

The 2016 PanSIG Journal

Innovations in Education



Edited & Published by JALT PanSIG

Proceedings Editor-in-Chief

Gavin Brooks

Doshisha University

Layout and Design by

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Helping Students to Develop Skills for Setting and Achieving Goals

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This paper explores the process of helping students to develop skills for setting and carrying out goals in their academic and non-academic life. It may be of interest to researchers and teachers working in the areas of developing learner autonomy and critical thinking. The paper offers several learning activities that students have used successfully to carry out goals such as sports success, overseas study, raising TOEIC scores, and other personal goals. The learning activities are divided into two distinct groups: setting goals and carrying out goals.

この論文は生徒が学術あるいは非学術時における人生の目標を定めたり達成したりする為のスキルを得る際のプロセスを探るものです。学習者が自主的かつ客観的な考えを持つ為の方法を探っている研究者や教育者にとっては興味深いと思われる。この論文は生徒がスポーツにおける成功、留学、TOEICの得点を上げる、その他個人的な目的を達成できるよう幾つかの学習アクティビティーが。このアクティビティーはゴールの設定と達成の2つの異なった分野に分かれています。

Much has been written about the importance of learner-autonomy (e.g. Pemberton, Li, Or, & Pierson, 1996). There has also been growing awareness of the need for students to develop better critical thinking skills in both the ESL classroom and across the whole curriculum (Atkinson, 1997; “Critical thinking essential”, 2016). More recently, influential educators are calling for greater personalization, creativity, and relevant skills to be integrated into education to engage and support a generation of young people who have grown up with computers and do not engage well with traditional curricula (e.g. Robinson & Aronica, 2015).

It is clear that personalized learning activities which promote learner autonomy and critical thinking are useful for language education in Japan, yet there has been little discussion of how this kind of activity can be integrated into classes. In this paper, we offer

some learning activities and ideas. More specifically, we focus on learning activities for setting and achieving goals because we believe that this promotes autonomy, critical thinking, personalization, useful real-world skills, and creativity. In accord with Robinson’s encouragement to bring creativity into education (Robinson & Aronica, 2015), we use many stories in our teaching, and so we will begin by sharing a story which offers a useful metaphor for our work.

A Metaphor

Once upon a time there was a rather frazzled hare that was always running round, constantly stressed yet really not getting much done at all. Eventually, a friend recommended a good therapist who happened to be a tortoise and who was highly-regarded for helping people to both relax *and* to be more productive.

The hare sat down with the tortoise (this was rather difficult to arrange because the hare was not good at sitting still and kept challenging the tortoise to a rematch of some race held long ago) and the tortoise was finally able to ask the important question, “What

Cullen, B., & Backwell, B. (2017). Helping students to develop skills for setting and achieving goals. In G. Brooks (Ed.), *The 2016 PanSIG Journal* (pp. 71-80). Tokyo, Japan: JALT.

do you want?”

“What do you mean, ‘what do I want?’”, said the hare. “I just want to stop these problems and worries and slow down.”

“I see, and when you have solved all your problems and worries, and you are able to slow down, what do you want?”

“I don’t understand,” said the hare. “I don’t know what I want and even if I did, I am never able to get what I want.”

“Ah,” said the tortoise. “I think that may be the real problem. If you were able to learn how to identify what you want and then learn how to really achieve those goals, do you think that would be useful?”

“But can someone actually learn skills to set and achieve goals?” asked the hare.

And you are probably curious about how the story ends, and it’s good to be curious because like our students, that probably means that you are interested in what comes next. We will come back to that story later. In the meantime, we would like to briefly discuss the importance of goals and goal-setting.

The Importance of Goals

The ability to set and achieve meaningful goals in our lives is one of the primary determinants of our happiness and success. Sir Ken Robinson, an internationally recognized leader in the field of education, creativity, innovation, and human potential has been viewed on TED talks by more than 40 million people. Robinson (2015) argues that there are four core purposes of education: personal, cultural, social and economic: “As I see it, the aims of education are to enable students to understand the world around them and the talents within them so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens”(p. xvii). Robinson believes that of these four important purposes of education the single most important is the personal. His education revolution “is based on a belief in the value of the individual, the right to self-determination, our potential to evolve and live a life fulfilled”(p.xvii). In other words the true purpose of education is to help each student become the person they want to become.

One powerful way to bring this kind of self-

determination in the classroom is to teach our students real-world skills for setting and achieving goals, skills that can be used far beyond their current classes. As teachers, we can do something to help students achieve their own goals, either academic or non-academic, and help them lead a life moving towards potential and fulfillment. Below, we introduce some of the learning activities which we have developed and tested extensively with students over the last five years.

Our learning activities are divided into 2 types:

1. Identifying worthwhile, exciting goals and
2. Learning the skills, attitudes and knowledge to actually take sustainable action and achieve the goal.

The learning activities follow a task-based learning approach (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2008). Students’ goals are self-chosen and self-concordant, therefore the tasks are personally meaningful and intrinsically motivating.

Again following the thinking of Robinson (2015) and other proponents of learning across the curriculum, we take an integrated skills approach by including the four skills of language learning with speaking, listening, reading, and writing into all lessons.

A key point in our learning materials is that they follow the principle of dogme or being content-free (e.g. Thornbury, 2011). Dogme creates personalized learning because students supply the content themselves. In this case, students create the real material of the lessons by inserting their own goals into the structure of the learning activities, thereby generating self-motivation to attend class and be engaged. In this sense students have increased autonomy in their learning and are more likely to mobilize their resources.

It is when students mobilize their own internal and external resources that they really learn. All too often in the classroom, the Ministry of Education, administration, and teachers impose their ideas about what constitutes important topics onto the students and then “motivate” them with the threat of a test. In our approach, however, the situation is reversed. Whatever is important to the student is the most important thing. If a student wants to focus on soccer then soccer is the most important thing. If another

student wants to focus on their TOEIC score then this is the most valued topic. From our experience, when teachers take this approach then the students see that the teachers value what is important to students, and in turn the students start to give the teachers what is important for teachers.

Furthermore, students don't just do the work for their teacher more sincerely. They also listen to other students and work collaboratively with other students at a deeper level because they understand the topic is genuinely important for their classmate. Intrinsic motivation is at the core of our work and success in the classroom. From a student perspective, the difference between wanting to study and being forced to study can be described by the metaphor: "Do you want to be chased by a tiger or do you want to chase a beautiful butterfly?"

Goals of Learning Materials

We used the following learning materials with university students at three different universities with first, second, and third year students. Using the TOEIC test as a measure of language proficiency, these students were spread over a wide range from as low as 350 to as high as 900. The smallest class size was 7 students and the largest was 32 students. The two main goals of our course were:

1. Improve students' English using a four-skills task-based approach, which is personalized and intrinsically motivating.
2. Help students to develop and use skills in setting and achieving goals.

Our lessons are based on the structure shown below. These are designed to cover approximately one semester of work in a university class.

In the next two sections, we will focus on the two important areas of goal setting and goal achievement. There are examples of these activities in the appendices which show how to scaffold and integrate them into lessons.

Setting Goals: Sample Activities

We teach a series of three lessons designed to help students to identify and set goals effectively. These activities are our own original materials with some

influence from traditional coaching tools.

1. Dream

Students learn to think about their dreams in useful ways that bring fantasies closer to reality. The key point is that it is important to have a dream and the key question is: How motivated are you to achieve your dream?

2. The Wheel of Life

Students learn and practice a great tool called the Wheel of Life. They use this to consider all the important areas of their lives, how to keep them in balance, and how to identify goals in each area. An example is given below.

3. Make Clear Goals

Students learn and practice the SPECIFY model, a tool for setting goals that are measurable and achievable. This builds on the earlier learning activities as they gradually learn and practice skills to become more clear and specific in their aspirations. An example of the SPECIFY process is given below.

The Wheel of Life

Too often, we are like the hare in the story of the tortoise and the hare, running from place to place, trying to solve problems. The Wheel of Life is a great tool for helping students to take an inventory of the current state of different areas of their life and then later to use this to identify goals in these areas. Figure 1 shows the eight areas representing the different areas of life: Career, Amour, Money, Personal Development, Health, Environment, Relationships, and Enjoyment.

To use the Wheel of Life, students simply work with a partner to identify the level of satisfaction in each area. Below is the basic exchange between students using The Wheel of Life. We wrote simple model sentences on the board and the students used them to carry their own conversations. The higher-level students were able to expand considerably on the basic language. We also modelled the process with a demonstration in front of the class.

- A: How satisfied are you in the area of "Career"?
 B: About 70%.
 A: I see. 70%.



Figure 1. The Wheel of Life.

As can be seen, the language used is relatively simple and students record the answer by writing a simple percentage. For example, a student might rate the area of health at 80% and money at 50%.

In the second part of the activity, students are asked to identify two or more areas that they would like to change. For example, they might want to change their level of satisfaction in the area of money. Again we practiced simple supporting language before the activity.

Example:

- A: Which two areas would you like to change?
 B: Money and health.
 A: I see. Money is at 50%. What would you like to change it to?
 B: I'd like to change it to 90%
 A: 90%. I see.

In the third step, students ask questions like: "what do you need to do to go from 50% to 80%?" This naturally leads to goals emerging from the Wheel of Life activity. There is a fuller transcript of a Wheel of Life activity in Appendix 1.

The SPECIFY Process

Many students start off with rather vague goals, and the purpose of this activity is to help them to set a more specific and achievable goal. For example, "I want to have more money" is vague whereas "I want to earn 20,000 yen more per month" is a much more specified and achievable goal. Other examples of student goals and the areas of Wheel of Life from which they emerged included:

- "Visiting the United States with friends" (*Enjoyment*)
- "To get a good job." (*Career*)
- "To be a person who can give everyone love." (*Amour*)
- "To be down to earth" (*Personal Development*)
- "To live a life with no regrets." (*Enjoyment*)

As can be seen, most of these goals are vaguely stated and can benefit from a process to make them more specific and achievable.

For this, we use the SPECIFY model (Bolstad, 2002). One of the advantages of SPECIFY is that it encourages people to think about additional aspects of their goals such as ecology (how it fits into their life), their resources for achieving the goal, and the first step

that can be taken towards the goal. We find it to be an active model which students quickly learn and use in their own lives.

The key questions for the SPECIFY process are shown in Table 1 and a full transcript of a demonstration is available in Appendix 2.

Achieving Goals

In the section above, we introduced sample activities for helping students to *identify and set goals*. The next step is taking action so that they actually *achieve* these goals. Table 2 shows a list of learning activities to help students to develop these skills.

Below we give one example of how we transform these important concepts into classroom and learning activities.

One important tool we use with our students is the 90 Day Action Plan. This is an activity where students break down a big goal into a list of actions to be taken over the next 90 days. The 90 Day Action plan breaks down bigger goal *and* makes it more immediate and urgent. This urgency in turn boosts energy levels.

Here is a sample action plan for a student who wanted to increase her TOEIC score by 100 points.

1. Find and buy a suitable TOEIC textbook this week.
2. Study from it 3 hours a week.
3. Identify at least 2 TOEIC questions to ask her English teacher each week
4. Take a practice test after the first and second month.
5. Take the real test at the end of the 90 day period and increase her score by 100 points.

The important point about the action plan is setting clear achievable actions and then just like the wise tortoise in the old fable, move slowly and steadily towards achieving these actions. It also makes learning more meaningful and enhances motivation and autonomy. Each week, students are given time to review their actions, outcomes, and any changes to the plan.

As can be seen from the example of the 90 day action plan, we believe that students need support and new skills to achieve their goals. At the start of the course we often see students accelerate quickly towards

their goal. This rate of progress at some point will level off, climb again level off, and climb again. At times students may not feel like they are making progress and therefore other skills, attitudes and knowledge developed in the course include habit analysis. Perhaps more importantly we identify good practices and habits which help us move towards our goal. Such practices included in our book are: practicing an attitude of gratitude, affirmations and visualizations, role model presentations, building a team to support you, and helping others achieve their goals. Finally, throughout the course we share stories with our students. These stories are chosen or designed to offer wisdom and support about working towards goals, and that reminds us of an unfinished story.

Concluding Story

Meanwhile, the tortoise and the hare were still sitting in the tortoise's therapy room where the hare had just said that he didn't know what he wanted or how to get it.

"Ah" said the tortoise. "I think that may be the real problem. If you were able to learn how to identify what you want and then learn how to really achieve those goals, do you think that would be useful to you?"

"But that's not something that can be taught, can it?," said the hare. "I mean, can someone actually learn skills to set and achieve goals?"

And the tortoise said,

"Yes, you can. You can indeed learn to set and achieve goals."

This is what we do with our students, and as the comments in Appendix 3 show, our students love it. Using the ideas presented here, we have found that students are intrinsically motivated to use English as they learn valuable life skills to set and achieve goals. Through a written test, we were able to check that students had memorized the basic steps of the processes and the reports that we assigned to higher level students showed that they were actively applying the tool in their lives. If more people learned how to set and achieve their goals in this way, we believe that it could lead to great positive change in the world, one little goal at a time.

Table 1

SPECIFY Activity Learning Worksheet

Steps	Question	Your Answer
Elicit Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is your goal? 	
1. Sensory-specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What date would you like to achieve it? Imagine achieving your goal. What do you see, hear, and feel? 	
2. Positively stated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the goal positively stated? If not, ask your partner to say it in a positive way. 	
3. Ecological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What will you gain when you achieve your goal? What will you lose? e.g. money, free time. 	
4. Choices increase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does this goal increase your choices? (a good goal increases our life choices) 	
5. Initiated by self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do you need to do to achieve your goal? 	
6. First step	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is your first step? (something you can do today) 	
7. Your resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are your resources? (find at least 4 resources) 	

Table 2

Achieving Goals: Sample Activities

Goal	Sample Activity
1. Take Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students learn about action plans and begin to chunk their goals down into small, scheduled actions. They create a 90 day action plan which can be revisited, revised during the rest of the semester.
2. Learn From Mistakes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students think about their mistakes and identify what they have learned from them. This is an important resiliency strategy to develop as all people face setbacks and make mistakes in achieving their goals.
3. Habits 1: The Outer Game	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students examine their own habits and consider which habits are helpful or unhelpful in achieving their goals. They are encouraged to identify and create new positive habits that support their goals.
4. Habits 2: The Inner Game	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thinking patterns, beliefs, and the ability to use visualization and positive language are all important in achieving goals. Students practice useful techniques and also write a gratitude diary.
5. Role Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students learn about the importance of role models and identify role models who are relevant to their goals.
6. Your Goal and Other People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No-one achieves a goal completely alone. In this section, students learn about different personality types and consider the type of people who are helpful or a hindrance.

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Appendix 1

Wheel of Life Demonstration

- A: I'd like to take you through an activity called the Wheel of Life. And this will help you to look at your whole life and see if each area is in balance.
- So we have these eight areas: career, amour, money, personal development, health, environment, your relationships, and enjoyment. So if we start off in the area of Career. How satisfied are you in the area of Career?
- B: You mean a percentage?
- A: Yes, a percentage. A number from zero to 100 which represents your level of satisfaction. Zero would be completely dissatisfied and 100 would be totally satisfied.
- B: Well, my career is 55%.
- A: 55%, great. And how about in the area of Amour. Amour is a French word that means love.
- B: Amour. I'd say 60%.
- A: 60%. I see. And next, how satisfied are you in the area of money?
- B: I'd say... 75%.
- A: 75%, and what about in the area of personal development.
- B: I would say 80%.
- A: 80%, right. And in the area of Health? What is your level of satisfaction now?
- B: Health... let me see. So getting enough sleep, getting good food, nutrition, exercising enough, all that kind of thing. I'd say 80%.
- A: 80%. Right. And in the area of environment... meaning your house, the places where you live and work. The town or city where you live.
- B: I'd say that needs a bit of work. Maybe 40%.
- A: 40%, great. And in your Relationships... your relationships with the people you work with, your friends, even your family.
- B: I'd say that's pretty good. I'd say 80.
- A: 80. And how about Enjoyment, your overall enjoyment of life.
- B: I'd say 75.
- A: 75%. OK. Thanks. We will come back to that in a minute.
- A: OK, Ben, what I see is that you are 55% satisfied with career, 65% in the area of amour. 75% in money. 80% in Personal Development, 80% in Health. 40% in Environment, 80% in Relationships, and 75% in Enjoyment. Is that right?
- B: That's right. Thank you.

Appendix 2

SPECIFY Demonstration

- A: First of all, we need to hear your goal. What is your goal?
- B: I want to go to Italy. I saw a program on TV last week and it looks so great.
- A: OK. That's great. So the 'S' in SPECIFY stands for Sensory. And the first question is:
What date do you intend to have this goal by?
- B: I will do it by the end of August next year.
- A: Great. That's nice and clear. Now, let's continue with the second part of 'Sensory'.
Put yourself in the situation of having it. Step into your body at that time.
What do you see/hear/feel when you have it?
- B: I see pizza in front of me on the table in Rome. I can smell the pizza. Now I can feel myself picking it up. And wow, it tastes so good. I can hear the people around me speaking Italian. And there are some American tourists speaking English. I feel excited and alive!
- A: What will you say to yourself when you achieve your goal?
- B: "Wow, I did it, I'm in Italy!"
- A: The 'P' in SPECIFY stands for 'Positively Stated'.
Your goal is "I want to go to Italy." That is already positively-stated, so it is fine.
Sometimes people say things like "I don't want to stay at home for my vacation". That is negatively stated.
It could be positively stated as:
"I want to travel during my vacation."
- B: I see, that makes sense.
- A: Right, let's move onto the third step. 'E' stands for 'Ecological'. In other words, does it fit into your whole life well?
- B: OK.
- A: What will you gain?
- B: I will meet interesting people and improve my English.
- A: And what will you lose?
- B: Well, I guess that I will need to spend money and I won't be able to go to my university club so much.
- A: Right. Next step. 'C' stands for Choices Increase. I think this is quite important.
How does this goal increase your choices?
- B: I am able to visit more countries and speak more easily. I think it will also give me confidence in everything.
- A: Just three more steps to go. 'I' stands for 'Initiated by Self'. You've got to take actions yourself, not just wait for other people!
So what do you personally have to do to achieve this goal?
- B: I need to save 150,000 yen or ask my parents to help me financially.
- A: OK, now we are getting down to details, aren't we?
'F' stands for 'First Step'.
What is your first step?
- B: Oh that's easy. I need to get on the Internet today and find plane ticket prices.
- A: Finally, 'Y' stands for 'Your Resources'. Resources include things like time, money, friends, family, the Internet and so on.
What are your resources?
- B: I have time. I have some money. And I can get information on the Internet. And I have my English classes.

Appendix 3

Student Feedback

This student feedback is from second year students at several Japanese universities who used these learning materials in the previous year. We have included this feedback to show how students became very engaged in the learning materials.

- “Thank you very much for teaching me the goal activities. I really think that this class will be the best English class in my life.” Mamoru
- “Your lecture on goals is very important for my job hunting. Every day I felt happy after your classes.” Erina
- “Our course finished 6 months ago but I still use the resilience strategies you taught us. They help me through the difficult days.” Honoka
- “Your class was very interesting and unique that I’ve never had before. Not like normal class at university which is so boring. I loved your teaching style.” Minako