Past, present and future: Goal setting, imagery and reflection in L2 and general study contexts

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1. Introduction

Student achievement in second language (L2) education is influenced by a number of factors. These include ability, effort, persistence, motivation, time and study management, and self-regulation. The setting of goals, from short-term to long-term, can direct the learning process, while reflection can encourage student awareness of their own effort, practices, and achievements. As John Dewey (1916) noted one hundred years ago, people do not simply learn from experiences, but rather from reflecting on experiences and making backward and forward connections between events. In other words, it is '⋯the learner's involvement with the event that constitutes the learning experience' (Boud & Walker, 1990, p.78). Thus, both goal setting and reflection may function as powerful mechanisms to promote learning at any level.

The L2 portfolio has been put forward as an educational tool to enhance students' skills related to both reflection and goal setting. In addition, portfolios may also contain evidence of student achievement and progress. Thus the L2 portfolio provides a means to actively engage students in the practical use and application of goal setting, reflective thinking and

to promote autonomous learning in a manageable format. However, the portfolio approach also has the potential to engage learners not only in the language learning process, but also by applying these concepts across subject areas.

Drawing on second language acquisition (SLA) and mainstream education and psychology research, this article explores theories and concepts associated with goal setting, visualization of future selves and reflection. It concludes with a discussion of issues that are arising as two preliminary reflection and goal setting pilot activities are being conducted at a small private university in Japan.

2. Goals and motivation

Goals and motivation are closely entwined, and goals often feature as a key component of motivation theories. Goals can initiate motivation and direct students through their learning by first establishing desired outcomes, and consequently working toward achieving them. Research has focused in particular on goal setting, goal orientation and the nature of goals.

Goal-setting theory is based on the premise that conscious goals affect action, whereby goals are defined as an object or an aim to obtain a specific proficiency within a certain time (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 1). The theory originated in the world of business and management, and remains the predominant model used by researchers in organizational psychology (Skinner, 2002, p.145). As a goal theory, its main sphere of influence is extrinsic motivation, although the idea of commitment, which refers to carrying out an action until it is completed, is related to intrinsic motivation.

Goal-orientation theory was proposed by Pintrich and Schunk (1996) to

explain children' s motivation in educational settings. The theory combines aspects of other theories including goals, perceived ability, and achievement behavior (Yates & Yates, 1996, p.1). Three types of goals are defined in goal orientation theory, namely:

　i. 　Task-specific or target goals (performance orientation)

　ii. 　General goals (personal or happiness orientation)

　iii. 　Achievement goals (mastery orientation)

Mastery goals focus on learning for interest and achievement. They are possibly a stronger long-term motivating force than performance goals, which are often short-term in nature. However, students may hold a belief in a mixture of the two, especially in an educational setting, and both types can be a motivating influence in the classroom (Schunk, 1995, p.313). Skill learning and self-improvement often lead to a mastery orientation, while comparisons of performance and ability lead to a performance orientation. Brophy (1999, p.3) states that while we know a lot about motivation in achievement situations such as an educational setting we know less about activities with no clear goals, which are often intrinsic and involve lifelong or sustained engagement.

It is also important to acknowledge that student motivation and goals are constructed within social and cultural contexts. *Goal content* may be social or academic in nature, and while the reasons for integrating the two are not clear, research indicates that '…academic competence is facilitated by combinations of social and academic goals' (Wentzel, Baker & Russell, 2012, p.606). Thus, it is not surprising that educational goals typically focus on the development of both social and academic competencies.

3. Goal setting and possible selves

Goals are by their nature future oriented, thus students are projecting

images of a future self as they set goals. The theory of possible selves was put forward by Markus and Nurius (1986) and later applied to L2 motivation research by Dörnyei (2005, 2009). We may not always think of the future in positive terms, thus future visions of possible selves can be both positive and negative in nature, and relate to what we might become, what we could become and what we are afraid of becoming. Whereas the *hoped for self* or *ideal L2 self* tend to align with hopes and motivation leading to performance and states that are positively evaluated, the *feared self* is associated with avoidance-type behavior. This self aims to decrease the likelihood of becoming the type of person one does not wish to become. Dörnyei (2005, p.103) adds the concept of an *ought-to L2 self*, a self-influenced and guided by duties, obligations or responsibilities. A manifestation of the ought-to L2 self can be seen in Japanese students studying English. They often feel they have to learn English, no matter whether their future career aspirations require English skills or not, because it is expected of young people living in an increasingly globalized world.

Future time perspective (FTP), or the mental representation of the future, is constructed by individuals and thus forms the base of finding, choosing and achieving goals (Leondari, 2007, p.18). In particular, instrumentality and value influence the choices people make when embarking on an action. Many students have career aspirations in secondary school, which change and evolve over time. These changes can occur not only through internal sources, for example individual characteristics and belief in one's own abilities, but also through social and familial pressure, socio-economic status and experienced opportunities (Schoon, 2001).

4. Past experiences and reflection

While the setting of goals is clearly linked to the future dimension, the past dimension plays an equally important role as ideas and goals for the future are born of past experiences. Both successes and failures may have positive and negative effects on future choices. For example, success in the past may result in the confidence to succeed in the next task in the future. On the other hand, a negative experience may incline individuals to make sure the experience is not repeated, or may lead to reluctance to attempt similar tasks in the future. However, experiencing failure can also set students on the path to success by enhancing the development of the necessary skills or strategies to overcome challenges. In other words, the ways individuals process past experiences, and the causes they attribute to successes and failures are key components impacting any decisions regarding future goals and expected successes.

Regular reflection throughout the stages of the learning journey toward the attainment of the goals is vital. Reflection is an essential tool in dissecting successes or failures, and encouraging reflective thinking can help students engage in the learning process while at the same time taking responsibility of their own learning. In recent years there has been a shift toward asking students to monitor and reflect on their own learning development and achievements. As discussed in the previous sections, goal setting, visions of future selves and self-regulated learning coupled with an awareness of how experiences are explained and analyzed by individuals are all crucial factors that can affect academic achievement and future career aspirations.

Students may approach the task of thinking about experiences and reflection in a number of ways. *Attribution theory* investigates the perception of causality and how the mind explains behavior and outcomes.

It is often used in educational settings as a means of explaining a student' s reaction to achievement outcomes (Weiner, 1994, p.3). The seminal work, written by Heider in 1958 distinguished between the ideas of 'can' versus 'try' or in other words ability versus effort (Weiner, 1972, p.204). Attribution theory is built on this distinction, focusing on achievement - how we interpret events and how this relates to our thinking and behavior and in turn how this affects achievement motivation. In language learning, this theory can give an insight into how students attribute their success or failure to ability, context or bad luck (Tremblay & Gardner 1995, p.4; Seifert, 1996, p.3).

When students set goals, it is important for them to believe that they can succeed. *Self-efficacy theory* was suggested by Albert Bandura in the late 1980s. The theory revolves around the belief that behavior is guided by the self as an agent regarding the anticipation of goals, intention, forethought, self-reactiveness, self-reflectiveness and fortuity, therefore affecting motivation (Bandura, 2001, pp. 1-11). Self-efficacy theory proposes that '…people are the agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences' (Bandura, 2001, p.4), and consequently individuals are also held responsible for their own learning. Self-efficacy is also the confidence a person has for their capability to achieve levels of performance that can influence their lives and '…it is not simply a matter of how capable one is, but how capable one believes oneself to be' (Pajares, 2002, p.8). Self-efficacy is closely linked to motivation, as a sense of achievement in the past can drive motivation in the present by influencing not only the initial choice of activities and the effort made, but also emotional reactions to accomplishments or failure.

Self-worth theory relates to the ability of an individual to have control over experience in order to achieve self-determination. At its base is a

belief that society equates worth or success with ability, therefore low ability or failure equals low worth. For example students who believe their failure in learning an L2 is due to lack of effort are likely to increase effort if the goal warrants it, whereas those who believe their lack of achievement is due to low ability tend to give up eventually (Martin, Marsh, Williamson & Debus, 2003; Seeratan, 2002). Students' self-worth is at risk from an early age in environments where examination-oriented learning and comparisons with peers dominate, and they tend to respond to challenges to their self-worth and competence by engaging a protective mechanism. This may take the shape of blaming poor results on lack of effort or outside factors rather than acknowledging a lack of ability (Seifert, 1996, p.2). For example, Japanese students of English often blame their lack of ability in communicative English on the schooling/examination system. For practical application of this theory in the L2 classroom, the students must first discover what kind of beliefs they hold about their language ability, before being asked to reflect on their experiences or to set goals.

5. Strategies

The combination of goal setting, reflection, self-awareness, beliefs about ability, and visualization of future selves can form an important strategy which could be utilized in schools and universities. The choosing and setting of goals, however, should not consist of haphazard guesses. A number of factors need to be taken into consideration. Goals should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time bound (SMART) in nature (Doran; Miller & Cunningham, 1981). Moreover, goals need to be challenging but within the students' capabilities (Dörnyei, 2001; Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). If students are encouraged to be active participants in the goal setting process, autonomy

may also be promoted. In terms of behavior, simply telling people to do their best has been shown to be less motivating than having them find and set their own goals or providing set goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). Furthermore, the setting of goals is also correlated with improved success rates (Latham & Locke, 2007). Finally, goals should be meaningful, as there needs to be an emotional connection between the task and each individual desire to achieve success.

Combining goal setting, task identification and planning, and visualization techniques can promote the formation of future selves. Activities may commence with the creation of a vision, followed by an assessment of the possibility and reasons for the vision. This may be followed by goal setting strategies, leading to achievement and development of identity as set out in Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013). Mental imagery is an effective strategy often used by athletes and coaches to '…enhance learning, performance, and self-efficacy' (Gregg, Hall, McGowan, & Hall, 2011, p.129). The implementation of visualization techniques and goal setting techniques based on Dörnyei's L2 Motivation Self System was also found to raise the confidence of students in an L2 environment (Magid, 2014) . Thus, the creation of programs using these strategies can be of benefit in a number of areas ranging from sport to language study.

6. L2 portfolios

Portfolios provide a means of promoting student engagement in the learning process. Students are asked to think about and establish clear objectives, identify concrete means of accomplishing them, and to evaluate their skills. While completing these tasks, students are encouraged to reflect on any successes and failures as they move closer to or further away from their set goals, thus providing a record of the learning process.

A number of portfolios have been designed for language learners. The European Language Portfolio (ELP), for example, is a personal document in which the learner records language learning goals and achievements and cultural experiences in three sections: language biography, dossier and language passport. It is important to note that each ELP is designed for different types of learners and languages, and at present 51 full portfolios can be downloaded from the ELP portal website (ELP portal, 2014). There are two American versions of the ELP; the LinguaFolio is designed for elementary and secondary language programs, while the Global Language Portfolio is aimed at tertiary-level programs. Portfolios have also been developed to cater for specialized career choices using languages. The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL), aimed at pre-service language teachers, is designed to encourage students studying to be language teachers to reflect on their knowledge and on the skills required to teach languages, to promote self-assessment and self-monitoring of progress and to reflect and record experiences throughout the duration of their course (Newby, Allan, Fenner, Jones, Komorowska & Soghikyan, 2007).

Research has demonstrated the portfolio to be a high quality learning tool which can assist the language learning process in formal learning environments. Positive results have been reported related to the promotion of goal setting skills, investment and student autonomy, and improved levels of achievement and skills related to reflective thinking and communication. For example, Ziegler and Moeller (2012) found the use of the LinguaFolio to be linked to increased intrinsic motivation and task value, and also resulted in more accurate student self-assessment in terms of learning. Furthermore, research by Clarke (2013) suggests that students whose L2 study included the LinguaFolio also showed improved performance in

other subjects. Self-evaluation may assist learners by raising their level of awareness regarding the learning process through the monitoring of the progress toward their goals and thus promoting autonomy. In addition, when the ELP portfolio is a central part of the language learning process, it can offer a dynamic reflection of an individual's language learning journey (Little & Erickson, 2015, p.125).

Teacher involvement is an essential part of goal setting and portfolio activities. The teacher or study advisor can clarify goals and ambitions, assist in the construction of workable plans, and offer feedback. The ability of the advisor to ascertain students' strengths, goals, and attributions early on may aid students in making appropriate or realistic plans and '⋯learn to interpret failure in ways that facilitate success rather than inducing panic and abandonment of their goals' (Pizzolato, 2007, p. 221). Thus, the use of any type of portfolio requires communication between the students and the teachers or study advisors, and any type of portfolio must form an integral part of individual language programs to be effective.

The portfolio approach has also been garnering attention in the Japanese EFL context in recent years. A Japan Association of Language Teachers Special Interest Group (JALT SIG) designed a language portfolio (LP) for Japanese university students in 2009 (O'Dwyer, Naganuma, Atobe, Horiguchi, Imoto, Nagai, & Sato, 2010). Individual teachers also began to use the ELP approach in their own classes and described the implementation; ideas and suggestions of how an ELP can be implemented in a university level English class are offered by O'Dwyer (2011). Certain aspects of language portfolios have also been introduced into English language programs in Japan. For example, can-do statements are used in some language programs (O'Dwyer et al., 2010) while EIKEN has also published a *can-do list* to inform potential test takers of the language skills targeted at

each level (EIKEN can-do list, 2015). Reflective activities are also conducted at various levels. In elementary school foreign language activity classes, *furikaeri cards* (振り返りカード) are sometimes used by students to write comments about each class. Learner histories have been used successfully at the university level, encouraging students to become more reflective and at the same time increasing investment and identity building (Murphey, Chen & Chen, 2005).

The EPOSTL has been adapted to the Japanese L2 context as the Japanese *Portfolio for Student Teachers of Language* (J-POSTL). Developed by the Japan Association of College English teachers (JACET) English Education Special Interest Group (SIG) in 2010 and finalised in 2014, it consists of separate versions: one for pre-service and one for in-service teachers. The success of this portfolio is dependent on whether relevant stakeholders including practitioners and policy makers are consulted, and accept the portfolio as a valuable learning tool and are further prepared to actively engage in the implementation process (Hisamura, 2014).

The implementation of portfolios can be challenging. Research suggests any type of ELP introduced in Japan would have to be sufficiently flexible in order for diversity and autonomy to be retained among the teaching staff (Atobe, Horiuchi & Imoto cited in O' Dwyer et al., 2010). While can-do statements are indicators that allow learners to assess their own progress, problems have occurred in terms of statements being ambiguous, students overestimating their language skills, and preference for teacher-based assessment (Atobe, Horiuchi & Imoto cited in O' Dwyer et al., 2010). Recent studies (see Kiyota, 2015; Takagi, 2015) reporting the actual use of the J-POSTL suggests that the portfolio is of value in education courses, but requires careful consideration of how different sections are explained and implemented.

7. Issues arising from preliminary results of two pilot activities

Research has shown that the positive benefits of an L2 portfolio may also extend to other subjects. In order to ascertain how a group of university students would respond to goal setting, reflection and self-analysis tasks related to their studies in general, two activities, one focusing on reflection and the other on goal setting, were designed and subsequently implemented during weekly meetings with the study advisor at a small private university in the Kanto region. Ultimately, the results of the activities will be used to inform the design of a portfolio which combines L2 study, major course areas and career preparation for university students. The second year students (N=34) were asked to complete the first activity at the end of Semester 1, 2015, while the second activity was implemented from Semester 2, 2015, and is still ongoing.

In the first activity, the students were asked to reflect on their achievements in Semester 1. A number of issues became apparent as the students completed this activity. First of all, when asked to reflect on Semester 1, many students simply described what they did or didn't do in the semester, while others wrote very little. This reaction seemed to suggest that the students did not really understand how to go about this type of activity in spite of the explanation conducted prior to the task. A similar result regarding reflection activities is described in Gunn (2010). It is acknowledged that some students were also reluctant to write a reflection, as they felt it was a personal and private task and not one to be completed in class and submitted to the study advisor. Secondly, while discussing the reflection activity with students, there was also a sense that writing a reflection was associated with soul searching about failure or wrongdoings. While the term hansei was not used to explain this reflection activity, a number of students felt that this activity was similar to a *hanseibun,* an

essay in which students are asked to reflect on their actions. While *hansei* has a similar meaning to reflection, the word and phrases associated with it have ' …an overtone of self-criticism measured against the yardstick of socially defined norms of behavior and emotions' (Irwin Fukusawa, 1998, p.308). While the aim of the reflection activity was to think deeply about their learning experience, it thus seems that the associations of the word 'reflection' contained a cultural bias, and were in fact negative at the outset of the activity. In consequence, any reflection activity requires the students to internalize that the aim of this type of activity is to aid their learning and journey of self-discovery, and not a means of confessing any wrongdoing.

The second activity comprises a portfolio-style handout to set short-term, mid-term and long-term goals for Semester 2 and their remaining two years of university study, also being implemented during weekly scheduled classes with the study advisor. For the short term goals, the semester was divided into three, five-week blocks, and the students were asked to set goals for each block. The students are then asked to reflect on their learning experiences once the time block is completed. The same process will be completed for the mid-term and long-term goals.

A number of issues related to this activity are also emerging. In general, students tend to set the achievement of qualifications as mid-term or long-term goals. For example, students wrote the names and levels or scores of IT and English related qualifications, however, in many cases this did not include a concrete explanation of how they would achieve these goals apart from simply stating 'I will study toward/take the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)' or 'I will get a TOEIC score of 600'. Students thus need to be encouraged to consider and envision the steps required to be able to achieve each goal. Furthermore, the choice of goals

also reflects the importance allotted to examinations and qualifications by both the institution and the students, which is in turn fuelled by their use as a gate-keeping function by companies seeking to employ new graduates.

While lead-up activities were conducted prior to the goal setting session, possibly more time and discussion is required to prepare the students properly for this activity. In terms of the mid-term and long-term goals, it is clear that the majority of students at this stage of their university study had not formed a clear career aim, and often simply wrote 'work using English' or 'work in the IT industry' . It is therefore essential that career-related guidance is available to all students to assist them on defining and working toward their career-related goals. As for the short-term goals, course attendance, completion of set tasks and working toward taking a qualification were common goals among the cohort. Similar to the result of the reflection activity completed in Semester 1, students are still unsure of how to reflect on their experiences and analyse their own strengths and weaknesses once each time block has been completed.

The initial findings from the two activities described above indicate that the introduction of a portfolio requires a carefully designed preparation period. During this period, students need to be taught goal setting and reflection skills. Furthermore students need to have a clear understanding of what the tasks involve, and internalize the importance of the learner contribution toward their own learning journey at university. In conclusion, while the preliminary results add to the body of existing research regarding portfolios, the activities themselves are contributing toward raising the awareness of goal setting and reflection in the cohort.

8. Conclusion

Research clearly indicates that setting goals and reflecting on our

experiences are key components of the learning process at any educational level. Nevertheless, the implementation of activities, programs or portfolios related to these concepts must be approached with care. As the preliminary results of the two pilot activities indicate, the active stakeholders in the process must clearly understand goal setting, imagery, descriptors and reflection, and the concepts that underpin them. In addition, it must be established whether the intended users possess sufficient strategies to manage set tasks in order to be able to complete them effectively. Finally, any successful implementation of the above as an educational tool in the L2 or general context depends on whether the stakeholders, including teachers, students and policy makers, truly see their value and benefit.

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