

SMART Goals, Better Outcomes: Transforming English Language Learning Through Student Goal-Setting

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For decades, educational psychologists have emphasized the importance of setting learning goals, with student goal setting being linked to academic achievement. When students have a declared interest in their academic goals, they are more willing to spend time studying, which is a key factor in academic success (Hudig et al. 2022; Morisano et al. 2010; Schippers et al. 2020).

How can setting goals increase motivation to study? According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021), a person is more motivated to engage in a behavior when they experience autonomy and self-efficacy, both of which are supported through individual goal setting. When students select their own objectives, they are taking responsibility for their learning by playing an active role in deciding where to focus their learning efforts, an example of autonomy. They are also demonstrating that they believe themselves competent and capable of producing intended results, signaling self-efficacy. Strong self-efficacy is associated with increased effort, persistence, satisfaction, and academic success (Bandura 1997; Locke and Latham 1990; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018).

When students have set their own learning objectives, they are not only more likely to study and be successful but also to be interested and engaged in their learning.

Students perceive a higher value in tasks designed to meet their goals, which can bolster motivation over both the short and long term (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021).

WHAT TYPES OF GOALS SHOULD STUDENTS SET?

Mastery Goals.

Goal orientation theory categorizes goals into (1) mastery-oriented, with a focus on learning and improving, and (2) performance-oriented, centering on the achievement of a particular task, recognition, and competition. Research on goals primarily finds mastery goals to be most effective (Dweck 2006; “Goal Orientation Theory” 2009; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018) and suggests that goals should prioritize learning and growth.

SMART Goals.

A mastery goal that is too broad, however, such as “become a better writer,” is difficult

to implement and evaluate. Goals are most effective when they are SMART: Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-Based, and Time-Bound (O'Neill and Conzemius 2006).

Strategic and Specific.

Goals can be strategic when they are individualized: meaningful and relevant for the goal setter (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021). A learner typically has multiple academic, professional, and personal goals, some of which might be conflicting, so students should think strategically about what is going to work best for them. Researchers have also found that learners with more specific goals tend to put in more effort and achieve more (Locke and Latham 1990), with additional work highlighting the broader motivational role of goal setting in learning (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021); the more specific the goal, the greater the achievement.

To illustrate *strategic* and *specific*, a student who wants to “improve their English,” will think first about what their broader goals are. They might know their future profession will require strong English writing skills. They are being *strategic* by connecting their current academic goal to a future professional goal. Next they can think about feedback they have received on their writing in the past. Perhaps they have received many comments about vocabulary choice or use, in which case they will make their goal more specific: *Become a better writer by revising vocabulary choice and use for at least five words in every written homework assignment I submit this semester.*

Measurable.

When a goal is measurable, a learner is more likely to perform a necessary action

repeatedly, form a habit, and thus make the effort required to achieve the goal. For example, *Become a more fluent reader by reading more* can be transformed into the more measurable *by reading 30 minutes every night*. A learner knows when they have accomplished a measurable task they have set for themselves, which makes progress on measurable goals easier to evaluate, more satisfying, and more likely to lead to successful results.

Attainable.

Likewise, goals should be slightly higher than a learner's current ability but attainable (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021; Locke and Latham 1990). Because it is difficult to maintain motivation over time, distal goals, requiring higher level of achievement, should be broken down into proximal (shorter-term) goals just a little higher in difficulty than what the learner is currently performing (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021). For instance, if a high school student hopes to give professional presentations in English one day, they might choose the proximal, attainable goal: *Post a two-minute video in English on my social media every week.*

Results-Based.

When a goal is results-based, the learner understands the greater impact of the goal. *Improve my understanding of the genre expectations of technical reports in my field by reading one report every week so that I can write my own technical report in June* adds an expected result to the action (*so that I can write my own technical report by June 1*). By connecting the goal to a tangible outcome, the purpose becomes more visible and the goal more motivating.

Time-Bound.

As shown in the examples above, goals should be time-bound (*this semester, 30 minutes every night, every week, by June 1*). Time-bound goals are more specific, more measurable, more results-based and also add the dimension of a deadline, which helps learners focus attention and maintain motivation (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021).

Other considerations for goals.

Connect goals to values.

When goals are grounded in values, there is additional commitment to achieving them (O'Neill and Conzemius 2006). Learners recognize that by striving to achieve their objectives, they are being true to themselves and what is most important to them as individuals. For example, a learner for whom family is a core value might connect family to a goal in the result: *Improve my aural comprehension by listening to an English podcast for 30 minutes every evening so that I can better understand my son-in-law.*

Build a community.

When learners are in community with other learners striving to reach their own goals, they may be more likely to remain motivated, make a concerted effort, and achieve substantial results (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021). Students can build solid peer support networks when they have opportunities to (1) discuss their goals, (2) find together or share resources and methods for reaching their goals, and (3) celebrate progress and successes as a group.

Provide opportunities for evaluation and feedback.

Goals should include opportunities for evaluation and feedback (National

Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018). Even a learner with a solid, well-crafted goal is less likely to thrive without the means (resources and guidance) to achieve the goal. For instance, a student working on listening comprehension might make more progress if they are also receiving guidance on listening strategies such as listening multiple times, reading the transcript between repetitions, and listening at different speeds. Students can self-evaluate (Do they believe they accomplished the tasks that they set out to accomplish and to what extent do they believe they carried out the task well?), but they should also receive feedback (evaluation and suggestions for resources and next steps) from an instructor and/or peers.

The next section offers pedagogical activities designed to help students set and evaluate goals.

SUGGESTED STEPS FOR BUILDING GOAL SETTING INTO THE CURRICULUM

Building goal setting into an already established curriculum is beneficial because it provides both a framework and a community for supporting students with their goals. Better yet, adding goal work is not necessarily time-consuming in terms of either instructor preparation or classroom time. This section breaks the process down into steps and provides suggested journal and discussion topics for instructors to adopt for or adapt to their educational contexts. Instructors are encouraged to select among these activities based on time available as well as learner needs and interests. Suggested instruction time for steps 1 and 2 is provided in parentheses but is likely to

vary by group and the desired amount of class discussion.

Step 1: Establish the goals (60-90 minutes).

- a. To assess identity and the gap between one's current self and one's ideal future self: *How do you see yourself currently as a writer/speaker in English? Who do you want to be as a writer/speaker in English in 1 year (or 5/10 years)? What steps might you need to take to become that person in 1 year?*
- b. To assess values: *Look at this list of values.* (See Elena Aguilar for an excellent list of values at https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/650894a3e9899e1797d705ee/650a00e200ec198ff68d3c67_Core%20Values_Art%20of%20Coaching.pdf.) *Select 10 values that resonate most with you. Feel free to add a value if you don't see it on the list. Then, from those 10 values, choose three that represent your "core" values.*
- c. To brainstorm potential goals: *What makes a good English speaker/writer?*
- d. To select their goals: *Look at your first three journal entries about who you want to become, what values are most important to you, and what makes a good English speaker and writer. Decide on three goals you want to commit to for this semester/year.*
- e. To make the goals "SMART": *Goals are easier to achieve when they are SMART (Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-Based, and Time-Bound). Here are two examples of SMART goals. (Feel free to use the examples above in the "SMART Goals" section or write your own examples.) Rewrite your 3 goals to make them "SMART." Now double-check to make sure your goals are consistent with who you want to be and what your values are.*

Step 2: Set an action plan and timeline (45-60 minutes).

To develop good habits that will support goal achievement (Adapted from Aguilar 2018: 59-60):

- a. *Part 1: Write about a time when you tried something new and hard to do. Maybe a sport, activity, or class. Maybe a new way of communicating, being, or seeing the world. But something that took courage. It doesn't have to be something that you did particularly well. Just something new and hard that you tried. Describe the feelings you had at different stages during the process (including now, as you look back on it). What motivated you to do it? Why didn't you give up?*
- b. *Part 2: Brainstorm behavioral changes you've made in your life, ones that you've felt good about and sustained. They could be big changes (such as quitting smoking) or little changes (such as checking your social media less often). They could be related to learning English, or not. Use the sentence stems I used to... and now I... For example: I used to spend an hour on social media before bed, and now I read a book.*
- c. *Part 3: Now identify a few changes you have tried to make but didn't sustain. Select those that you wish you had sustained. Use the sentence stems I tried... because I... but I didn't continue doing it because... For example: I tried going for a run every morning because I knew it would be good for my physical and mental health, but I didn't continue doing it because I kept finding "more important" things to do.*
- d. *Part 4: Re-read your goals. Now brainstorm behavioral changes you would like to make in*

your life. Choose one behavioral change that sounds both challenging and possible.

Highlight it on your list. Ask a friend if they believe the behavioral change will help you come closer to reaching your goal. If no, refine your proposed change. If yes, continue with the next steps. Close your eyes and imagine yourself engaging in the behavior. How did it feel to do it? What might you need to learn or know how to do in order to adopt this habit? What emotion could help you make this change?

- e. *Part 5: Create a schedule. Describe when you plan to carry out this new behavior. How will you need to change your schedule to do this? Is there something you will need to give up in order to do this? What will you have just finished when you begin this new activity? (For example, As soon as I get into bed, I will read in English for 30 minutes.) What can you do to make sure you do the activity as planned? (For example, I will put my book on my bed every morning when I make my bed, so when I get into bed in the evening, I will need to pick my book up.)*
- f. *Part 6: What do you hope to have accomplished after one month? Two months? etc. What will you do to celebrate if you stick to this habit for one month?*

Step 3: Create goal groups.

- a. To increase the impact of their work together, have students share their goals and determine as a class common goal themes. Those themes can help determine focus areas for each group (e.g., a vocabulary group, a reading group).
- b. To foster a positive, safe environment for learners, ask groups to write their

community agreements. Alternatively, the class can write community agreements as a whole to be applied across all groups. Examples of community agreements include *Maintain privacy, confidentiality, and trust: What is said here stays here; what is learned here, leaves here* and *Create space for everyone to contribute to discussions by practicing active and empathetic listening*. More resources and examples are listed in the Sidebar at the end of this article.

- c. To maximize effectiveness, ensure groups meet regularly and have specific tasks to accomplish together for each meeting (e.g., find evidence of goal work in the revision of a particular assignment).

Step 4: Provide resources and feedback.

- a. To ensure learners have the resources they need to achieve their goals, share materials with and suggest activities to groups and individuals.
- b. To keep goals on learners' minds, remind them frequently of how they can apply what they are learning to their goal work. For instance, *If your goal for this semester is to work on listening to academic lectures, the site we are using today will give you a lot of other lectures you can come back to for additional practice.*
- c. To monitor and increase progress, ensure students receive feedback from multiple sources.
 - i. Instructor feedback: Focus feedback to students on their goals.

- ii. Self-evaluation: Provide a form students can fill out on a regular basis or have them write in their course journal. For instance, *Evaluate your work in the class so far. Where have you put in the most effort? What have you learned? What is still not clicking into place? Show me where you worked on your goals in this paper/presentation...*
- iii. Peer evaluation: Ask students to fill out a form with questions such as: *What was your partner's goal? Did your partner work on their goal in the assignment you reviewed? Where do you see evidence of that? What help can you offer as they work on their goal?*
- d. To prevent roadblocks, provide opportunities for learners to potentially modify goals. *What is not going very well for you? What has been preventing you from making the progress you had hoped to make? (For example, your schedule isn't allowing you to devote enough time to your goal, or you aren't seeing progress and aren't sure what to do next.) What steps can you take to address the problems you are seeing? How can I help you with this?*
- b. To mark the end of this phase in their goal-setting, celebrate successes. This can take many different forms, depending on your students and setting. Examples include:
 - i. A party with food and drinks, a dance party, a board game party, etc.;
 - ii. An oral or written presentation highlighting every learner's progress on their goal delivered to an administrator, another class, the general public, etc.;
 - iii. A creative project illustrating progress made (e.g., a balloon bouquet with each balloon representing progress on one learner's goal, a drawing or sculpture depicting progress on every learner's goal);
 - iv. A celebratory discussion, such as a reflective circle where students pass a symbolic object to one another and spend two minutes talking about their progress or a gratitude circle where students thank one another for specific support they received from others (e.g., *I want to thank Maria in my group. She told me about a website I could use to track my reading hours, and it really helped keep me motivated this semester*).

Step 5: Create closure.

- a. To allow students to evaluate their progress on their goals at the end of the course, ask: *How did you do with your goals this semester/year? How do you know? What evidence do you have? Go back through the feedback you have received and review what you have accomplished. How do you currently see yourself as a writer/speaker in English?*
- c. To remind students that learning is a life-long process, have students set new goals for when they leave your class: *Do you have goals for the next semester/year? What are they? Why are they important to you?*

CONCLUSION

Student goal setting offers an opportunity to boost student autonomy and self-efficacy, and ultimately their motivation and achievement. When carried out in group settings, it can also heighten social connection and a sense of belonging. Learners of all ages can be guided through the goal-setting process, which requires no particular technology, experience, or proficiency level. Many of the activities can be easily incorporated into the curriculum (e.g., during a unit on supporting an assertion through reasoning and examples, ask students to justify their claim that they are making progress on their goals). Thus, goal-setting tasks can reinforce rather than detract from course content. Arguably the greatest reward that comes with student goal setting, though, is the visible gratification that comes from students choosing, pursuing, and achieving meaningful, impactful goals.

SIDEBARS

The following sidebars provide recommended resources and sample community agreements referenced earlier in the article.

Recommended reading:

- For a number of useful templates to guide students of different ages and educational contexts through the process of setting goals: *Step into Student Goal Setting* (Nordengren 2022).
- For further information on research into learner motivation with particular focus on L2 motivation: *Teaching and Researching Motivation* (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021).

- For activities on exploring personal beliefs and behaviors: *The Onward Workbook: Daily Activities to Cultivate your Emotional Resilience and Thrive* (Aguilar 2018).
- For activities on establishing community agreements: *The Art of Coaching Teams: Building Resilient Communities that Transform Schools* (Aguilar 2016: 95-119).

Community agreement examples:

1. Show respect for others. Listen and don't interrupt.
2. Be open to new ideas and perspectives.
3. Be fully present mentally and physically; participate actively and make space for others to participate actively too.
4. Maintain privacy, confidentiality, and trust: What is said here stays here; what is learned here, leaves here.
5. Assume positive intent, but acknowledge when you are feeling hurt by what is said or how it is said.
6. Use cell phones and other technology only if they help the group move forward.

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