

Student-Generated Focus Points and Self-Assessment

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ACADEMIA, Journal of the Nanzan Academic Society, Literature and Language, Nanzan University; Vol. 74, p. 121-134, June 2003.

Abstract

This article reports on how goal setting was combined with recorded conversations with the objective of helping first-year English majors become more autonomous learners. Goal setting has beneficial outcomes for both students and teachers. It sets out in clear terms what the learner wishes to achieve. It promotes learner autonomy in that each student must evaluate her/his own progress during the course of one class period. Reflecting on one's progress by reviewing self-recordings made weekly in class can make students aware of strengths and weaknesses in their language skills. Combining goal setting with this critical thinking process gives students the opportunity to then set individual goals for the following week. Through this ongoing process, the teacher becomes aware of what individual students perceive their learning goals to be and can adapt lessons to address some of the students' concerns.

Introduction

Goal setting has been widely accepted as a method that helps organizations or individuals to focus on specific standards of achievement. It has also been shown to have considerable effects in the field of language teaching and learning. Yet many students and/or teachers may not have explicitly considered specific goals beyond improving the English ability of the learner. Of course such broad goals as "to speak English" or "to be able to communicate when I travel abroad" can be broken down into more concrete, intermediate goals. But what of the day-to-day efforts students put into their learning? How can they clearly assess and monitor their speaking progress over the course?

This paper shows how setting "focus points" can help learners to gain mastery over a variety of communication skills. This technique is based on comprehensible output theory, goal setting theory, noticing, and the concept of learner autonomy. After a description of the focus point technique, I will briefly discuss how focus points relate to these theoretical positions.

Background

Focus Points

Student-generated "focus points" are written statements about particular language goals (see Appendix). A focus point has the following attributes:

- 1) it consists of a specific communication feature of the student's choice
- 2) it is attainable within a limited amount of time (e.g. during one task, or

- during one class period)
- 3) it is challenging
- 4) it is useful

After the designated time period students assess the degree to which they have attained their goal and can designate a small reward for themselves.

“Communication feature” refers to some aspect of the language that the student has noticed is not a regular part of her “communicative repertoire,” that is, one that the student does not yet use naturally. This includes not only grammatical structures and vocabulary items but also paralinguistic features such as facial expressions, body language and gestures. Focus points can be directed at any aspect the learner chooses to focus on and is therefore a quite flexible strategy, which can be used with a wide variety of tasks and activities. It is similar to the use of learning contracts in second-language teaching (see McGarrell 1996, Schwarzer, Kahn and Smart 2000, Todd 2002) but is much more specific and singularly short-term.

Goal Setting Theory

Locke and colleagues define the term “goal” as “attaining a specific standard of proficiency on a task, usually within a specified time limit” (Locke et al 1981). Goal setting theory (Locke and Latham 1990) states that people who have specific, challenging goals perform better on work tasks than individuals who do not have clear goals (e.g. “do your best”). Individuals who show a higher degree of commitment have been found to have better goal attainment. Goals that are assigned by others have not been found to have any effect on an individual’s performance as long as the individual has committed to the goal

Several other factors affect goal attainment. Among those directly related to the language learning process are one’s ability to perform the goal, the difficulty of the goal, the provision of appropriate strategies for achieving the goal, and a reward of some form for attainment of the goal. The level of difficulty of self-generated goals is further related to one’s beliefs about one’s own abilities, one’s perception of the difficulty of the goal, and one’s own past performance. Additionally, the individual must recognize a useful purpose in the goal, or be able to determine what benefits will result for the effort involved. Finally, goals must be linked with feedback.

Feedback or Knowledge of Results has been shown to have a positive effect on future behavior as it shows the extent to which a person’s performance matches the standard desired. If a person has met or exceeded the expected standard, future performance will usually stay the same or improve. If the standard has not been met, performance will improve if the person is not satisfied with previous performance, has “high self-efficacy,” and determines to improve in future through setting new goals (Locke and Latham 1994, p. 19).

Bandura’s *self-efficacy* concept refers to “individuals’ perceived capabilities to attain designated types of performances and achieve specific results” (Pajares 1996, p. 546). Self-efficacy influences the difficulty of the goal an individual sets for her/himself, the amount of effort exerted toward attaining the goal, and the extent to which the individual persists in attaining the goal (Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons 1992, p. 664).

Oxford and Shearin have found that learning style differences also affect goal setting behavior (Oxford and Shearin 1994). Drawing on their own work and that of Joy Reid, they observe, "Learning style differences, based on personal preferences, are reflected not only in the selection of goals but also in the behaviors use to achieve those goals" (p. 19).

Focus points automatically set up a certain degree of commitment as it is the students who are in control of setting their goals. The goals should be challenging but within the ability range of the student. The learner should also be aware of why s/he chose that particular goal, that is, the value it has toward the larger goal of competency in the language. There is also a component of feedback and reward.

Output and Noticing

Krashen's theory is that learners need comprehensible input and opportunities for negotiation (1985) and Krashen states that production is not directly involved with acquisition. He acknowledges that it may be indirectly related in that during conversation learners ask for clarification and this leads the speaking partner to alter the speech that the learner then uses as further comprehensible input.

Swain's comprehensible output theory (1985, Swain and Lapkin 1995) states that input alone is not enough. Her position is that learners need opportunities to produce the language because that is how they will be forced to think about the structures of the language.

Schmidt and Frota suggest that features will not become intake (items held in memory which may or may not later become part of the learner's interlanguage system) unless they are first consciously attended to (Ellis 1994). When learners do become aware of a certain language item or structure in the input, and compare this with what they presently produce, they may find there is a gap between their present abilities and the level they would like to achieve. Schmidt and Frota call this "noticing the gap."

Focus points allow students to build on the features of communication they have noticed, by setting goals to consciously use these features in output. However, I would argue that students also notice gaps in paralinguistic features just as they do grammatical or vocabulary items, and that they need opportunities to practice a chosen feature several times and *in context* during a designated time period.

Memory

There is a considerable amount of evidence that repetition of an item among other items provides a better chance of being remembered than when the item is repeated several times in succession. Stevick calls this "distributed practice" (1996, p. 112). In sequential repetition, the brain does not need to distinguish the semantic meaning from the context in which it can be used. The distributed practice effect may strengthen the connections between neurons in the brain that deal with memory. Stevick states,

the networks that got strengthened in the ER [existing resources]ⁱ would differ among themselves at least with respect to their information about time. Quite probably various changes in the context would eliminate some other

kinds of incidental and nonessential information as well (1993, p. 17).

Through the use of focus points whose main features are the repetition of a vocabulary words, phrase, gesture or other behavior, the item can be repeated several times during the given time period. One example might be the learner whose focus point is “I will use the phrases on my ‘Asking for Clarification’ card six times during this class.” Here, the learner will be using several phrases on a handout, all of which have a similar function, in the course of a 50-minute class. Undoubtedly, the phrases will not be repeated in succession, but will be used at points where the context allows for their use. With a focus point such as “I will shadow my partner five times during this conversation” the learner will be using the shadowing technique five times, but not in succession, which should help to reinforce this skill along the lines of the distributed practice effect.

Learner Autonomy

The basic premise of learner-centered teaching is that the student is an active participant in the decision-making process of the curriculum of a particular course (Nunan 1988). Learner-centered teaching encourages students to take responsibility for their learning in the classroom, and helps them learn to use strategies outside the classroom, independent of the teacher.

Goal setting has an important role to play in language learning, whether the goal is set by the teacher or by the student. Locke and Latham (1990) point out that it is not as important who chooses the goal as it is the level of difficulty of the goal and the commitment of the individual toward attaining the goal. Although there is not a great deal of evidence that participation in goal setting has an effect on goal commitment (ibid, p. 169), our purpose in encouraging our students to set goals for themselves is to foster independent learners and to assist them with learning strategies that they can use outside of the classroom.

Focus points encourage the student to take control of the learning process by establishing goals that that individual sees as pertinent to making progress in the L2. This is also a technique that self-regulated learners can easily use anywhere and at any time.

Motivation

Nunan (1999) lists the “lack of perception of progress” as one factor that leads to unmotivated students (p. 233). Students who have a record of their successes over time will become more confident learners and will develop a sense of ownership over their own learning process. There is evidence that showing “low-achieving” learners how to set short-term goals has beneficial effects on “their sense of cognitive efficacy, their academic achievement, and their intrinsic interest in the subject matter” (Bandura & Shunk in Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons 1992). Dornyei (1994) also suggests that the satisfaction learners feel from attaining their goals contributes to their intrinsic interest and that “attainable subgoals can also serve as an important vehicle in the

development of the students' self-confidence and efficacy" (p. 276).

Learning Strategies

Learning strategy research has included goal setting, or organizational planning (Oxford 1990, O'Malley and Chamot 1990), as an activity that can enhance a student's progress in language study. Most information for learners that includes goal setting focuses on long- and short-term goals (see Rubin and Thompson 1982), but does not give learners a method by which they can judge their own progress on a specific communication feature during one study period. In addition, the use of focus points entails other learning strategies such as Self-Monitoring, Rewarding Yourself, and Self-Evaluating, which will be discussed further in the next section.

Feedback/Self-Assessment

Many teachers and researchers see self-assessment in language learning as "an important supplement to teacher assessment" (Nunan 1988, p. 116) as it "prompts learners to begin making links between important links in the educational chain; for example, between their communicative goals and the grammatical and structural means of achieving those goals" (Nunan 1999, p. 193). Thomson states that self-assessment "involves learners to a much higher degree in learning than any prescribed learning" (quoted in Gardner and Miller 1999, p. 205).

In addition to the self-assessment aspect, focus points provide immediate feedback at the end of a set period of time (e.g. at the end of a task, or at the end of one class period) and fulfill one of the requirements for effective goal setting indicated by Locke and Latham (1990).

Students' self-assessment of their focus points can be used as part of an ongoing process of student assessment through the use of focus point charts. A bar chart showing progress over the semester broken down into focus areas such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency, listening, conversational phrases or conversational strategies—such as extending the conversation, using body language/facial expressions, or shadowing—could be included in assessment at the end of a semester or course.

Practical Application

I have used goal setting with a group of first-year university English majors, starting them off with long-term goals. At the beginning, students who have never set goals for themselves tend to have high expectations of what they can accomplish in one year. We brainstormed these as they related to the reasons why they were studying English. Many wanted to travel, study, or work abroad. Others wanted to use English in their careers here in Japan. Almost all said they would need to use English in some capacity in the future.

These freshmen were then asked what they planned to do to accomplish those goals. As with many language learners, perhaps until now their language learning has been primarily teacher-driven, or rather exam-driven, with little opportunity for

self-reflection. Thus, consideration of the steps involved in eventually achieving their long-range goals proved to be rather confusing for them.

After breaking down their long-term goals into interim goals, they began to focus on specific things they would like to work on during one 50-minute class period. Their first attempts at writing specific speaking goals produced phrases such as, “I will speak like a native speaker,” which did not specifically address problems of pronunciation, grammar, fluency or any other aspect and therefore was too broad. “I will speak with correct grammar” was also too broad in that there are so many grammatical categories the students may have problems achieving this in one lesson

Through trial and error, discussion with partners and the teacher, clearer goals began to emerge, goals such as “Start the conversation from me,” “I will write down three new vocabulary words” and “Give my opinion three times.” The means toward communicative competency are not limited to grammar and vocabulary, but include paralinguistic features, which are often overlooked in the EFL classroom. Students also set their focus points on nonverbal aspects of communication such as “I will make eye contact with my partner five times this class” or “I will use the ‘quotation gesture’ⁱⁱ once during this class.”

Recorded conversations

Focus points were combined with recorded conversations between students. During class on Friday, students would pair up and make recorded conversations. They would then take the tapes home and listen to them, often completing a task such as “Listen to any 10-minute section of your conversation and observe the way you responded to your partner. Are there any other ways you could have responded? How would this have made the conversation better/worse? Write down your observations.” Another use of the tapes was so that the students could observe their own speaking abilities and decide what aspect they would like to improve during the next week. From these observations they then created a focus point for Monday’s class. For example, when listening to the recording of the previous Friday, if a student hears herself say, “My father work at a tire company” and she realizes she has omitted the third person “s,” she can write this down as one of her goals for the following week as “I will pronounce the ‘s’ when it is necessary.” Yet this may also be too broad. The student can then adjust the goal to be even more specific. Perhaps the focus point becomes “I will use 3 sentences that require the 3rd person ‘s’ and I will pronounce it clearly.” By adding “during one 5-minute conversation,” the student has a specific, attainable, and challenging goal.

In the first semester, students wrote comments about their focus point efforts in their Action Logs, a type of learner diary (Woo and Murphey 1999). Many small successes were reported, as these examples of actual student comments show:

Today I could reach my goals. I found that when I see partner’s eyes, our conversation become more interesting than before. I knew eye contact is very important for conversation. - Chihiroⁱⁱⁱ

I could reach my goal. I could speak using wider intonation and I also could speak more fluently than before! - Tomoyuki

Even comments that expressed frustration also demonstrated critical self-evaluation and the possibility of a future goal:

I couldn't reach my goal. When I try to say shadowing, I let say something to interruptings. Especially I let say 'Ah, yes!' so many times. I try to speak more shadowings and other agreements. - Aki

After certain conversations, or sometimes at the end of class, the students worked in pairs to discuss whether or not they had reached their goal. If they had, they reviewed the strategies they used to do it. If not, they discussed how they might have approached it differently. This offers the teacher the chance to raise new strategies that the learners may not have considered.

At the same time, students were encouraged to give themselves rewards for reaching their goals. For example, a student who completed a series of focus points over a week's time wrote in her Action Log that because she attained her goals, she enjoyed a relaxing hour at a coffee shop. Other students purchased books or magazine, or gave themselves other simple forms of rewards such as stickers on their focus point charts.

Overly-simplistic/unrealistic goals

Once we spent some time working to make the focus points specific, few students wrote overly simplistic goals. Goals such as "Enjoy the class" and "Keep up with the class" served as an opportunity to ask the student for further clarification of such terms as "enjoy." The student may have meant to convey the idea of relaxing when s/he might otherwise be nervous speaking. If this is the case, then the goal might be "I will check my physical condition three times during this conversation and will take a deep breath if I find that I am anxious or nervous." Students who appear to have put little effort into their goals may not know the right words to indicate their meaning. These can be addressed as a class, in groups or pairs, or individually.

Teachers should observe the goals regularly. "Because goal success is more frequent when goals are easy, it means that easy goals produce more satisfaction than hard goals" (Locke and Latham 1994, p. 22). Locke and Latham, among others (see Young 1991), offer some possible solutions:

1. Set moderate goals so that the net total of satisfaction and productivity is maximized.
2. Give credit for partial goal attainment, rather than only for goal success.
3. Apply the Japanese principle of *Kaizen* or continuous improvement (Imai, 1986). Make goals moderately difficult at any given time, but insist on constantly raising the goals by small amounts (Locke and Latham 1994, p. 22).

Likewise, students whose goals reflect unrealistic expectations may be setting themselves up for disappointment. Kitano observes that that when students realize their actual level is far below their target goal, they may then have a negative perception of their ability and this gap may become a source of anxiety (2001, p. 559).

If complete student control over the goals is not feasible, then teacher-directed category control is possible, for example, "So, today's topic is the effects of smoking on

health, and I thought we'd work a bit on vocabulary building. I'd like you to choose four or five words from the passage you've read that you wouldn't normally use in a conversation. During today's class you're going to have several short conversations about smoking. I'd like you to try to use the words at least once in each of your conversations. As you go along, make a note (mentally or on paper) how many times you were able to use the words naturally." As discussed above, it does not matter who chooses the goal as long as the learners agree to commit to it. The teacher—or better yet the students—should also plan some form of reward for those who achieve their goal.

Finally, in order to reinforce the progress learners make on individual days, at regular intervals the teacher can suggest a review class during which students concentrate on focus points they have performed successfully in the past.

Conclusion

The focus point technique encourages learner awareness of communication features that are not currently part of their interlanguage system, including paralinguistic features. It adds to the development of learner autonomy and of critical self-evaluation skills. The results of individual focus point achievement can be used as part of an ongoing process of student assessment through the use of a focus point chart. Students can review their own progress and develop self-reward systems for reaching their goals. Teachers should address overly-simplistic goals, and offer alternatives to those who have trouble such as accepting partial success, or creating goals that are somewhat difficult but expecting the standard to be raised in increments. This technique should be coupled with strategy training if necessary. If the learner does not immediately reach the goal, a review of the strategies used might offer some insight into how to achieve the goal in a future attempt by using a different strategy.

Giving students the tools they need to become successful language users is the goal of language teachers everywhere. The use of focus points is one of those tools.

RESOURCES

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Appendix

My focus point for today is:

Double check:

1- can you do it in 45 minutes?

2- do you have the resources / knowledge to do it?

3- do you know how you will go about doing it? (i.e. what's your plan of attack or strategy?)

4- about how much effort will you need to do it? Are you willing to put forth that effort?

5- what is the value for you in reaching this goal?

ⁱ “Existing resources” is a term Stevick prefers over long term memory. See (Stevick 1993, p. 9).

ⁱⁱ The “quotation gesture” is one native speakers use by curving down the index and middle fingers of upheld hands, imitating quotation marks. Students have asked the significance of this gesture and have indicated interest in using it themselves.

ⁱⁱⁱ Students' names are pseudonyms.