

Autonomy in Goal Setting and Learner Motivation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines autonomous goal setting as an integral and key component in the motivation of L2 learners from both a theoretical and practical perspective. Firstly, it provides a background and context to the study and reviews some of the relevant literature. The following section outlines the procedure and findings of an observation in which freshman university students employed goal setting to improve their performance in extended group discussions. Next, the paper describes the issues students experienced when getting to grips with autonomous goal setting and analyses these observations by drawing on linkages to research. Finally, the paper concludes that although goal setting can motivate students to perform better, a wider investigation is necessary to understand the effectiveness of different strategies and the importance of autonomy in the goal setting process.

INTRODUCTION

In mandatory English classes taught as part of a general curriculum, motivating students to perform well can be challenging for the instructor. For Instructors in English Discussion Class (EDC) this issue is of particular importance, especially when teaching students with varying levels of motivation and ability. Instructors can take solace in students that have a genuine interest in developing their English skills, participate fully and cooperate willingly. But not all students in EDC share this enthusiasm and the instructor must employ strategies to elicit a reasonable level of performance from them too.

Motivation has long been a consideration in second language learning. At the genesis, durable concepts such as integrative and instrumental orientations of motivation (Gardner, 1959, p.12-13, Gardner, 1985, p.11) became widely accepted in the field. Earlier models have been built on extensively in the literature to present a more comprehensive model of motivation, of which 'goal setting' is a core feature (Oxford & Shearin, 1994, p.19, Tremblay & Gardner, 1995, p.508). However, promoting goal setting in the classroom continues to be a low priority for many language teachers (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998, p.220, Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007, p.163).

This paper aims to examine the extent to which students can be motivated to perform better in group discussions by allowing them autonomy to set goals independently. Goals in EDC relate to the usage of specific function phrases and communication skills used during extended discussions, which shall be referred to from here on as Function Goals (FG) and Communication Skill Goals (CSG). In EDC, learners have few opportunities to exercise 'autonomy', defined by Benson (2001, p.47) as 'the capacity to take control of one's own learning'. He points out that this space provides learners with freedom to determine their own goals (p.49) and completion of these goals in group activities is shown to strengthen motivation in East Asian students (Littlewood, 1999, p.86).

The class selected to observe goal setting behavior was chosen using convenience sampling. This particular class allowed time in the instructor's weekly schedule to reflect on the class and write a detailed diary after each observation lesson (Farrell, 2007, p.113).

DISCUSSION

Observations took place over five lessons in the second semester¹ and centered on student performance during two extended group discussions. After Discussion 1, students used a self-checklist (See Figure 1) to identify which function phrases and communication skills they had used. Next, learners identified one weak point from each and used these to formulate a FG and a CSG to work on for the next discussion. Self assessment and goal setting was supplemented by teacher feedback which aimed to reinforce their goals or provide additional advice on ways to improve performance in the next discussion. This approach is congruent with the understanding that goals directly guide and influence task performance and can have tremendous effect when used in conjunction with teacher feedback which supports those goals (Locke & Latham, 1990, p.241).

In Lesson 1, most students were quick to identify their weak points, as checklists had already been used in previous lessons that semester. However, some students struggled. For example, a few learners selected their FG based on a function phrase they had used strongly in Discussion 1. In this case, the instructor intervened to reinforce the notion that only weak points should be turned into goals, but that students should continue to use their strong points too.

CHECKLIST		
Check (O) the Functions and Communication Skills you used. O = 1 time, OO= 2 times, OOO = 3 times etc.		
Functions	Discussion 1	Discussion 2*
CHECK if everyone's FINISHED (Does anyone want to comment?)		
CHANGE TOPIC (What shall we discuss next?)		
TALK about POSSIBILITY (If.....)		
ASK about POSSIBILITY (If.....?)		
Communication Skills		
FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS (e.g. What kind of...? / When....?)		
CHECK UNDERSTANDING (e.g. Sorry, I don't understand?)		
AGREE / DISAGREE (I agree with your idea because...)		
Function Goal for Disc Test: _____		<input type="checkbox"/>
Comm Skill Goal for Disc Test: _____		<input type="checkbox"/>
* In Lesson 1 Discussion 2 was a Discussion Test so students didn't complete this section.		

Figure 1. Sample of Self-Checklist from Observation Lesson 1

Students were encouraged to think about how they could complete their goals in the next discussion and were reminded to strive to achieve these goals. After Discussion 2, the instructor informed students if they had completed their goal. The high level of goal completion in lesson 1 did initially cause concern that a higher level of performance had occurred because Discussion 2 was actually a Discussion Test. In spite of this, overall results reveal that students' ability to complete goals improved slightly over successive lessons (See Table 1). In lessons 1 and 5, the instructor was able to inform students very accurately if they had completed their goals in Discussion 2 because it was a Discussion Test and highly detailed monitoring notes were taken as part of the formal assessment procedure. However, during lessons 2 to 4, students completed

¹ Observations commenced in week 5 and concluded in week 9. In weeks 5 and 9 students were formally assessed through a group Discussion Test in class. The three lessons in between were regular lessons in which students learned and practiced function phrases and communication skills.

checklists after Discussion 2 and used self-assessment to check whether they had completed their goals or not.

Table 1

Results of students' ability to complete goals

Student	Lesson 1		Lesson 2		Lesson 3		Lesson 4		Lesson 5	
	FG	CSG								
A	X		X	X	X	X			X	X
B		X	X		/	/	X	X	X	X
C	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
D		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
E	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
F		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
G	X	X	X	X		X	/	/	X	X
H	X	X	/	/	X	X	X	X	X	X

Key: FG = Function Goal. CSG = Communication Skill Goals. X = goal was completed.
 /= Student was absent in that lesson.

An interesting area of goal setting that was observed concerned the ways in which learners thought deeply about the process of completing their goals. One student, who was contemplating their FG, asked the instructor “This...timing...how?” This question provides a useful insight into the way that the student was pondering how to arrive at the desired destination of completing that goal. This relates to a pre-actional phase in goal setting that Dörnyei and Ottó (1998, p.55) explain is important when learners are considering the timing and initiation of completing their goal. In this case, creating the right conditions for using function phrases was clearly prevalent in this student’s thinking and preparation.

During the observations there were incidences of success. For example, in observation lesson 2, Student A demonstrated that goal setting can be fruitful. In Discussion 1, he failed to use a recent function phrase so this became his FG in the next discussion. Not only was this goal successfully completed, but he also completed his CSG which was the same one he had failed to achieve in the previous lesson’s Discussion Test. This case reflects the possibility that Student A had focused on effort and task strategies because of recent emphasis placed on self-improvement through goal setting in the classroom (Ames & Archer, 1988, p.260). Triumphs aside however, there were also difficulties with goal setting that came to light during the observation lessons.

One issue was that having more than one goal can be confusing and cloud focus on how to achieve individual goals. In Lesson 2, Student D included two function phrases as her FG and only managed to use one of them in the Discussion 2. Interestingly, the phrase that wasn’t used was the same one she had set as the FG and had failed to achieve in Lesson 1. Harmony and conflict issues can often arise when learners strive to achieve multiple goals simultaneously (Dörnyei & Ottó 1998 p.55). If the student had selected the more difficult function as the FG by itself, and not been distracted by the easier phrase, more focus and energy could have been applied to achieving a more meaningful and progressive FG.

A final consideration that came to light in the observation lessons related to the relevance of autonomy in goal setting. Some students had preferences to select easier function phrases from earlier in the semester as their FG at the expense of more recent and challenging phrases.

This meant that autonomous goal setting efforts sometimes didn't have a forward focus, which could have been the result of a lack of experience in handling autonomy on the students' part. After observing this, the instructor guided several students by suggesting they select more recently learned phrases as their FG. Adopting this intervention was inconsistent with the approaches to autonomy outlined earlier, yet it had no noticeable negative effect on goal completion in the students observed. For Locke and Latham (1990, p.241), automatically assigned goals have the same impact as autonomously set goals in terms of commitment and performance. During Lesson 8, the instructor developed assigned goal setting further by setting a uniform CSG for all students and this again had no detrimental effect on goal completion. As a result, this raises questions about how important autonomy really is in the goal setting and motivation relationship.

CONCLUSION

Goal setting has become established as a core component in L2 motivation theories. This paper has illustrated that goal setting can motivate students to achieve better performance, but also that processes and strategies utilised in achieving goals can be problematic for learners. In particular, autonomy in goal setting can be particularly difficult for students to manage if it is a new concept for them. From the results of this study, it is clear that the students observed were very cooperative and able in completing their FGs and CSGs from the outset. But would goal-setting work in classes with very low initial levels of motivation and participation? Future empirical studies may do well to compare a diverse range of classes where different levels of emphasis are placed on autonomy in goal setting, and a variety of goal setting strategies are employed.

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