

Individual Goal Setting in Discussion Classes

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ABSTRACT

The need to implement a universal program of education to a large number of people in the most efficient way possible means that institutions and educational structures have to focus on group objectives and group feedback. This means there may be less room for personalisation of learning objectives. In this paper I describe an activity designed to give students individual objectives in class. First, I explain the reason why I wish to implement such an activity. Next, I discuss some relevant literature on feedback, motivation and goal-setting. Following this, I explain the task itself and its implementation. I then go through numerous variations on how the activity could be implemented. After this I discuss my impressions of the benefits and drawbacks of such an activity. I finish by suggesting the classroom situations in which I believe my activity would be beneficial to other teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Any course taken by large numbers of students needs to be standardised in order to provide consistency across classes. The activities which students do and the goals they are given are, in general, very similar. Correspondingly, feedback from the teacher tends to focus on how well the class as a whole achieved a specific goal or goals. The obvious drawback of this approach is that elements of student performance that are not directly covered by these group goals may not be addressed. A further problem is that group feedback may not be helpful when students experience specific, individual weaknesses that the rest of the class do not struggle with. Therefore, my activity is an attempt to balance standardisation with the variation that occurs amongst individual learners. It is based on Ellis' (2014) principle that "Instruction needs to take into account individual differences in learners" (p. 40). Ellis acknowledges that while there are certain universals to L2 acquisition, the rate of individual learning and ultimate achievement vary. He goes on to argue that successful learning is more likely when instruction is matched to students' particular aptitude and when students are motivated. This is an intuitive and common-sense claim, but one that is easily overlooked. Black and Wiliam (1989) stress that teachers need to be familiar with their pupils' progress and difficulties in order to adapt their styles to meet these individual needs. This is relevant to my teaching situation as I teach English Discussion classes in a Japanese university. All first year students take the course, so student numbers are large and the course is heavily structured, involving mostly the same goals, activities and feedback. These goals are important, but at the same time there may be other aspects of student performance that are worthy of teachers' attention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ellis (2014) lists the need to take individual learner differences into account as one of 10 principles of instructed second language teaching. These 10 principles are, by their all-encompassing nature, fairly vague, meaning there are a lot of areas in which this principle could apply. Ellis mentions the application of the principle in terms of learning styles and student motivation. I wish to explore this principle as it relates to feedback, motivation, and goal setting. My activity is based around setting individual goals for students. Although what I aim to do seems relatively straightforward, it is surprisingly hard to find literature directly addressing this. It is equally difficult to find literature focusing on the balance between individual and group-focused goals. However, my goal touches on many other areas that have been well covered. In this literature review I will therefore

detail some more general points from the literature that are important in the context of what I aim to do. Specifically, these relate to motivation and feedback.

Motivation is well established as an important factor in student success. Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) explain that it is one of the most consistent predictors of second language learning success (p. 589). They use the term “self-regulatory learning” to distinguish active behaviours a student takes to improve their learning from any kind of inherent language aptitude. They also use the term “academic self-regulation” to describe how students take control of their learning. These are the behaviours I wish to encourage with my activity. Further, in line with the growing importance placed on individuals taking control of their learning is a change in the role of the teacher. Cohen (2011) argues that a shift in the teacher’s role towards being more of a facilitator is inherent in the shift towards communicative styles of second language teaching. In all, it seems allowing students to choose their own goals is likely to be a good motivating factor.

Another element of motivation is student control over the learning process. My activity involves students choosing an individual goal, which has attendant strengths and weaknesses. On the plus side, if students share a commitment to attaining goals, they are more likely to seek and receive feedback; however, against this, students may be tempted to set less challenging goals, and be satisfied with performance far below their capabilities (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Individual goal-setting is beneficial because it encourages students to evaluate their abilities and current knowledge, and because it encourages students to monitor and regulate their behaviour (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

The final area that my activity broaches is feedback. The fundamentals of feedback include three elements: recognizing the desired goal, assessing the present position, and understanding how to close the gap between the two (Sadler, 1989, as cited in William & Black 1989, p. 85). According to Shute (2007), research on formative feedback indicates that the most important aspects are that it should be multidimensional, non-evaluative, supportive, timely, specific, credible, infrequent, and genuine. Shute goes on to discuss how research shows that unattainable goals are demotivating while easily achievable goals means that success does not produce further effort. Therefore, for a learner to remain motivated and engaged, there needs to be a match between the learner’s goals and the expectation of meeting those goals (Shute, 2007).

The benefits of setting goal-orientated feedback are that it helps learners realise that ability and skill can be developed through practice, that effort is crucial to raising this skill, and that mistakes are a natural part of the skill-acquisition process (Shute, 2007). Interestingly, Hattie and Timperley (2007) conclude that studies show that students who receive feedback about a task and how it should be conducted show greater improvements than students who receive praise, rewards or punishment. One question in feedback is the timing of when it should be delivered. Hattie and Timperley cite research by Clariana, Wagner, and Murphy (2000), which suggests that delayed feedback is more effective when it relates to task complexity, because more complex tasks require greater processing and planning.

One telling observation emerges from research on the effects of feedback: the number of factors to consider in giving feedback is huge, and the effect of these types of feedback is modified by the learner’s wishes and motivation. This means that it is very hard to decide what kind of feedback to give and to ensure it is maximally applicable to all students.

TASKS AND MATERIALS

During lessons 2 to 4 I took brief notes on how each student could improve their performance in class. I did not take any notes in lesson 1 because the lesson content differs from the rest of the course, and because students are still getting to know each during this lesson. In lessons 2 to 4 it is possible to observe group dynamics emerging and see how students cope with the demands of

the lessons. The notes I took covered a range of points. It could be things directly related to course grading, such as using more Function language or using more Communication Skills. It could be things related to speaking fluency, such as attempting to paraphrase in simple words rather than asking how to say Japanese words in English. It could be making an effort to speak first in group discussions. For more capable students who had fewer obvious points to improve, I noted more challenging points such as making sure that all group members were equally involved in a discussion, or trying to disagree with what classmates said in order to extend the discussion.

After the fourth lesson I selected two things that I felt would most improve each student's performance. I wrote these objectives on a standardised 'Personal Objectives' template, an example of which is in the Appendix. This included the goal, some examples of phrases to help achieve the goal (where appropriate), and a rationale for why this goal would help the students.

PROCEDURE

At the start of lesson 6, after conducting the Fluency activity, I explained that before beginning the main part of the lesson I was going to give students two personal objectives based on what I had observed from their performance in the previous lessons. I explained that these personal goals would help each student to improve their personal weaknesses and to round out their performance in class. I told students that they needed to choose one of these goals that they wanted to concentrate on over the coming weeks. I then handed out the objectives. Students chose one and returned the other one to me. Students then briefly discussed the following questions with a partner: "What is your personal objective?" and "Why did you chose that objective?". I included this brief discussion to formalise the process, and also in the belief that a goal which is stated publicly is more likely to be attempted.

During this lesson and the following two lessons I frequently referred to the personal goals. At the end of lesson 6 I had students discuss this question with a classmate: "Did you achieve your personal goal in this lesson?" This brief discussion was intended to remind students of their goal and to reinforce the idea that these personal goals were a new element of the class procedure. After lesson 6 students kept the piece of paper with their goal in their textbook. At the start of lesson 7 students again asked a classmate "What is your personal goal?" and "Why did you choose this goal?". I emphasised that students should try to achieve this objective over the course of the lesson. At the end of lesson 7 I had students discuss with a classmate: "Did you achieve your personal goal in this lesson?" and "How will you try to achieve your personal goal in the next lesson?" I added this second question about how to achieve the goal to encourage students to strategise. At the start of lesson 8 I had students discuss "What is your personal goal?" and "How will you try to achieve your personal goal in this lesson?", and at the end of lesson 8 students discussed "Did you achieve personal goal in this lesson?".

VARIATIONS

A strength of this activity is that it is easily adaptable. The simplest possible change concerns the goals themselves: the teacher can control the level of difficulty of each objective. Lower-level classes can have easily achievable goals. For higher level classes who are already achieving course objectives the students could be given a list of advanced discussion objectives and asked to choose one. This would be particularly good in pushing students who were not challenged by the course material. Indeed, this would be a good way to keep the course material fresh and relevant for students.

Another way to change the activity is to remove or increase the element of choice. I gave students two goals, but a teacher could simply decide one goal and give this one goal to the students. Obviously, this takes away the element of choice and therefore removes the possible

motivation of choosing a goal which is personally meaningful. However, this way would ensure that the student focused on the thing that is most important for that student. I gave control to the student, but it is possible that a student would not choose the objective that the teacher feels is most important for them! This somewhat detracts from the purpose of the activity. Conversely, the whole process of goal-choosing could be given over to students. One advantage is that doing so would increase the personal significance of the goal for students, as they would choose something they were fully invested in. The other advantage is that students might feel a greater responsibility for achieving a goal they had decided for themselves. On the flipside, some students might choose simple goals. Perhaps a more significant issue, however, would be that students would be unaware of their weaknesses and therefore struggle to select an appropriate challenge. In all, the option of students controlling the goal-setting has potential high risks and potential high rewards, and so might be more suited to higher-level classes with good motivation.

The way I implemented the activity put the onus on students to remember to do their objective and to decide whether or not they were successful. I did not want to over-stress these personal goals because they were in the main part not directly related to student assessment on the course. However, it would be possible to spend more time emphasizing the goals. An alternative would be for the teacher to monitor each student's performance and inform students at the end of a lesson whether they achieved their objective. Likewise, rather than the teacher doing the evaluation, students could formally rate their own performance on a scale of 1 to 5. In addition, at regular points during the lesson before starting activities the students could briefly tell their partner or group what their goal is to remind them to do it. All of these things would require more class time, but would be increase the likelihood of students concentrating on their goal.

My activity lasted for three weeks, but trying to achieve the personal objective could be extended over the whole semester. The teacher could continue reminding students about their goals and have students discuss whether they achieved these goals in later lessons. Another way to extend the activity would be to use a second goal. Over the first few lessons I took notes on each students to determine two areas for improvement. An easy extension could be that when students felt they have achieved their first goal, or when the teacher felt that the student had achieved it, the teacher could give out the second goal and have students focus on this second one.

DISCUSSION

Benefits

I noticed that students seemed to take the activity seriously when they were choosing which of the two objectives they wished to try. They seemed enthusiastic about the process, and I felt that it had personal significance for the students. I got this impression because when students discussed "Why did you choose this objective?" I was surprised by how well every student could articulate their reasons. This supports the idea of individualised teaching being meaningful for students and contributing to student motivation.

Many students making a number of relatively small changes can make a big difference to the smooth performance of a class. This is because when students achieve a goal it often has a knock-on effect on other students due to changes in class dynamics. For instance, when a quiet student attempts to speak first in a group this forces other students to use more agreeing and disagreeing because they will be speaking later on in the discussion. Another example is that if a student attempts to check that they understand classmates more, this modelling tends to be picked up on by other students who start to do it as well. For higher level students with a more advanced task such as involving everyone equally in a discussion, this boosts the participation (and therefore grades) of quieter members of the class.

Moving from a group to an individual perspective, the activity works particularly well with certain students. It is sometimes the case that students have specific issues that the teacher cannot focus on because this student is the only one who is not taking advice. In addition, it is sometimes the case that a student's problem is not something covered in regular feedback. Certain behaviours which are intuitive to many students may not be so to others, such as using simple words to paraphrase an idea rather than giving up trying to explain things. Another example is that students may not be aware that they are speaking too much Japanese in class. Even if the teacher has covered a point in feedback, a student may still be unaware of this problem. For instance, I find there are some students who do not realise that they are using the English they already know in discussions rather than using the new Function language that we study. This kind of student benefits from specific reminders. Individualised feedback is less face-threatening than singling out a student in front of the class. The activity is an efficient way to deal with all these common problems.

The final benefit of this activity is how easily applicable and adaptable it is; all students have areas they can potentially improve upon. It works for all levels of student. For lower level students the goal can be the class fundamentals. For medium level students it can be something that may be a secondary lesson objective that the student would not think to do by themselves. For higher level students who can cope with class demands and who are already doing well, these objectives are a chance to push them further and extend the student's performance outside of the regular class objectives.

Drawbacks

One drawback of this activity is that it is labour-intensive on the teacher's side. It requires careful observation in the first few weeks to determine areas for improvement. It is important that the teacher can smoothly incorporate this observation and note-taking within regular teaching so as not to detract from other aspects of class feedback. On the practical side, typing up, printing and preparing two objectives for each student is somewhat time consuming. This effort decreases with time, however, as once the teacher has saved a range of objectives on a computer file they can be reused with different classes. The teacher could also choose to laminate objectives so they can be used repeatedly with different classes.

From the students' side, one simple drawback is this activity requires the student to achieve the task. This is problematic if students do not concentrate on achieving the goal. I felt this was the case when students were caught up in achieving other lesson goals which may have taken up all their cognitive space. For example, a student's goal might be to use a bigger range of Function phrases, but the student may be trying hard to articulate an idea on an unfamiliar topic and not be able to simultaneously deploy a range of new language. What is more, some kinds of goals are harder to achieve as there may not be many chances to do this in the space of a lesson. For instance, if a student has the objective of asking about the meaning of any words they do not understand, this will not be necessary if all the vocabulary used in the lesson is already understood. A further limitation is that it is hard to judge the activity's success. At the end of the first lesson in which I introduced the goals students discussed if they had achieved their goal, and I noticed that many students said they failed to achieve their goal. I think there are two reasons for this. Firstly, students simply forgot about it; some responded to the question with a surprised recognition and laughter. Second and more fundamentally, the goals are personal weaknesses so it is natural that they are difficult for the student. For example, these goals can be about changing behavior, such as taking the lead in a discussion, or can be about more higher-level cognitive tasks, such as disagreeing with opinions expressed in the discussion. Such things are intrinsically difficult. However, after the third week there were fewer students saying they could not achieve their goals. This suggests

a long-term approach to personal goals is more realistic than a short-term one. I think it would help to have constant reminders of the goal, such as students laying out their paper with their objective on the desk in front of them. It might also help to remind students of these goals at strategic points in the lesson, such as before starting practice activities and group discussions. It may also be good to extend the period of focus on the goal. I devoted class time over three lessons to these personal objectives, but it could quite easily be continued over more lessons. In light of the points made above about the difficulty of achieving these goals, I think it is better to view these personal goals as a long-term class project and stretch the process out for five or six weeks.

CONCLUSION

This activity has clear strengths and clear weaknesses. The effectiveness of this activity depends on the class. It is useful when students in a class have varying areas that need improvement. It is useful when these areas for improvement are not covered by the usual course objectives. It is useful when certain students in a class exhibit persistent behavior patterns that are affecting class dynamics as a whole. It is less effective if the majority of students in a class have similar problems these can be addressed in general feedback to the whole class. Similarly, if no student in the class has an obvious weakness that needs addressing this kind of activity is probably more time consuming than beneficial. The main barrier to the success of this activity is if students fail to concentrate on their personal objective. However, it is important to note that there is not a negative consequence or negative side-effect of the student not concentrating on their goal because it will not make their English worse. In other words, aside from the wasted class time spent choosing a goal and discussing it with fellow students, students will not ‘suffer’ in any way.

My observations about the success of this activity were informal. This activity could be more formally assessed in the future by teacher-centered evaluation or student-centered evaluation. The teacher could take notes on how well each student was achieving their personal goal. Alternatively, the teacher could note the number of times a students achieved their goal in a lesson. Rather than the teacher, students could assess their own performance. They could give themselves a score, say of one to three, to evaluate their progress. They could also count the number of times they achieve their goal in a lesson.

Overall, I hope the discussion here has shown how this activity can be a useful tool for teachers to deploy in certain classroom situations. Based on my experiences it is certainly something that I will keep doing in the future.

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APPENDIX – Examples of personal objectives:

Your personal goal is:

Do not ask “How do you say . . . in English?”

Use simple English to explain your ideas, then ask “Do you understand?”

(This will make your discussion faster and will increase your confidence.)

Your personal goal is:

Be the first person to give an opinion in the group discussions.

For example: “Can I start?”

(This means you can increase your participation and increase your confidence.)

Your personal goal is:

Balance your time equally between speaking and asking questions

(This means you will use the phrases we studied for both asking questions and giving opinions.)

Your personal goal is:

When you don’t understand, use English (not Japanese). Use the ‘Classroom English’ phrases (on page 96) when you need help:

“Could you repeat that please?”

“How do you say . . . in English?”

“What does . . . mean?”

“What should I do?”

This will increase your confidence in speaking 100% English.