Teaching Goal-Setting in English Learning

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Abstract
Effective goal-setting is essential in language learning strategies for becoming autonomous learners. However, in countries where English is a foreign language, required practical English skills are not self-evident. In addition, being surrounded by many extrinsic motivators such as English test scores, it is not simple for learners to find realistic and meaningful goals of their own. This study examined goal-setting practice integrated into English courses in students' first language (Japanese). The students practiced goal-setting three times over three weeks. After students' reflections and discussions with peers in the classroom, we observed both improvements and difficulties. Although it seemed challenging to influence large-scale goals for future time, the long-term goals of more than half the students became more concrete. The implication of this study is that the significance of teaching goal-setting needs to be recognized as that of English skills.

Keywords: Autonomous Learners, English Learning, Goal-Setting, Self-Directed Learning

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Introduction

The significance of mastering English is emphasized in a globalizing society. However, among the countries comprising the Expanding Circle, where English is not used in daily life and is learned as a foreign language, the nature of the reasons for learning English is distinguished by the fact that English learning is not usually the learner's real choice but induced by external factors. It is also a characteristic among the countries comprising the Expanding Circle that the real need for learning English cannot be presented as a collective interest but as an individual one that varies from user to user.

In Japanese universities, most students would have studied English for six years in secondary school prior to entering university.[1] English is usually one of the subjects in paper-based university entrance examinations in Japan. Before entrance into university, the purpose of studying English was presented to them as a requirement for passing university entrance examinations. Most students study English exclusively for this purpose. Up to this stage, the objective of studying English was something imposed on them, and they did not have the opportunity to deeply reflect on the purpose of their language instruction. In addition, there is also strong societal pressure for university graduates to acquire English skills.

The university period is the first occasion in which many students are confronted with the question and must think deeply and seriously about the purpose of studying English. To some extent, English remains a compulsory subject on the undergraduate curriculum for first-year students of all disciplines in Japanese universities. Most universities encourage students to improve English test scores, such as the TOEFL and TOEIC.

In the context where English is not used daily, finding meaningful goals for studying English will be essential for maintaining the motivation to successfully continue English learning for a defined period. However, how can students define meaningful goals for themselves?

This study explores this issue based on the empirical research conducted in English courses for first-year students taught in Japanese. The underlying concept of the course is learner autonomy in English learning, aiming to guide students towards independent and self-directed learning. The course offers much different teaching style from general courses on English skills. This study also aims to prove the importance of including such explicit interventions, using the students' first language in the English curriculum.

The Perceptions of English Learning of First-Year Students

The author conducted this study in one of the largest state universities in Japan with 12 academic schools (letters, education, law, economics, science, medical science, dental medicine, pharmaceutical science, engineering, agriculture, veterinary science and fisheries). In 2021, the university had 18, 171 students, including postgraduate and 2,826 Japanese first-year students in the undergraduate degree programmes (Hokkaido University, 2021). English courses are compulsory for all first-year students who must take four English courses during their first year of the curriculum.

Before conducting the main empirical study, the author administered a simple survey questionnaire in Japanese to first-year students selected randomly. The survey asked one

[1] In Japan, foreign language education was officially introduced in primary education in 2020.

open-ended question, 'Do you have any difficulty or concerns in your English study? If yes, what are they?' The students were able to answer more than one item. The author collected 85 complete responses. There were primarily two groups of respondents: humanities/social sciences major (n=33) and science major (n=52). Table 1 summarizes the answers.

		Humanities, Social Sciences (n=33)		Sciences (n=52)	
	Difficulties/concerns	n	%	n	%
1	Lack of purpose	8	28	8	15
2	Lack of occasions to use English	3	10	15	29
3	English skills declining	2	7	2	4
4	Lack of speaking skill	10	24	13	25
5	Lack of listening skill	8	17	10	19
6	Lack of vocabulary	4	14	8	15

Table 1: Difficulties/concerns in English study of first-year students

The result confirmed the author's intuition that many students are engaged in English learning without being fully aware of the purposes, even after entry into university. The awareness of 'lack of purpose in studying English' and 'lack of occasions to use English' are assumed to be familiar in Expanding Circle countries. The author pays more attention to 'lack of purpose' than skill issues. It seems that after achieving their previous purpose, the university entrance examination, students then started wondering about the meaning of English learning. Researchers and universities should not ignore this issue because the lack of purpose can also be related to the lack of motivation. As per Oxford (1990), 'students without aims are like boats without rudders; they do not know where they are going, so they might never get there!' (p. 157): without setting goals, students do not know what English proficiency and skills to be enhanced.

Instead of significant common goals such as examinations, students need to find their personal meaning for studying English during university to become successful learners. According to Table 1, there is an implication that quite a few students tend to struggle with finding their purpose in studying English. The tendency is more salient in humanities and social science majors. Many students do not need to question why they need to master English in science majors. Approximately 75% of students in science majors (Hokkaido University, 2021) go to graduate school and engage in research activities in science, which is usually conducted in English.

In other career paths, schools require testing English ability through English tests or as a subject of examinations. For example, in job-hunting activities for business companies, candidates must present their English skills, typically by English test scores such as the TOEFL and TOEIC, whether in humanities or sciences. In addition, English is one of the subjects for civil service examination and teacher employment examination for schools. English is also a subject for graduate school entrance examinations in humanities and social sciences.

Students perceive the lack of English practical skills, particularly in listening and speaking on the one hand. However, their immediate need for English seems to be the scores of English examinations on the other. The former is the issue of proficiency and practical skills to use a

language, while the latter is the issue of techniques for assessments. The current situation may confuse the students. External factors likely induce the purposes of English learning, and there is a concern that it would become a barrier for autonomous learning. Hawkins (2018) points out that 'successful students described high motivation coming from intrinsic factors', 'while unsuccessful students only discussed extrinsic motivators (p. 460).

Another phase of this matter is that students would not sincerely enjoy English learning without meaningful purposes of learning, affecting their motivation to commit to long-term spontaneous English learning. This point implies that students need explicit guidance to help them find individual goals in English learning.

Goal-Setting in Language Learning Strategies

Oxford (2011, p.79) states 'L2 learners benefit from knowing more about how to set goals.' She advocates the following three elements of goals for effective self-regulated learning: specificity, proximity (the combination of long-term goals and short-term goals), and difficulty (modest level of feasibility) based on Shunk (2001). Since in 1990, she has argued the importance of goal-setting in language learning strategies. She emphasizes the importance of fixing the terms for each goal and differentiates between long-term 'goals' and short-term 'objectives'. The former is for planning for relatively longer periods from months to years, while the latter is from hours to weeks (Oxford, 1990). Besides combining of different goals, Shunk (2001) further adds the need to monitor progress and assess capabilities to adjust the strategy and goals as needed.

Oxford (2011) also points out the importance of 'future time perspective' for setting appropriate long-term goals via 'the planning' strategy. Hence, the author recognizes three stages of goals, including the one with future perspective posed above long-term 'goals' and short-term 'objectives' and considered integrating this viewpoint into the practice of empirical study described later.

There are discussions on the teachability of strategies (Griffith, 2015; Hawkins, 2018). However, if we focus on goal-setting only, it is hard to assume that many although not all, students can naturally set effective goals in the current situation without proper instruction. Without educational intervention, many students would first set non-specific goals, as other studies show (Cotterall, 2000; Horai and Wright, 2016; Kanazawa, 2020). Cotterall (2000) argues the importance of raising students' awareness of goals in classroom-based courses to foster learner autonomy. Therefore, the current empirical study examined the following research question:

RQ: How goal-setting practice influence students' goals?

Context

The author planned this empirical study in her English courses which are offered as elective compulsory subjects to first-year students. The underlying concept of this course is establishing one's suitable English learning method, and it aims to guide the students towards autonomous and self-directed learning. It is a different teaching style from other general English classes, which mainly teach English language skills. In this course, the students used Japanese as a medium language for all activities. Therefore the instructor expected students to discuss in Japanese the issues such as 'English learning at secondary school', 'learning

strategies', and 'International English/English as a Lingua Franca', etc. The course content is in Appendix 1.

The course consisted of 15 sessions of 90 minutes once per week. The students submitted two essays for assessment, keeping reflection notes at the end of each session. The maximum enrolment was 25 students per class. The author conducted the empirical study in four classes with approximately 100 first-year students over two academic years from 2020 to 2022. The study followed ethical considerations. The author informed the students of the purpose of the research, confidentiality, anonymity and promised no influence on academic activities.

The Findings of Goal-Setting Practice

The study integrated goal-setting practice into the above English course. Every three weeks, the instructor asked students to set three different goals: (a): The ultimate goal: what they wish to achieve using English in the future (more than a year later), (b): What kind and level of English skills they wish to acquire within a year, and (c): Action plan of the next three weeks under the directions of goal (a) and goal (b). Goal (b) corresponds to 'long-term goals' and goal (c) to 'short-term objectives' defined by Oxford (1990). Goal (a) corresponds to the 'future time perspective' stated in Oxford (2011). The reason the author added goal (a), ultimate goal, was that she considered that goals (b) and (c) were not enough to gear the students' perspectives from 'extrinsic' to 'intrinsic'.

The students repeated setting goals three times over nine weeks. The instructor asked the students to reflect on their previous goals in the second and third practices and set the next goals based on the reflections. In the classroom, students also had occasions to introduce and discuss their goals with each other in a group of several students. The flow of setting goals, reflection and adjustment tended to become individual work. However, the interactions utilizing the contexts with peers would contribute in the adjustment of goals. In fact, 'learner autonomy is a matter of developing and exercising a capacity for independent learning behaviour in interaction with other learners (Little, 2000, p.26)'. The author as a teacher avoided individual advising on the goals students described to encourage students' self-adjustment.

Out of approximately 100 first-year students enrolled in the four courses, 81 students completed the three sets of goal sheets with reflections, which the author analyzed. The author/instructor explained that there was no penalty for not achieving their action plans, the students were free to alter their previously set goals (a) and (b) in the subsequent goal-setting periods. The author regarded these reflection activities as monitoring progress and assessing capabilities which Shunk (2001) suggests, as previously mentioned.

This study focuses on how goal (a) and goal (b) altered from the first period to the third period. Goal (c) was not the analysis target in this study due to the capacity and action plans' nature that the action plans' achievement is self-assessed by students.

Goal (a): The Ultimate Goals: What They Wish to Achieve Using English in the Future (More Than a Year Later)

If students continue studying English without these goals, English learning remains solely an academic subject for study. After release from compulsory English subjects assigned in their

first year, students would find it difficult to continue studying English by themselves. In a sense, the determined future goals would sustain their long-term English learning.

After reflections of the two periods, the author divided the students' goals in the third period into the categories in Table 2.

	Goals	n	%
1	Study abroad	9	11
2	Reading research articles	9	11
3	Personal interests, hobbies	10	12
4	Vocational interest (concrete)	18	22
5	Job hunting（incl. English test score)	11	14
6	Fluent communication	34	42

Table 2: The ultimate goals of English learning set in the third period

In Table 2, the characteristics of the first four categories are different from the two categories at the bottom. If they plan to study abroad, it is natural to aim at 'study abroad.' Most students stated 'reading research articles' were in a science major where they need to do research in English in the future. Examples of the third category are 'to enjoy premier league football live coverage' and 'to enjoy mystery novels in English.' An example of the fourth category is 'My dream is to become a curator of a museum in another country to introduce Japanese art. To acquire English skills to explain Japanese art is my goal.' A characteristic of this category is that their future direction is concrete. They stated their future professional aims with other examples, including 'international lawyer' and 'international nurse', etc. There was a distinguished lack of concreteness in '5 Job hunting.' In the fifth category, students have not decided what they wish to become and tended to state, 'English skill will be an advantage in job hunting,' or 'Good English test scores will be needed for getting a good job.' In addition, the large difference between the fifth and fourth categories is that the description is still vague.

Examples of the sixth category are 'natural communication with people all over the world is my goal,' and 'to gain fluent English-speaking skills like my mother tongue, Japanese, is my goal.' In several cases, 'to become a native speaker-level English speaker' is set as a goal. These descriptions are more suitable to goal (b), but the vagueness was prominent. There was an association between the fifth and sixth categories and the result of the first questionnaire (Table 1), where students indicated they had not found the purposes of studying English, yet. The responses indicate that many students are still searching for their future directions, including vocational interests and could not decide the type of English users they wish to become. Hence, the author assumes that students lack clarity in required English skills and levels.

Unlike the following section, the goals they described for the first period rarely changed in the third period. Only eight out of 81 students revised their initial goals in the third period. It is somewhat unexpected, as the author assumed more students to clarify their future directions after the goal-setting exercises. The author realized it was a little early to ask them these goals as they are still following compulsory English courses in their first year. The future direction is often closely related to vocational interest, but many first-year students are unsure.

Goal (b): What Kind and Level of English Skills Do They Wish to Acquire Within a Year

The author also set one year to achieve this goal, as it will take a certain period to acquire specific skills. In this category, the students' descriptions varied, with some stating more than two goals of different skills. Therefore, the attempt at categorization was not realistic, and the author decided not to categorize them. In this goal, the author found many refinements in the third period compared with those in the first period. Out of 81 students, 43 revised their stated goals to be more concrete. In the first period, the author discerned vague and abstract descriptions such as 'to be able to understand in English well.' There were also quite a few unrealistic goals such as 'to be able to speak English like a native speaker'. Many also focused on the English test scores rather than using English, such as 'to keep attaining TOEFL score XX or above.' In the goal-setting practice of the third period, however, more specific descriptions increased such as 'to be able to output in daily level communication using basic English grammar' and 'to be able to understand the texts of extensive reading materials.' In addition, a few students mentioned CEFR can-do statements that the author introduced during class.

It is also interesting that students mentioned English-medium classes by English native speaker-teachers as criteria, such as 'to be able to properly participate in the activities in all English-classes' and 'not to hesitate in English activities in all English-classes,' etc. The author assumes that English-medium classes are psychological challenges for the students, and some may struggle with them. A few students also mentioned finding goals or motivation of learning English itself, such as 'to find my personal motivation to learn English.' This finding is also associated with the first questionnaire survey result (Table 1) that many students cannot find the purpose of English learning.

The difference between goal (a) and goal (b) was sometimes unclear. For example, one student stated, 'to be able to understand Disney animation films without Japanese subtitles.' in goal (b). It is detailed but this would be more suitable to goal (a) as it would require a high level of multiple skills.

Students revised and refined their goals through the goal-setting practice with reflections over the three periods and discussions with classmates. As a result, more than half of the students improved their initial statements, although the goals of two students did not change as they were concrete from the beginning.

Conclusion

The effect of goal-setting practice became evident to some extent. But as the author found a limitation in goal (a), the future time perspective, how to expand students' interest in English use beyond English learning, will be one for the next plan. In Oxford (2011), although the researcher recognised the effect of future time perspective, she does not define it to be essential. She suggests that leaners without a future time perspective can also use tactics associated with 'the Planning strategy.' In a sense, it is an issue beyond English language education, but one that we cannot ignore. Commit to goal (a) might have been early for first year students, but the earlier they set up goal (a), the earlier they will start becoming autonomous. For example, students who established a concrete goal (a) also described concrete goal (b).

English classes incline toward input of skills. However, as this study shows, many students probably need help setting up practical goals. There should be more room for educational intervention in this direction.

Regardless, this study has limitations. The study only focused on goal-setting practice. Future research should also examine the aspect of goal achievement and together with the result, illustrate the role of goals in learning strategies. In addition, it is unexplored how course content influence students' development of goals. The topic will be one on a future research agenda.

Appendix 1

Week	Content
1	Why learn English?
2	Analyzing your learning style
3	English language teaching in school education
4	Setting goals and how to achieve them
5	Analyzing self-study materials
6	Learning English vs using English
7	International English（1）
8	International English（2）
9	Proven methods in Second Language Acquisition Research（1）
10	Proven methods in Second Language Acquisition Research（2）
11	Learning from the experience of a non-native speaker with a high level of Japanese proficiency (guest speaker session)
12	Learning strategies
13	Evaluation of goal setting and achievement
14	Wrap-up, after this course
15	Individual consultations

Course Contents of English Course

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