The Effects of Goal Participation on College Students' Self-efficacy and Task Performance in an English Oral Training Class

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Introduction

The theory of self-regulated learning (SRL) has received increasing attention over the past 20 years. Previous researchers have suggested that self-regulated learning is closely related to success in school (Kauffman, 2004; Zimmerman, 1994; Zimmerman 2001). According to self-regulation theory (Zimmerman, 1989; Schunk, 1990), self-regulated learners are active participants in the learning process. They set personal learning goals and apply a wide variety of self-regulatory strategies to reach them.

Goal setting is an effective technique to motivate and increase individual performance (Ames, 1992; Bandura, 1988; Locke & Latham, 1990; Schunk, 1989) and it can significantly enhance students’ self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 1995). Bandura (1993) identifies two main functions of goal setting: (a) to guide learner efforts to monitor
and regulate one’s efforts in a particular direction, and (b) serve as the basis for evaluating one’s performance and intensifying effort or revising the original goals. Achieving one’s goals can enhance an individual’s self-efficacy, i.e., the belief that an individual can master specific situations or tasks that consist of ambiguous or novel elements (Bandura, 1995).

A large body of research evidence shows the benefits of goal setting (Latham & Locke, 2001). Much of the previous research work in this field has involved with 1-12 graders rather than college students, especially the ones with English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It is logical to extend the study into college classrooms to explore how goal setting affects college students’ learning. The purpose of this current study was to examine the effects of goal participation on EFL college students’ self-efficacy and task performance in an English oral training class.

**Literature Review**

Learning motivation, goal setting, action control, and learning strategies played a significant role in their learning performance (Cheng, 2001).

A self-regulated learner starts the learning process by setting a goal. Goal setting is an effective technique to motivate and increase individual performance (Bandura, 1988; Locke & Latham, 1990; Schunk, 1989). Goal setting refers to establishing quantitative or qualitative standards of performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). In terms of the definition of goals, prior studies on the relationships between goal setting and self-efficacy typically have defined goals as performance standards,
such as expected course grades (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992), employee productivity standards (Bandura & Wood, 1989), and number of problems to be solved (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Students with a goal are more likely to experience a sense of efficacy for attaining it and engage in activities they believe will lead to attainment such as attending to instruction, rehearsing information to be remembered, expending effort, and being persistent. Research on goal setting has been directed toward investigation of specific characteristics of goals that contribute to the improvement of performance. For example, researchers have focused on the effects of goal specificity, difficulty level, proximity, feedback on goal attainment and participation on performance.

Review of previous goal setting research indicates that allowing students to set learning goals can result in a high degree of goal commitment, which increases task performance (Locke et al., 1981). In Schunk (1985) study, 30 sixth-grade children who previously had been classified as learning disabled in mathematics received subtraction instruction and practiced over sessions. Some children set performance goals each session, others had comparable goals assigned and children in a third group received the training but did not set or receive goals. The results showed that self-set children judged themselves more confident of attaining their goals at the beginning of each session than did children in the assigned goals condition.

Researchers who are interested in language learning have also found enhancing effects of goal on students' learning of language. Gorsuch (1991) claimed that student self-set goals could be of positive value for a language program in seven areas: (a) They can focus student's
attention on the way they learn, (b) they can focus students' attention on specific skill areas, (c) they can shift responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student, (d) they can give students a sense of control and accomplishment, (e) they can focus students' attention on how they behave in class, (f) they can focus students on learning resources outside the classroom, and (g) they can give the teacher a window on student thinking which may lead to the teacher having insights on curriculum and student learning.

Self-efficacy is a powerful force in the regulation of human behavior (Bandura, 1982). The role of self-efficacy has been extended to the application to teaching and learning situations (Schunk, 1985). In the academic domain, self-efficacy means personal judgment of one's performance capabilities in particular situations or tasks that include ambiguous, stressful, or novel elements. The construct of self-efficacy includes students' judgments about their ability to accomplish certain goals or tasks by their actions in specific situations (Pintrich, 1989). Perceived efficacy can influence motivation. Students with a high self-efficacy feel confident and motivated to work toward a specific goal, while students with a low self-efficacy is not motivated and finds working toward a particular goal very difficult. In addition, students with a high sense of efficacy are more likely to choose difficult tasks, expend greater effort, persist longer, apply appropriate problem-solving strategies on tasks, and have less fear and anxiety regarding tasks than are students with a low sense of efficacy for a task (Schunk, 1989).

A study conducted by Collins (1982) illustrates how self-efficacy beliefs impact achievement behavior. Collins selected students who were high, average, and low in mathematical ability and identified those
students who had high and low mathematical self-efficacy. He found that within each ability group, those students who had high efficacy solved more problems correctly and were willing to redo problems they missed than were students low in self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was more predictive of achievement behavior than the students' actual ability levels. Schunk (1991) also claimed that students who feel more confident in their ability regarding a task are likely to engage their repertoire of strategies and persist in their use than those having no confidence in their competence.

Self-efficacy theory predicts a cyclical interaction between efficacy expectations and performance that can work to an individual's advantage or downfall. Bandura (1982) notes that "judgments of one's capabilities partly determine choice of activities and rate of skill acquisition, and performance mastery, in turn, can boost perceived self-efficacy in a mutually enhancing process" (p. 128). Thus, the students who see themselves as good at math seek out math problems, work on them until they are resolved, and from the success enhance their feelings of being good at math.

Bandura (1988) suggests two components for motivating students' learning. First, teachers need to teach the cognitive skills and tools necessary for students to learn, but along with that teachers must also enhance students' self-efficacy so these skills and tools can be used successfully. According to Bandura (1995), achieving one's goal can enhance an individual's self-efficacy.

Although considerable research on goal setting has been conducted concerning the application of a number of key variables related to goal setting in working settings and schools, there is a lack of investigation
about the effect of goal participation on self-efficacy and task performance of college students with English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Leger (2009) indicated that the development of learners’ speaking skill may be especially challenging at advanced levels in a foreign language setting. In addition, speaking is the one skill that involves a public demonstration of abilities in the classroom, and anxiety has been shown to be more related to speaking than to any other skill (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Learners may have different learning goals and expectations that may affect their willingness to participate in oral activities. As an instructor of English oral training courses at a university in Taiwan, I encountered such a challenge. Oral Training Class students are enrolled in a range of levels; individuals’ expectations toward the course and learning goals are diverse. Most of them are nervous about the course requirements and the oral activities. For many students, a diminished sense of self-efficacy in English has undermined their motivation and academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that students who set their own goals will demonstrate the highest self-efficacy and skills.

Methodology

Participants

Thirty English majors enrolled in an English oral training class were recruited to participate in this study. Sixteen of the students were female and 14 were male. All participants undertook and completed the same class activities throughout the semester. In this study, these stu-
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dents were randomly assigned into one of self-set goal, assigned goal, and no-explicit goal conditions.

Instruments

Instruments used in this study included a self-efficacy scale and an oral proficiency evaluation scale. At the beginning of the semester, the oral proficiency evaluation form was explained in class. The criteria include: (a) Introduction (e.g., begin with effective attention-getter and preview body of speech), (b) Content (e.g., organization and vocabulary), (c) Voice Quality (e.g., volume, intonation, and pronunciation), (d) Body Languages (e.g., gestures and postures), and (e) Conclusion. The oral proficiency evaluation scale ranking from 1 to 100 (100 being the highest) was applied to evaluate students’ English oral performance on Spoken Learning Logs.

The self-efficacy scale ranged from 10 to 100 in 10-unit intervals from high uncertainty (10), through intermediate values (50-60), to complete certitude (100). Students were asked to mark down how well they could achieve in the requirements of Spoken Learning Log entries. The self-efficacy scale was used for both pre-test and post-test.

Procedure

Students were assigned randomly within gender to one of three treatment groups (ns=10). To yoke the level of goal setting between the self-set goal and assigned goal conditions, the study started with the self-set goal condition first. At the beginning of the semester, students were asked to set a goal in terms of the scores they would expect toward the spoken learning logs and complete the pretest of the self-efficacy scale. Throughout the semester, students received the instruction of
English oral training. They were asked to complete two spoken learning log entries and upload to Chaoyang University of Technology LMS—an interactive environment where students’ learning progress can be recorded electronically (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The instructor offered feedback to students’ online spoken learning log entries by posting the comments and the quantitative assessment of students’ performance using the oral proficiency evaluation scale (see Figure 3). The posttest of self-efficacy was conducted by the end of the semester.

The average goal set by the self-set goal condition was 72 and used as the level of goal assigned to the assigned goal condition. Students in this condition had a pretest on self-efficacy, followed the instruction with the goal assigned to them at the beginning of the semester. After the instruction, the posttest of self-efficacy was administered.

Students in the non-explicit goal condition participated in the pretest and posttest of self-efficacy without either self-set or assigned goal for their performance in the spoken learning logs.

Figure 1. Chaoyang University of Technology LMS Interface.
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Figure 2. ePortfolio Interface.

Figure 3. Online comments on Spoken Learning Log—Traveling show.

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Results

This study was designed to examine two hypotheses regarding effects of goal setting on students’ self-efficacy and English oral performance. It was predicted that, compared with students in an assigned-goal situation and no-goal situation, students in a self-set goal situation would have higher self-efficacy and better performance in a language learning task.

To test the first hypothesis regarding the effect of goal setting on students' self-efficacy, students pre-test and post-test scores on the self-efficacy scale were analyzed via an ANCOVA procedure with the experimental condition as the independent variable, post-test self-efficacy as the dependent variable and the pre-test self-efficacy as the covariate. The pre- and post-test self-efficacy scores were correlated with a Pearson r of .42, \( p < .05 \). The descriptive statistics of the two self-efficacy scores, including means, standard deviations, and the adjusted means, are grouped by the condition and presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Scores on Self-efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pretest Mean</th>
<th>Pretest SD</th>
<th>Posttest Mean</th>
<th>Adjusted Mean</th>
<th>Posttest SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-set Goal</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>81.50</td>
<td>81.33</td>
<td>17.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned Goal</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>78.70</td>
<td>79.49</td>
<td>20.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-Goal</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>71.40</td>
<td>72.78</td>
<td>25.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ANCOVA procedure yielded a significant group effect on the post-test of self-efficacy, \( F (2, 26) = 6.11, p < .01 \). Post-hoc comparisons among the three experimental conditions indicated that the self-efficacy score of the self-set goal condition (Adjusted \( M = 81.33 \)) was significantly higher than that of the no-goal condition (Adjusted \( M = 72.78 \)), \( p < .01 \). Also, the difference between assigned-goal (Adjusted \( M = 79.49 \)) and the no-goal conditions was significant. However, the difference between the self-set goal and the assigned-goal conditions was not significant.

Descriptive statistics of students' scores in the learning log entry #2 are grouped by condition and presented in Table 2. The performance scores were submitted to an ANOVA procedure, with the performance score as the dependent variable and the experimental condition as the independent variable. The group effect on performance was significant, \( F (2, 27) = 4.83, p < .01 \). Post-hoc comparisons indicated a similar pattern as observed with the self-efficacy score. Students in the self-set goal condition outperformed students in the no-goal condition. Mean values were 80.50 and 75.30 for the self-set goal and no-goal conditions, respectively. Also, the students in assigned-goal (\( M = 79.20 \)) condition showed higher score than the ones in no-goal condition. The difference between the self-set goal and the assigned-goal conditions was not significant.
Table 2
*Descriptive Statistics of Performance Score on the Spoken Learning Log #2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-set Goal</td>
<td>80.50</td>
<td>15.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned Goal</td>
<td>79.20</td>
<td>10.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-goal</td>
<td>75.30</td>
<td>12.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a summary, the predictions regarding effects of goal setting on self-efficacy and performance were supported by the data in this study. Students in the self-set goal condition manifested higher self-efficacy on the language learning task and outperformed students in the no-goal condition. The results of the study also showed that the source of goal was important for the enhancing effect of goal on students' self-efficacy and performance. When the goal was assigned to students from an external source, the enhancing effect of goal was diminished.

**Discussions**

This study shows that participation in goal setting enhanced the self-efficacy and skill performance of EFL college students. Though there is no significant difference between self-set goal and assigned goal conditions, the difference between self-set goal and no-explicit goal groups and the one between assigned-goal and no-explicit groups prove that allowing students to establish goals results in high sense of
self-efficacy. In turn, a strong sense of self-efficacy leads to students’
skillful performance.

One problem with this research is that the sample size is too small.
The relatively small sample size is a possible explanation of why the
difference between self-set goal and assigned goal conditions is not sig-
nificant. This particular limitation of this study needs to be considered
for further research in this domain.

This study supports the idea that allowing learners to set their own
goals may encourage greater interest in attaining them. Thus, setting
conferences with students to discuss individual classroom goals or es-
tablishing contracts for completing academic tasks can help students
take more responsibility for their learning and develop greater
self-efficacy.

This study also supports Locke and Latham's (1990) theory that
goal setting bears an important relationship to performance improve-
ment. Personal expectations for success can be considered as important
impacts on learning performance. Goal-setting procedures can be easily
implemented in classrooms and can enhance school achievement. The
findings of previous research and this study suggest some implications
for teaching practice. First, goals direct students' attention to the task at
hand. Second, goals mobilize effort. Third, goals increase persistence.
Fourth, goals promote the development of new strategies when old
strategies fall short. Finally, participation in goal setting may help stu-
dents enhance more active task involvement. Suggestions for further
study would include research of a longer duration that would observe
continued use and development of goal-setting. Does it become more
individualized with continued use and if so, how does it change
References


