

*Fostering Learner Autonomy:
Web-Based Goal Setting and Self-Evaluation in Japanese Higher Education*

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WorldCALL 2023 – CALL in Critical Times
Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper examines the influence of a custom web-based application for goal setting and self-evaluation in compulsory English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses at a Japanese higher education institution. Employing a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data revealed a strong preference for this digital platform over traditional methods, with students setting challenging goals reporting higher self-evaluation scores than those who selected easier goals. Qualitative reflexive analysis generated themes that recognized the merits of reflective learning, and revealed contrasting yet interconnected themes: the empowerment from student-set goals and the structured support of instructor-composed goals. These findings highlight the tool's role in facilitating learner autonomy and engagement, consistent with Goal Setting Theory and Self-Regulated Learning principles, and underscore the potential of digital tools in modern EFL education.

Keywords: EFL Education, Goal Setting, Learner Autonomy, Self-Regulated Learning



WorldCALL Conference 2023 in Chiang Mai, Thailand

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This paper examines the influence of a custom web-based application for goal setting and self-evaluation in compulsory English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses at a Japanese higher education institution. Integrating principles from Goal Setting Theory (GST) and Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), the application is tailored to enhance learner autonomy and engagement. GST, inductively developed over decades by Locke and Latham, is a key theoretical element that underpins this study. It underscores the critical role of specific and challenging goals in elevating performance and positively affecting well-being (Latham & Locke, 2007).

Reflective practices are integral to effective learning, serving as a tool for learners to evaluate their progress and adapt strategies accordingly (Little, 2007). These practices contribute significantly to fostering learner autonomy, an essential element in language education highlighted by Benson (2013), which enables learners to assume control over various aspects of their educational experience. Zimmerman's model of SRL supports this view, advocating for an educational approach that encourages students to engage proactively and take ownership of their learning process (Zimmerman, 2002). In EFL contexts, the cultivation of autonomy is not just about active language use; it is about empowering learners to engage in informed decision-making regarding their educational trajectories, a foundation for lifelong learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the accelerated integration of technology in educational settings, including Japanese university EFL classrooms (Crawford et al., 2020). This shift has introduced new paradigms for educational engagement, as Learning Management System (LMS) usage has become deeply embedded in tertiary-level course instruction.

Students and teachers are becoming increasingly adept at navigating the digital world, yet there still exist wide variances in digital proficiency among both students and educators, highlighting a need for customized training and support for effective technology use (Smith et al., 2020). Within this digital transition, leveraging technology for goal setting presents a promising avenue for enhancing language learning experiences, offering an innovative solution.

1.2 Pedagogical Intervention

Incorporating a web-based application into the EFL curriculum, this study investigated goal setting and self-evaluation through a digital platform integrated with the institution's *Moodle* LMS and its deployment within a learning sequence. The custom application offered three structured goal categories:

- **Basic/Advanced Goals:** Compulsory, instructor-defined goals tailored to course requirements, with 'basic' goals aimed at foundational skills and 'advanced' goals designed to stretch student capabilities.
- **Challenge Goals:** Optional, extracurricular activities to foster deeper language engagement through various mediums.
- **My Goals:** Providing students with the autonomy to set personalized English-related goals.

Students interacted with the application primarily through smartphones, setting their initial goals in the first class of the second semester. Subsequent classes concluded with a self-evaluation phase, where students assessed their weekly progress using a simple and intuitive 1-5 star rating system. This system was deliberately chosen for its ease of use and widespread familiarity. Figure 1 displays the application's interface, featuring both the initial goal setting and the weekly self-evaluation components.

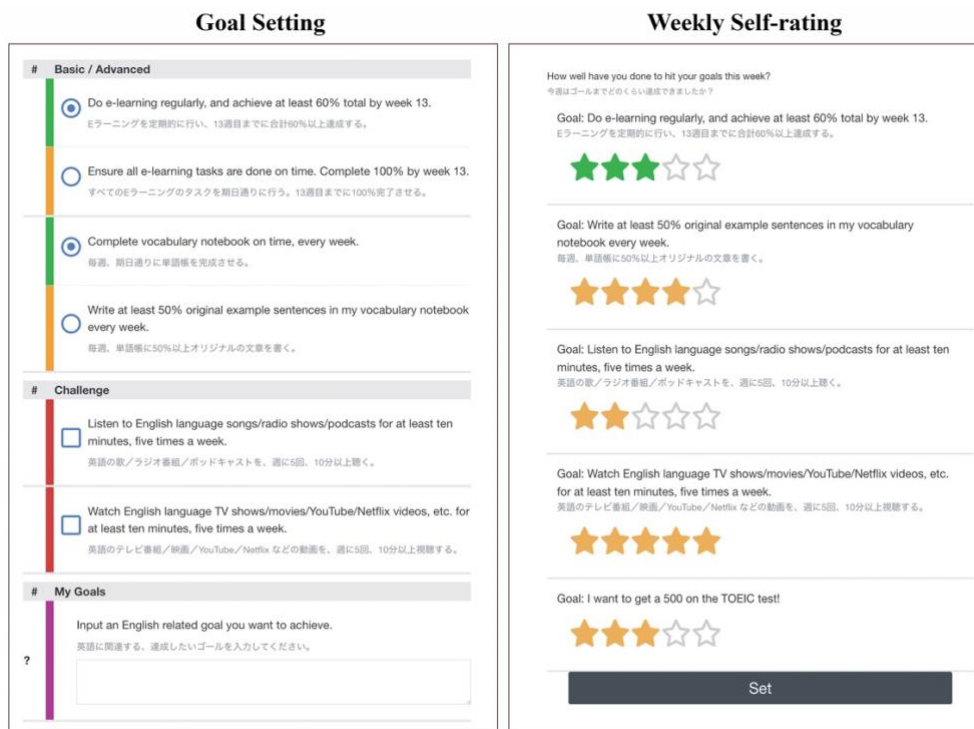


Figure 1. Examples of goal setting and weekly self-rating pages from the student interface

To facilitate continual reflection and progress monitoring, the application featured a goal review history page, accessible to both students and instructors. The bilingual interface of the application catered to the linguistic comfort levels of all users, with all Japanese text vetted for accuracy by native speakers, ensuring clarity and comprehensibility.

1.3 Methodology

The study's participants comprised eighty-eight first- and second-year Japanese university students, enrolled in compulsory EFL speaking and listening courses. They had been previously assessed using the Visualizing English Language Competency (VELC) test, with an average equivalent TOEIC® score of 375, indicative of a basic English proficiency level as per the CEFR A2 standard (Tannenbaum & Caroline Wylie, 2019). All students took part in paper-based goal setting during the previous semester's classes, facilitating comparison between the two approaches.

A mixed-methods framework, featuring an equal status concurrent design in line with Creswell's (2022) methodology, was employed. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the web application's impact on EFL learning. By integrating empirical data with participant narratives, the study endeavored to inform effective pedagogical strategies and guide future research in the realm of digital language education.

The quantitative component of the study involved analyzing system usage data and closed-ended survey responses with JASP statistical software. Non-parametric tests were employed due to the data deviating from a normal distribution. Concurrently, qualitative data from open-ended survey responses and practitioner analytic memos were scrutinized. This examination led to the generation of themes in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis methodology.

The specific aims of the study were as follows:

- **Qualitative Aim:** To understand student experiences with the digital platform, assessing its influence on EFL learning engagement and motivation.
- **Quantitative Aim:** To explore student preferences for goal setting methods in EFL courses and to analyze the impact of goal difficulty level on self-evaluations.
- **Mixed-Methods Aim:** To integrate findings across methodologies, evaluating the web application and its deployment's effectiveness in supporting goal setting and self-evaluation for EFL learners.

2. Findings

2.1 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis of the study revealed five salient themes that reflect student and practitioner perspectives on the online goal setting and self-evaluation tool and its use within classes:

Theme 1: A place for reflection on learning. Students perceived goal setting and self-evaluation as useful through enhancing self-awareness and behavior modification. Regular self-evaluation prompted reflection, with students noting improvements in motivation and task completion. Despite its benefits, a minority found frequent self-evaluation taxing. Social interactions around self-evaluations provided peer support and accountability. The goal review history page proved valuable in facilitating discussions on effort and progress, demonstrating the reflective capacity enabled by the web application.

Theme 2: Guided goal setting scaffolds learning. Students appreciated the clarity and direction provided by teacher-composed goals. This guidance was particularly welcomed by those who found setting their own goals daunting. Offering a choice between 'basic' and 'advanced' goals allowed students to engage at a level that matched their motivation and interest. This scaffolding by guided goals offered a balance between the need for direction and the desire for autonomy, prompting some students to strive for more challenging objectives than they might have set on their own. It was noted that guided goals often provided specificity and measurability, which some students felt might be lacking in their self-devised goals.

Theme 3: It's better to write your own goals. Contrastingly, many students favored the personalized nature of self-set 'my goals', valuing the autonomy they provided. These goals allowed students to align their learning with personal aspirations, leading to a deeper engagement with the material. Self-composed goals were seen to promote introspection, helping students define their learning paths and enhance their metacognitive awareness. The responsibility of crafting their own objectives also empowered students, making the learning process more memorable and enjoyable, and their achievements more satisfying.

Theme 4: ‘Challenge’ goals extend learning beyond the classroom. ‘Challenge’ goals effectively broadened the scope of language learning, as students actively sought English exposure in day-to-day life, from watching English media to listening to music. Such activities, chosen willingly, reinforced language skills and fostered a practical engagement with English, beyond the classroom. Students expressed that these self-selected 'challenge' goals sparked an increased motivation, as they resonated with personal interests and integrated naturally into their routines. Teachers also found these goals instrumental in prompting discussions about additional study resources, reinforcing the value of autonomous, extracurricular learning endeavors.

Theme 5: The online medium suits today’s learners. Students showed a strong preference for the online platform due to its convenience and accessibility, favoring it over paper methods. They valued the ability to easily modify goals and appreciated the ease of access that the web application provided. Despite global digitalization trends and the benefits of instant access to their goals on various devices, a minority of students noted the lack of physicality and potential technical glitches as downsides. This theme highlights the growing inclination towards digital solutions in education, aligning with the technological aptitudes of today's learners.

These themes reflect the students' experiences and perceptions, as interpreted through the lens of the teacher-researcher. They illustrate the varied ways in which the digital tool was engaged with and perceived by the students, offering insights into their preferences, challenges, and the overall impact of the tool on their language learning journey.

2.2 Quantitative Findings

In the quantitative analysis of web application data, the weekly self-evaluation process revealed that students assigned higher ratings to 'advanced' goals compared to 'basic' ones. The statistical tests identified a significant difference in the self-ratings between these two goal types, with 'advanced' goals receiving an average of 0.54 more points. When considering students who exclusively selected 'advanced' goals, they rated themselves an average of 1.41 points higher than those who selected only 'basic' goals, a finding that was statistically significant with a moderate effect size.

Goal Type	Goals Set	Average Rating (mean)	SD
Basic	203	3.31	1.61
Advanced	149	3.85	1.42
All Basic	68	2.92	1.57
All Advanced	48	4.33	1.22

Table 1. Goal Categories Selected

Closed-ended survey responses collected during the latter part of the semester reflected a pronounced preference for the digital medium over traditional paper-based approaches for goal setting (displayed below in Figure. 2), a difference that was both statistically significant and moderate in terms of effect size. The mean preference for online goal setting was markedly higher than for paper-based methods.

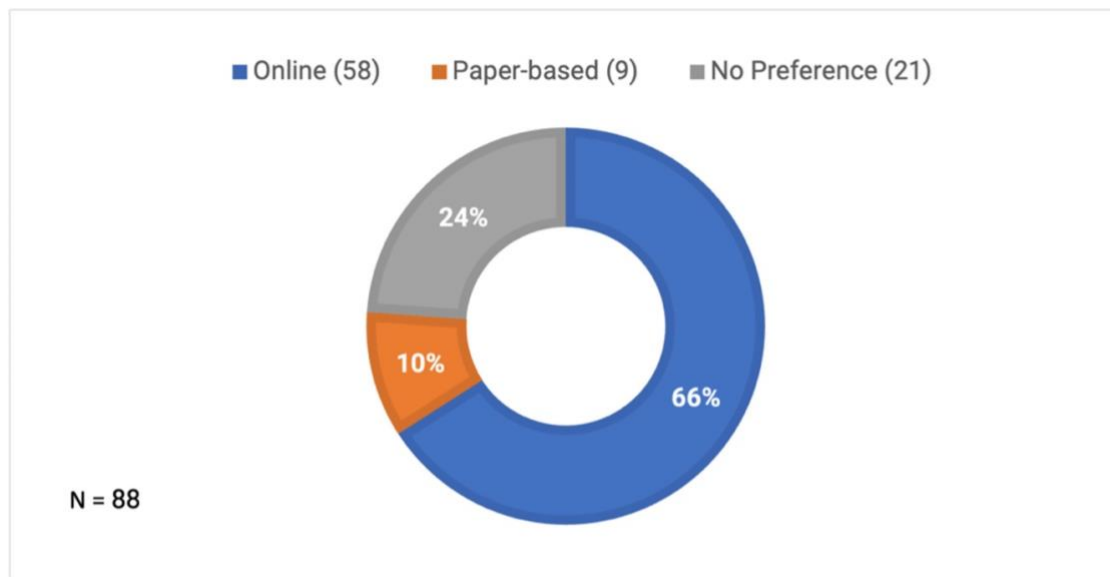


Figure 2. ‘Which did you prefer, goal setting and self-evaluation on paper or online?’

3. Conclusions

This study, employing a mixed-methods approach, provides insight into the use of web-based goal setting in an EFL context. The qualitative findings bring to light the nuanced experiences and perceptions of students and educators regarding the application. Themes such as the importance of 'challenge' goals and the preference for digital mediums underscore a trend towards more autonomous and technology-driven learning strategies. These insights align with the principles of SRL, showcasing how the application supports reflective learning and autonomy.

The quantitative data complements these qualitative insights by revealing patterns in students' goal setting preferences and self-evaluations. The tendency of students who opted for 'advanced' goals to assign themselves higher ratings aligns with GST's emphasis on the motivational benefits of specific and challenging goals. This aspect of the study indicates a positive relationship between goal difficulty and self-evaluation, a key element in effective goal setting.

When viewed together, the quantitative and qualitative data suggest a complex interplay between structured guidance and personal autonomy in the learning process. While students value the clarity and direction provided by the teacher-composed goals, they also exhibit a strong desire for setting personal goals. This dual preference reflects a modern educational landscape where learners seek a balance between guided learning paths and opportunities for self-directed growth. The enthusiastic response to ‘challenge’ goals underscores the interest of non-elective language students in learning-oriented goals, beyond just performance-focused ones, emphasizing the value of providing opportunities that cater to broader aspects of language learning.

This study calls for a nuanced approach to EFL pedagogy, highlighting the integral role of digital tools in going beyond mere convenience. They are essential in fostering engagement, autonomy, and reflective practices. By merging traditional methodologies with cutting-edge digital solutions, tools like the web application explored in this research offer a more dynamic and effective approach to language learning. Such integration not only resonates

with contemporary educational theories but also meets the evolving needs and preferences of today's learners, pointing towards a shift to more personalized and adaptive educational strategies.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates the significant role digital tools play in enhancing goal setting and self-evaluation in EFL learning. It emphasizes the necessity for EFL pedagogy to progress alongside technological advancements, ensuring that language education is relevant and effective in a digitally driven educational landscape. The findings also pave the way for further research into the long-term impacts of these tools on language acquisition and the development of learner autonomy.

4. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kyushu Sangyo University and their Computer and Networking Center for the financial support which made this research possible. Additionally, I am grateful to the organizers of WorldCALL 2023 for the opportunity to share this work with the academic community.

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