for this study are:

1. To what extent do goal-oriented self-checklists motivate EDC learners to use functions and communication skills more effectively in extended discussions?
2. To what degree do goal-oriented self-checklists foster a sense of autonomy in EDC learners?
3. Do EDC students use independent goal-setting in a positive manner?

METHOD

A purposive sampling method was employed for this study to include as many students as possible in my regular lessons across both semesters. The cohort includes four level 1 (higher proficiency) classes and twenty level 2 or 3 classes. The questionnaires were conducted at the end of lesson 12 of semester one and lesson 13 of semester two. The final number of respondents amounted to all those that were present for the last ten minutes of that lesson. Total respondents were 164: 76 from semester 1 and 88 from semester 2 (n=164).

These respondents were selected because over the previous 11 to 12 weeks of classes we had spent considerable time practicing using self-checklists as a form of student-centered feedback and these students had been setting themselves personal Function Goals (FG) and Communication Skill Goals (CSG) to achieve in Discussion 2 or the Discussion Test.

In this research the aim is to investigate the connection between the goal-setting activities that were being employed in class and the concepts of intrinsic motivation, learner autonomy and performance avoidance. In order to devise the research tools to test this relationship I gathered a range of views of students related to using FG and CSG in class from some

open-ended questions (Wash 2014). From these responses, a number of indicators were identified that could be used to measure students' autonomy and motivation in relation to the task. This process led to the design of a multi-item survey questionnaire to measure various aspects of these concepts. Using this research design allowed me to off-set any inconsistencies in learner responses over a range of indicators and strengthen the internal reliability of the research. In order to answer research question 1, several indicator statements were produced to enquire into learners' attitudes towards goal-setting in connection to their motivation to have effective discussions and improve their discussion skills (e.g. FG and CSG help me to improve on my weak points). To answer research question 2, indicator statements were designed to gain insight into learners' attitudes towards autonomy in relation to goal-setting (e.g. I am confident that I can set accurate FG and CSG by myself). To answer research question 3, sentences were produced to discover if learners' disposition towards goal-setting was at all negative or if other external factors were at play (e.g. I try to complete my FG and CSG so that other students won't think I am poor at English). See Appendix 1 for a full set of questionnaire items.

To gather data on the items for each concept it was decided that a Likert scale would be employed to measure each indicator. A five-point scale running between 1 (Not at all true of me) and 5 (Very true of me) with a mid-point, 3 (Somewhat true of me) to offer an option to indifferent respondents was decided upon. Response set measures were put in place that switched the scale position for positive and negative responses to ensure that respondents did not just fall prey to acquiescence bias and thereby agree with every statement, or skim their answers and select the same scale measure for every statement. The reversed sets were items C and F (motivation), and item H (autonomy). Any respondents that did skim answers would be easy to detect as their responses would be contradictory. During the instructions, respondents were encouraged to read each item carefully and to think about it before answering. While the questionnaire was being administered the instructor remained in the room but did not monitor respondents. Only one respondent asked a question to check the meaning of an indicator statement but this was promptly resolved by a fellow-student. Upon collection, questionnaires were checked for completion and for blatant acquiescence bias. In a few cases where a respondent had missed an item or selected the same scale for every answer (which is not possible due to reversed response sets), the respondent was asked to double-check their questionnaire.

RESULTS

Questionnaire results were input into SPSS software. The mode response scales for each indicator were calculated to determine the frequency and percentage for each questionnaire item across the three concepts categories: motivation, autonomy, and performance avoidance (Appendix 2). To facilitate relating items on the scale to the concepts being measured and to help answer the three research questions, values labels were translated accordingly. For example, for the motivation items *Very true of me* was labelled as 'Very motivated'. The same was done for autonomy and performance avoidance. The following results stood out are particularly interesting.

For items A to D, the most frequent response indicated that students were either 'Motivated' or 'Very Motivated'. For instance, for item B, 82 (50%) students selected *Very true of me* that FG and CSG helped to boost their English discussion skills. For item E, corresponding to student fulfillment after completing goals successfully, the mode response was that students were 'Motivated' with 72 (44%). But regarding loss of confidence after failing to

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complete goals for item F, student motivation was more ambivalent with 66 (40%) choosing *Somewhat true of me*. When asked how much less motivated they would be without FG and CSG, only 24 (15%) students responded as *True of me*. The results for item G point to fairly good existing levels of motivation in EDC students in the absence of goal-setting.

In the autonomy section, 66 (40%) of respondents answered *True of me* that FG and CSG were more effective when set independently and without teacher intervention for item I, pointing to a high level of autonomy. However, there could be some acquiescence here because for item H, 51 (31%) stated that it was more effective for teachers to set students FG and CSG, indicating that they were ‘Not autonomous’ learners. This inconsistency is perhaps explained in the results from item J wherein a combined 110(67%) students found it only *Somewhat true of me* or *Not true of me* that they were confident in accurately setting FG and CSG by themselves. Furthermore, 62 (38%) of respondents claimed it was *Not true of me* that they wanted more autonomy in the classroom beyond independent FG and CSG setting for item M, which reinforces the general doubt in student attitudes towards developing greater levels of agency.

Generally in the performance avoidance concept category, it seems that students used goal-setting in a positive way. Only 36 (22%) admitted that it was *True of me* or *Very true of me* that they purposefully selected the easiest functions and communication skills on the checklist as their FG and CSG for item N. This is backed-up by the results for item O in which 89 (55%) stated that it was either *Not true of me* or *Not at all true of me* that FG and CSG set by the teacher would be more difficult to complete, meaning that many students ‘Used goal-setting positively / (or) very positively’ by setting themselves challenging goals. On the other hand, for item P, which measured the extent to which students completed their FG and CSG so that their peers wouldn’t think they were poor at English, results were more mixed. From the sample, 42 (26%) students responded *Somewhat true of me* and a further 46 (28%) said *True of me* or *Very true of me*, meaning that over half of the cohort were not positively working on achieving goals for their own personal achievement.

DISCUSSION

These findings provide some evidence that from a sample of 24 classes across semesters 1 and 2, the motivational benefits of implementing self-checklists in which students set FG and CSG have been generally positive. It is therefore possible to assume that very structured and specific goal-setting tasks that encourage learners to focus in detail on the exact target language they want to use in an extended group discussion can engender some level of intrinsic motivation. In turn it reinforces goal-setting as a key component of motivation in the EDC context which is of importance due to the mandatory status of the course which exerts external motivation by its very nature. Since the majority of respondents answered that FG and CSG motivated them to have smoother discussions and that these goals boosted their discussion skills, the upshot is that by association this activity internally motivates students towards the overarching goal of the entire course: to participate effectively in English discussions.

Learner Autonomy, however, is more difficult to draw positive conclusions from given the less concrete results. However, this is not wholly surprising since for many of our students in EDC, this is their first experience of being a relatively independent learner. Many EDC students have not been provided with the space to independently set their own goals for classroom activities and monitor their own progress in their high schools or other previous learning environments. This naturally leads to uncertainty about taking more control of other activities in EDC lessons and confirms that autonomy is something to be developed gradually over time in a

semi-structured way. Setting FG and CSG is just one of many ways to enhance students' sense of agency in EDC lessons. Nevertheless, it is the instructor's role to guide students through these preliminary steps of becoming more autonomous and independent learners able to self-regulate their acquisition of skills and knowledge.

Some of the results for performance avoidance are encouraging and contradict previous classroom observations made when instructor intervention was necessary to prevent learners from continually selecting easy functions as their FG (Wash, 2014 p.254). Because findings indicated that the majority of learners were using goal-setting positively by setting challenging goals, it could be conceded that prior observed instances of 'easy-picking' were isolated incidents. On the other hand, findings regarding performance avoidance related to students completing FG and CSG in order not to look poor at English in front of their peers comes as little surprise. These results are consistent with Cutrone's (2009, p.59) ideas mentioned earlier on Japanese learners' tendency to save face in English classes. Performance avoidance of this nature on the SDT continuum would fall into the category of external motivation, or more specifically *introjected regulation* - a more internalised sub-type of external motivation in which outside pressure is reacted to and incorporated into 'the self' (Noels et al., 2000 p.62). It is therefore important for instructors to be aware that although intrinsic motivation is preferable to foster in our learners, external forces in the form of social pressure or a need to pass a mandatory course in order to receive credit still have a considerable bearing on EDC student performance.

One major concern with research designs such as this that deal with ordinal data using Likert scales is the internal reliability of the data; in other words, are the individual items in the questionnaire consistently measuring the concepts they set out to? Analysis was done using SPSS software to calculate the Cronbach's Alpha (α). This statistical test allows us to check the internal consistency of the indicators and their reliability at measuring the core concepts. The Alpha was calculated for motivation, autonomy, performance avoidance, and for the total (Appendix 3). Alpha for the total items was recorded as 0.78 which tells us that the overall consistency for student views related to FG and CSG was acceptable. Similarly, for autonomy alone, internal reliability was also acceptable at a level of $\alpha= 0.72$. The Alpha measure for performance avoidance was less consistent at 0.63 which is perhaps only marginally acceptable. However, for motivation the result was much lower at $\alpha=0.49$ indicating an unacceptable level of consistency. Within the motivation section, if we were to remove item C from the study, Alpha would increase to a more respectable 0.67. This is possibly due to the nature of the item which possibly measures students' attitudes towards functions and communication skills themselves as it does the motivational aspects of FG and CSG for having effective discussions. From these results it is clear that even when care is taken to construct effective Likert scale questionnaires, it should not be taken for granted that the multiple items we are using to measure concepts are consistent and provide us with strong levels of internal reliability. Calculating the Cronbach's Alpha is an effective way of verifying the robustness of Likert scale data collection tools and enables us to be more transparent about any weaknesses in internal reliability.

CONCLUSION

This study has found that using self-checklists with a goal orientation that guide students to independently set FG and CSG can have a positive intrinsic motivational effect on learners and can facilitate more effective discussions in EDC. However, it has also revealed that the activity did not significantly increase a sense of autonomy EDC learners. Furthermore, although

goal-setting is generally used in a positive manner, elements of performance avoidance such as social pressure to perform exert a strong external influence on student performance. This area of research could be vastly improved by increasing the sample size. How would results differ across the items on this questionnaire if goal-oriented self-checklists were a mandatory part of EDC and data was collected from all students across both semesters of an academic year? Knowing the answer to this question by expanding the study would enrich our understanding of the three conceptual orientations of learner goal-setting in the EDC context and make the findings more representative of similar mandatory English speaking courses in other Japanese universities.

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APPENDIX A - Survey Scale and Items**Scale**

Not at all true of me 全く当てはまらない	Not true of me 当てはまらない	Somewhat true of me やや当てはまる	True of me 当てはまる	Very True of me とても当てはまる
1	2	3	4	5

Items

A) I think that when all students have clear FG and CSG, this helps the group to have smoother

discussions 私はすべての学生が明確なファンクションの目標とコミュニケーションスキルの目標を持っていれば、グループがよりスムーズなディスカッションをするのを促進すると思う。

B) Using FG and CSG help me to boost my English Discussion Skills

ファンクションの目標とコミュニケーションスキルの目標を使用することは、私の英語ディスカッションスキルを高めるのに役立つ

C) FG and CSG are obstacles that prevent me from having effective discussions

ファンクションの目標とコミュニケーションスキルの目標は私が効果的なディスカッションをするのを妨げる障害物である

D) FG and CSG help me to improve on my weak points.

ファンクションの目標とコミュニケーションスキルの目標が私の弱点を改善するのに役立つ

E) Successfully completing my FG and/or CSG gives me a feeling of personal fulfillment.

私のファンクションまたははコミュニケーションスキルの目標を首尾よく完了することは私に個人的な充足感を与える

F) When I fail to complete my FG and CSG I lose confidence in my English ability.

ファンクションの目標とコミュニケーションスキルの目標を完了することができないとき、私は自分の英語力に対する自信を失う

G) If I didn't have FG and CSG I would feel lazy and less motivated.

ファンクションの目標とコミュニケーションスキルの目標を持っていなかったら、私は怠惰でありやる気がでなかつたろう

QH - I think it is more effective for the teacher to set my FG and CSG.

私は先生が私のファンクションの目標と、コミュニケーションスキルの目標を設定することがより効果的だと思う

I) I think it is more effective for me to set my own FG and CSG.

私は私自身でファンクションの目標と、コミュニケーションスキルの目標を設定することがより効果的だと思う

J) I am confident that I can set accurate FG and CSG by myself.

私は自分で正確なファンクションの目標と、コミュニケーションスキルの目標を設定できると確信している

K) When I can set my own FG and CSG I try harder to complete it.

私がある自分のファンクションの目標と、コミュニケーションスキルの目標を設定することができたとき、私はそれを完了するために一層努力する

L) Selecting my own FG and CSG makes me feel in control of my English learning experience.

ファンクションの目標とコミュニケーションスキルの目標を選択することは、私が英語の学習経験を管理できると感じる

M) Selecting my own FG and CSG makes me want to do more tasks without the teachers help in EDC lessons.

ファンクションの目標とコミュニケーションスキルの目標を選択することは、英語ディスカッションレッスンで教師の支援なしでより多くのタスクを実行したくなる

N) When I set my own FG and CSG I select the easiest functions and communication skills.

私がある自分のファンクションの目標と、コミュニケーションスキルの目標を設定すると、私は最も簡単なファンクションやコミュニケーションスキルを選択する

O) If the teacher sets my FG and CSG I will find it more difficult to complete the goals.

先生が私のファンクションの目標と、コミュニケーションスキルの目標を設定した場合、目標を完了することはより困難だろう

P) I try to complete my FG and CSG so that other students won't think I am poor at English.

他の学生に私は英語に弱いと思われないように、ファンクションの目標と、コミュニケーションスキルの目標を完了するよう努める

Q) On my checklist I check functions and communication skills I didn't actually use in the discussion to avoid embarrassment.

恥ずかしさを避けるために、ディスカッションの中で実際には使用していなかったファンクションやコミュニケーションスキルを私のチェックリストにチェックする

APPENDIX B - Tables of Results

Motivation

	Q A		Q B		Q C		Q D *		Q E		Q F		Q G	
	Motivation 1		Motivation 2		Motivation 3		Motivation 4		Motivation 5		Motivation 6		Motivation 7	
	No	N%												
Not at all Motivated	1	0.6 %	1	0.6 %	1	0.6 %	1	0.6 %	2	1.2 %	11	8.5 %	16	9.8 %
Not Motivated	2	1.2 %	2	1.2 %	10	6.1 %	3	1.8 %	14	8.5 %	27	28.0 %	58	35.4 %
Somewhat Motivated	18	11.0 %	13	7.9 %	24	14.6 %	29	17.7 %	47	28.7 %	66	40.2 %	58	35.4 %
Motivated	79	48.2 %	66	40.2 %	72	43.9 %	70	42.7 %	72	43.9 %	46	16.5 %	24	14.6 %
Very Motivated	64	39.0 %	82	50.0 %	57	34.8 %	60	36.6 %	29	17.7 %	14	6.7 %	8	4.9 %

* = Contains a missing value

Autonomy

	QH		QI		QJ		QK		QL		QM	
	Autonomy 1		Autonomy 2 *		Autonomy 3		Autonomy 4		Autonomy 5		Autonomy 6	
	No	N %	No	N %	No	N %	No	N %	No	N %	No	N %
Not at all Autonomous	17	10.4%	3	1.8%	8	4.9%	1	0.6%	3	1.8%	10	6.1%
Not Autonomous	51	31.1%	13	7.9%	52	31.7%	10	6.1%	27	16.5%	62	37.8%
Somewhat Autonomous	52	31.7%	49	29.9%	58	35.4%	59	36.0%	58	35.4%	63	38.4%
Autonomous	37	22.6%	66	40.2%	36	22.0%	63	38.4%	57	34.8%	28	17.1%
Very Autonomous	6	3.7%	32	19.5%	10	6.1%	31	18.9%	19	11.6%	1	0.6%

* = Contains a missing value

Performance Avoidance

	QN		QO		QP		QQ	
	Perf Avoidance 1		Perf Avoidance 2		Perf Avoidance 3		Perf Avoidance 4	
	No	N %						
Uses goal-setting very positively	13	7.9%	13	7.9%	16	9.8%	73	44.5%
Uses goal-setting positively	67	40.9%	76	46.3%	60	36.6%	53	32.3%
Uses goal-setting somewhat positively	48	29.3%	51	31.1%	42	25.6%	28	17.1%
Does not use goal-setting positively	30	18.3%	18	11.0%	36	22.0%	7	4.3%

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	QN		QO		QP		QQ	
	Perf Avoidance 1		Perf Avoidance 2		Perf Avoidance 3		Perf Avoidance 4	
	No	N %						
Uses goal-setting very positively	13	7.9%	13	7.9%	16	9.8%	73	44.5%
Uses goal-setting positively	67	40.9%	76	46.3%	60	36.6%	53	32.3%
Uses goal-setting somewhat positively	48	29.3%	51	31.1%	42	25.6%	28	17.1%
Does not use goal-setting positively	30	18.3%	18	11.0%	36	22.0%	7	4.3%
Does not use goal-setting positively at all	6	3.7%	6	3.7%	10	6.1%	3	1.8%

APPENDIX C - Cronbach's Alpha Results

Item	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Motivation 1-7	0.492
Autonomy 1-6	0.718
Task Avoidance 1-4	0.634
Total (all 17 items)	0.782