

Online Goal Setting and Self-evaluation in Japanese Higher Education Compulsory EFL Classes

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Abstract

This study explores a pedagogical intervention in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at Kyushu Sangyo University, utilizing an online goal setting and self-evaluation tool. Involving 88 students, the qualitative research aimed to understand perceptions of the digital platform, the goal setting model, and the influence of the intervention on reflective practices, learning attitudes, and motivation. Data were gathered through student questionnaires, analytic memos, and a teacher interview, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings indicated a preference for the online platform over traditional paper-based methods, with efficiency and digital familiarity being key factors. While this preference suggests a positive reception of the technology, it does not conclusively demonstrate that the technology itself is more efficient for goal setting. The study's goal setting model, which integrated assigned, self-set, and participatory objectives, facilitated a focus on learning rather than solely on achievement. The online tool supported this model by providing a structured yet adaptable framework for goal setting and reflection. However, the direct impact of the technology on streamlining the goal-setting process was not explicitly established. Some students reported changes in learning attitudes and motivation, highlighting the potential of goal setting in enhancing learner engagement. Future research could further investigate the specific efficiencies and benefits of technology in goal setting and its impact on academic performance. This study contributes to the understanding of digital tools in EFL environments, particularly in how they might support learner-centered approaches.

この研究は、九州産業大学の英語教育（EFL）クラスで、オンラインの目標設定と自己評価ツールを活用した教育介入について探究しています。88

人の学生を対象とした質的研究では、デジタルプラットフォーム、目標設定モデルの認識および介入が、反省的な実践や学習態度、モチベーションに与える影響を理解することを目的としています。データは、学生のアンケート、分析メモ、および教師のインタビューを通じて収集され、再帰的テーマティック分析を用いて分析されました。調査結果から、学生は、従来の紙ベースの方法よりもオンラインプラットフォームを好む傾向を示しており、効率性とデジタル技術への親しみが主要な要因であることが示唆されています。この好みはテクノロジーへの肯定的な受容を示唆していますが、テクノロジー自体が目標設定において、より効率的であることを結論付けるには至っていません。研究の目標設定モデルは、割り当てられた目標、自己設定目標、および参加型目標を統合し、単に成果だけではなく学習に焦点を当てることを促進しました。オンラインツールの使用は、目標設定と自己評価のために構造化された柔軟な枠組みを提供することで、このモデルをサポートしました。しかし、テクノロジーが目標設定プロセスの効率化に直接的な影響を与えたかどうかは明確には確立されていません。一部の学生は学習態度とモチベーションに変化があったと報告しており、目標設定が学習者の関与を高める可能性を強調しています。今後の研究では、目標設定におけるテクノロジーの具体的な効率性と利点、および学業成績への影響をさらに調査することができます。この研究は、特に学習者中心のアプローチをどのようにサポートするかに焦点を当て、EFL環境におけるデジタルツールの理解に貢献しています。

Background

This research investigates the use of an online goal setting and self-evaluation tool in compulsory English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at Kyushu Sangyo University (KSU). It aims to explore the perceptions and potential impacts of this digital intervention on learning processes, focusing on how it might influence reflective practices, attitudes towards learning, and student motivation in an EFL context.

Goal setting

In educational psychology, goal setting refers to the practice of establishing specific, measurable, and achievable learning targets (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). This approach benefits both educators and students by concentrating on clear outcomes, and fostering an environment conducive to continuous growth and academic success. The integration of goal setting into educational curricula is primarily informed by two theoretical frameworks: Goal Setting Theory (GST) and Achievement Goal Theory (AGT).

Emerging from the realm of workplace psychology, GST offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate relationship between conscious goal setting and task performance. According to GST, effective goals should be *specific, difficult, and challenging* (Locke & Latham, 2019). These goals influence performance through mediators such as *choice, effort, persistence, and strategies*, while their effects are moderated by *ability, goal commitment, feedback, and resources* (Latham, 2016). When these elements are successfully aligned, they can positively impact not only performance but also subjective well-being, as achieving meaningful goals contributes to one's overall sense of fulfillment and life satisfaction (Latham & Locke, 2007). The foundational principles of GST have been instrumental in shaping the approach of this study, guiding students in setting meaningful goals that are aligned with their educational aspirations.

While enhancing performance is a key aspect of educational success, fostering learning engagement through goal orientation is equally crucial. In academic settings, AGT delineates two primary orientations: *performance* and *mastery* goals (Dweck et al., 1988). *Performance* goals are normative, focusing on external validation and comparison to others, while *mastery* goals are self-referenced and emphasize personal standards and competence. While *mastery* goals center on the process of learning, *performance* goals prioritize achieving external validation. The approach to goal setting in this research was designed to integrate aspects of both *mastery* and *performance* goals, aiming for a comprehensive impact on educational engagement.

Building on these theoretical underpinnings, this study also focused on achieving a balance in goal setting practices, as informed by GST. GST classifies goals into *assigned, self-set, and participatively set* categories (Locke & Latham, 2019). *Assigned* goals, typically externally imposed, correspond with the *performance-oriented* goals of AGT. In contrast, *self-set* goals, which stem from individual aspirations, resonate with the learning-centric focus of *mastery* goals. *Participatively set* goals, developed through collaboration between the individual and an authority figure or peer, have the potential to blend elements of both *performance* and *mastery* orientations.

In addition to goal ownership, this study also considered the time frame of goals. Bandura and Simon (1977) classify goals into short-term (*proximal*) and long-term (*distal*) categories. *Proximal* goals represent short-term sub-goals relative to their longer-term *distal* counterparts. Setting *proximal* goals helps individuals track their progress, which in turn

enhances self-efficacy (Schunk, 1990). In the realm of language learning, Dörnyei (2001) highlights the importance of aligning *proximal* sub-goals with *distal* goals to maintain learner engagement. He also advocates for setting both individual and class goals, coupled with regular reviews to monitor progress and sustain learning momentum. Accordingly, the integration of periodic goal reviews, essential for assessing progress and sustaining engagement, was a key feature in the development of this study's self-evaluation mechanisms.

Goal setting serves as a powerful metacognitive strategy, fostering an active approach to learning and boosting engagement levels (Hattie, 2012). In the domain of EFL education, the practice has been shown to stimulate learner autonomy and motivation by engaging students in metacognitive processes such as planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation (Klimas, 2017; Little, 2007). To nurture this autonomy, educators should actively guide learners, enabling them to take control of their learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content (Benson, 2013). In this study, goal setting was employed with the aim of transferring the ownership of learning to the students, thereby encouraging them to take a more active role in their education.

Written methods such as learning logs, and goal plans have emerged as effective tools in fostering academic growth and achievement. Empirical studies affirm the positive correlation between these methods of goal setting and academic performance, particularly among university students (Morisano et al., 2010; Travers et al., 2015). In a targeted study, Haynes (2011) demonstrated among Japanese university language learners that the freedom to set and adjust weekly goals yielded transformative learning experiences and emphasized the need for further research into teacher-composed goals.

Overall, effective goal setting in language education is intricate and nuanced. It involves a careful balance of ambitious and realistic goals, a respect for learner autonomy, and a consideration for both short-term and long-term objectives. Furthermore, the time invested in goal setting programs must be carefully balanced against their derived benefits to ensure optimal learning outcomes. The design and execution of goal setting in this study were informed by an understanding of the complex interplay between learners' autonomy, the scope of their goals, and the pragmatic application of goal setting practices to enhance language education outcomes.

Learner reflection

Learner reflection, defined as the conscious process of self-examination in learning experiences, is key to effective self-regulation (Schön, 1983; Zimmerman, 2002). Goals act as roadmaps for learners, providing direction and purpose to their educational journey. To navigate this journey effectively, regular checkpoints for self-evaluation are crucial (Locke & Latham, 2002). Engaging in reflective practices allows learners to monitor their progress, modify their goals when necessary, and enhance their learning strategies (Little, 2007). Reflection is an integral component of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), proceeding the phases of *forethought* and *performance* with *evaluation*. Self-regulated learners are proactive in achieving personal goals, employing specific strategies while recognizing their strengths and areas for improvement (Zimmerman, 2002). In this study, the implementation of regular reflection periods was tailored to encourage students' active participation in setting and revising their strategies for achieving their goals, thereby enhancing their sense of ownership and engagement in the learning process.

Self-assessment acts as a catalyst for active learning, stimulating both reflective thinking and metacognitive monitoring – the evaluation of one's own learning process (Andrade, 2019). Dörnyei (2001) suggests that language learners maintain weekly goal setting logbooks to facilitate this reflective process. Coupled with regular teacher-student conferences centered on goal setting, these logbooks provide both structure and valuable feedback. The approach adopted in this intervention adapts Dörnyei's concept of logbooks for the digital era, creating an online platform for dynamic, interactive self-assessment and goal tracking.

Incorporating SRL techniques into tertiary-level EFL courses lays the foundation for lifelong learning skills extending beyond language education (Fryer, 2015). Research indicates that even novice language learners exhibit initial self-regulation, evolving into proficient self-regulators given opportunities for incremental success (Nakata, 2020). Therefore, the inclusion of more SRL strategies in EFL pedagogy can effectively promote learner autonomy, enhance self-confidence, and equip students for linguistic challenges beyond the academic setting. The main obstacle, however, lies in harmonizing these practices with existing time constraints and the constant requirements of assessment and classroom management.

Use of technology

In this study, technology serves as a conduit for embedding goal setting practices within EFL education, enabling efficient use of classroom time, and aligning with modern educational methodologies. In recent years, the landscape of higher education has rapidly evolved to incorporate more digitally integrated learning environments. Although this shift – accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic – has made Learning Management Systems (LMS) increasingly prevalent in language education (Crawford et al., 2020), it has also sparked debates. While digital tools can personalize learning experiences, concerns about losing the interactive essence of traditional classrooms persist (Garrick et al., 2017). This study confronts such traditional pedagogical constraints, advocating for a balanced integration of technology that preserves interactive learning while embracing the efficiency and scalability that digital innovations offer in language education.

The global trend towards technological integration, which this study seeks to harness, has overcome many infrastructural challenges, providing educators with innovative means to enhance learning experiences. As educational environments evolve to be more digitally inclusive, recognizing the spectrum of technological proficiency becomes imperative. The assumption that all students are 'digital natives' with high technical skills may lead to oversights in the actual variance of these abilities (Smith et al., 2020). For technology to reach its full educational potential, users – both students and teachers – must be competent in employing digital tools effectively. The reluctance of some educators to adopt Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) technologies is a notable concern (Wang, 2021), underscoring the importance of user-centric design and comprehensive support for the successful integration of new technologies into classrooms.

Although the research on utilizing technology for goal setting and self-evaluation in language is still in its infancy (Cheng et al., 2020), exploring these themes is critical. The interaction between individual goals within technological systems, such as digital badges, is an emerging area of inquiry that holds promise for enhancing language teaching methodologies (Weber et al., 2021). To optimally leverage technology in these areas, it's essential to delve deeper into the intricacies of embedding goal setting tools within the classroom setting, and to craft systems that are intuitive and effectively scaffold the goal setting and self-evaluation processes for educators and students alike. Through the development and trial of an innovative digital platform, this research contributes to the

understanding of how such technological tools can be integrated into language education to support and enhance the learning process.

Institutional context

Compulsory English programs are a common requirement for graduation in many higher education institutions in Japan, including KSU. The primary motivation for students in these non-elective English classes is securing credits, relegating language learning to a secondary concern. This dynamic often results in low student engagement with the subject matter, leading to a significant number of students failing and needing to retake classes. Additionally, teachers, under pressure to ensure students pass, may prioritize instruction on task completion over the development of language proficiency, acting more as arbiters of the gradebook than facilitators of learning.

Against this backdrop, the present research introduces a novel approach to goal setting that utilizes an online tool designed to support the learning process. The intervention aims to engage students by enabling them to set and monitor their progress independently via the digital tool. Its broader objectives include enhancing learner autonomy and promoting reflective learning. This is facilitated through the adoption of a structured approach to goal setting that balances teacher guidance with learner choice.

Aims

This study explores the perceptions of both teachers and students regarding a newly developed goal setting and self-evaluation web application, focusing on its integration and utility in compulsory EFL classes at KSU. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How did participants perceive the digital platform and the specific goal model implemented within the program?
2. In what ways did students perceive the use of the application as influencing their engagement in reflective practices?
3. How did students perceive the application's impact on their attitudes towards the learning process?

4. What were the students' perceptions of the application's effect on their motivation to study?

Building on the literature previously discussed, goal setting and self-evaluation have been recognized for their positive impact on learning across various contexts, including language education. Prior research in EFL goal setting has predominantly focused on written methods such as journals, learning logs, and detailed goal plans. This study aims to extend this understanding by exploring how goal setting and regular self-evaluation, facilitated through a web application, can support learning in this specific educational context. The results of this study are intended to inform educational practices, contribute to the knowledge base in this field, and guide future research directions.

Sampling and Methods

Positionality statement

To provide context and transparency in the study's design and interpretation, it is important to articulate the researcher's positionality and educational philosophy. This is especially relevant given the dual roles as both a teacher and researcher. The researcher embraces a constructivist perspective, as outlined by Dewey (1938), where learners actively construct knowledge through their experiences and interactions. This viewpoint shapes the pedagogical approach of the study, focusing on meeting diverse learner needs and fostering essential learning skills. Additionally, the researcher is an advocate for the positive influence of technology in education and promotes the inclusion of collaborative experiences within the learning environment.

Sample

This study's sample comprised 88 first- and second-year students from five English *Listening & Speaking* classes. These compulsory EFL courses are divided into four proficiency-based levels at KSU, with level 1 being the most advanced. The sample included 40 students from level 2 and 48 students from level 4. Given the qualitative nature of this study, a degree of diversity in proficiency levels can be seen as an advantage, providing a representative cross-section of the institution's wider population.

Immediately preceding the study, at the end of the first semester of 2022, students undertook the Visualizing English Language Competency (VELC) test. This assessment converted their performance into equivalent Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC®) scores. The average score was 370, with level 2 students averaging 434 and level 4 students averaging 320. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) aligns a TOEIC® score range of 225 to 545 with an A2 English proficiency level. Consequently, the VELC test results suggested that the students' average English proficiency corresponded with the A2 level on the CEFR scale.

Inspection of results from an institution-wide questionnaire provided insight into the motivations of the participating students in this study. Of the students from the five classes involved in the study who responded, 93.6% (44 out of 47) selected 'It was a mandatory course' (必修科目だったから) as their reason for taking the class. This is compared to an average of 49.6% (25,618 out of 51,676) for students across all courses in the institution.

Methodology

The data collection for this study was multi-pronged:

1. Analytic Memos: The researcher-practitioner (T1) documented reflections and experiences in analytic memos throughout the study, offering an insider's view of the teaching process and the application's integration.
2. Student Questionnaires: Students, designated as P1-88 in excerpts, completed a questionnaire during the final weeks of the semester, providing insights into their learning experiences.
3. Teacher Interview: Insights were also garnered from a colleague (T2) who implemented the web application, enriching the data with a second practitioner's perspective.

A qualitative methodology formed the foundation of this research, following the interactive model proposed by Maxwell (2012). This approach particularly emphasized the importance of triangulation through diverse data sources, which was central to the study. By triangulating across various data sources, the research aimed to reduce bias and construct a comprehensive, multi-faceted understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Due to

logistical considerations, convenience sampling was employed, with all participants providing informed consent in accordance with JSPS standards (2015). The research design was further shaped by a preliminary reconnaissance phase, which included a pre-study data analysis of an existing paper-based goal setting program.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). This method emphasizes the utilization of the researcher's subjective perspective as a critical tool in extracting insights from the data. Given the researcher's dual role as both investigator and practitioner, this approach was particularly relevant, enabling a nuanced understanding and interpretation of the findings from a unique viewpoint. The analysis proceeded in stages, starting with familiarization through repeated review of the translated questionnaire responses, analytic memos, and interview transcripts. Initial translations of the students' responses into English were conducted using translation software and were then verified for accuracy by a bilingual individual proficient in both Japanese and English. During the coding phase, significant segments of data were pinpointed through iterative readings. Cross-referencing across different data sources enabled a holistic understanding of the studied phenomena. Candidate themes were identified based on their pertinence to the research questions and underwent further refinement via thematic mapping. This process highlighted interconnections between themes, enhancing the thematic structure. The reflexive nature of this approach, integral to inductive analysis, capitalized on the teacher-researcher's dual perspective, effectively situating the findings within the broader context of the study.

Pedagogical intervention

At the start of the second semester of 2022, students were introduced to an online goal setting and self-evaluation web application integrated with the university's LMS, *Moodle*. The application was structured around three goal types: 'basic/advanced' goals (obligatory); 'challenge' goals (optional); and 'my goals' (optional). Table 1 below shows the goal text as it was displayed within the web application.

Table 1

Goal Categories and Goal Text

Goal Category	Goal Text
Basic	Complete vocabulary notebook on time, every week.
Advanced	Write at least 50% original example sentences in my vocabulary notebook.
Basic	Score at least 60% in weekly word tests.
Advanced	Score at least 90% in weekly word tests.
Basic	Complete speaking tasks using the scripts provided. Dialog duration at least 30 seconds.
Advanced	Write an original dialog based on the example dialog in each speaking task. Dialog duration at least 1 minute.
Basic	Do e-learning regularly, and achieve at least 60% total by week 13
Advanced	Ensure all e-learning tasks are done on time. Complete 100% by week 13.
Challenge	Watch English language TV shows/movies/YouTube/Netflix videos, etc. for at least ten minutes, five times a week.
Challenge	Listen to English language songs/radio shows/podcasts for at least ten minutes, five times a week.
Challenge	Read English language blogs/articles/magazines/books for at least ten minutes, five times a week.
Challenge	Attend English language events every week, e.g. English Discussions.
My Goals	“Input an English-related goal you want to achieve.” [Free goal, written in either Japanese or English]

Note. Japanese translations were also provided within the student interface.

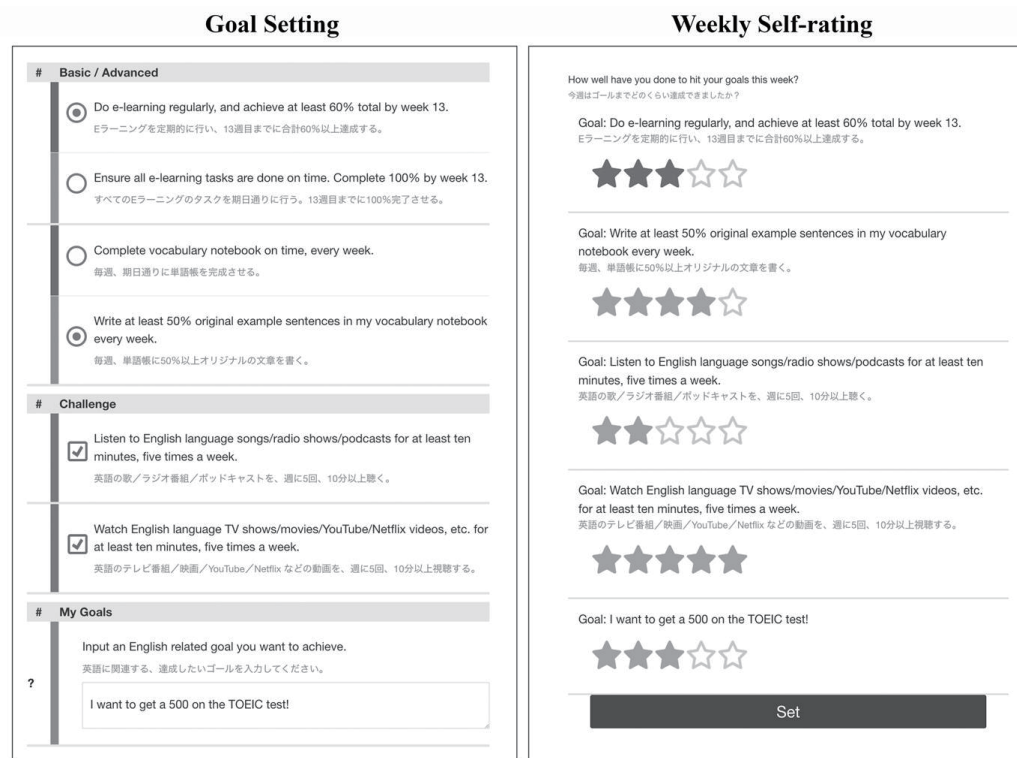
The diversity of goal types was designed intentionally to facilitate effective goal setting within this specific context. The tiered ‘basic/advanced’ goals were *proximal* and directly linked to assessable elements of the course. The ‘basic’ goals provide a clear path toward achieving a passing grade, whilst the ‘advanced’ goals pushed students to aim for higher grades. The ‘challenge’ goals were crafted to motivate sustained extracurricular English engagement through preferred learner mediums. The ‘my goals’ section offered students the freedom to define personalized objectives, with the only requirement being that they somehow relate to English; students could articulate these goals in either English or Japanese.

Each class ended with students self-evaluating on a 1–5-star scale against each goal that the teacher had identified as pertinent to that week’s lesson (this scale was chosen for its simplicity, quick decision-making, and familiarity in other feedback systems). The teacher initially demonstrated the self-evaluation process, but no rubric was provided, allowing students to define their own criteria for success. Students accessed the application via a link shared alongside other online class resources, typically through their smartphones.

Evaluations were conducted towards the end of each class. Both students and teachers could access a goal review history page displaying previous self-ratings, facilitating the monitoring of progress. Figure 1 below illustrates the initial goal setting interface and the weekly self-rating feature of the application.

Figure 1

Examples of Goal Setting and Weekly Self-rating Pages from the Student Interface



Analysis

Data from analytic memos, student questionnaire responses and a teacher interview were analyzed utilizing reflexive thematic analysis. This analysis generated five salient themes concerning student and teacher perceptions of the online goal setting and self-evaluation intervention: a place for reflection on learning; guided goal setting scaffolds learning; it's better to write your own goals; 'challenge' goals extend learning beyond the classroom; and the online medium suits today's learners. These themes are discussed

sequentially, supplemented by participant quotations for illustration. For the sake of clarity and conciseness, student comments originally in Japanese have been translated into English.

Theme 1: A place for reflection on learning

This theme underscores how students and teachers perceive goal setting and self-evaluation as meaningful spaces for reflective learning. It encompasses individual reflection and social interactions within the learning environment, highlighting the value participants place on reflective practices within this intervention. Students referred to how regular self-evaluation had facilitated reflection on learning that led to changes in behavior. For instance, one student shared, “My goals became habitual, and I could work on improving my level,” (P76), highlighting the transformative impact of consistent reflection.

Frequently revisiting set goals can act as a reminder of one's targets, thereby enhancing awareness and performance. Students described how weekly self-evaluations helped them remember what they were meant to be doing, both consciously and unconsciously. P12's insight, “I tried to get good marks because I was assessing myself,” illustrates how this monitoring can influence classroom behavior and academic performance.

While goal setting and self-evaluation generally increased self-efficacy and motivation, it's important to note the varied student experiences. A few students, like P74, found it less engaging, remarking, “It's a bit of a hassle.” This diversity in responses underscores the complexity of learner engagement with reflective practices.

In this context, the social dimensions of learning emerged as a vital component. T2's comments about learners discussing their self-evaluations, “It also gave them something at the end of the class to kind of coalesce on that didn't involve me,” (T2, interview) reveal the importance of peer interaction in the reflective process. In contrast, T1's approach of using the goal review history in one-to-one meetings, as described in their analytic memo, “I found the goal review history a valuable tool to go alongside the gradebook,” (T1, analytic memo 12) shows how the tool could help facilitate teacher-student conversations around learning.

The intervention also highlighted discrepancies between self-perceptions and actual performance, a critical aspect of reflective learning. Some students noted the usefulness of sharing their goals and progress, with P76 stating, “The praise I received helped motivate me.” Conversely, P24 reflected on their shortcomings, “I reflected on some of the things I've

been slacking off on.” This contrast between perceived and actual performance adds depth to the reflective process.

In sum, this theme illustrates the role of the goal setting and self-evaluation in enhancing the learning experience. The tool’s effectiveness was influenced by how it was integrated into classroom practices. Students and teachers found it valuable for promoting reflective learning, though some challenges were noted. The intervention encouraged reflection, impacting learning habits and motivation, with social elements like peer discussions and teacher feedback enriching the process. Notably, the intervention highlighted discrepancies between self-perceptions and actual performance, emphasizing its impact on reflective learning practices.

Theme 2: Guided goal setting scaffolds learning

This theme captures participants' perspectives on the effectiveness of guided goal setting in their learning process. Students appreciated the structured approach of teacher-composed goals for focusing their learning objectives, as reflected in P35’s comment, “It’s easier to narrow down my goals.” The challenge of effective goal setting, particularly for those new to a course, was alleviated by the simplicity of the guided approach, echoed in P7’s statement, “It is easier to set goals.”

The combination of structured guidance with personal choice was valued by students. P22’s preference, “I prefer to be able to choose,” highlights the desire for autonomy within a guided framework. The utility of guided goal setting in helping students draft relevant and achievable goals was acknowledged by several participants. For example, P47 noted, “I think I can set better goals if I have advice,” and P87 added, “Because I can't come up with them on my own.” This approach was seen as accommodating diverse levels of interest and motivation in compulsory EFL courses. P50’s insight, “Having an advance makes me feel like I have to do at least the basics,” illustrates the motivational aspect of structured goals.

The study also revealed students' perceptions of the origin of a goal affecting its impact. Statements like P79’s “If I set my own goals, I compromise,” and P17’s “Because if I set them myself, I might end up on the side that is quite easy,” indicate a preference for the challenge presented by teacher-composed goals. Additionally, P83 pointed out a potential

issue with student-defined goals, “Because setting them myself would make them loose,” emphasizing the need for precision, which guided goals provided.

In this theme, participants' responses highlight the role of guided goal setting in clarifying and achieving learning objectives, balancing teacher guidance with student choice, and providing a structured yet adaptable framework for goal setting.

Theme 3: It's better to write your own goals

This theme explores the students' preference for self-composed goals, emphasizing the importance of personalization and autonomy in their learning journey. Students frequently expressed appreciation for the freedom to set goals that resonate with their individual needs and preferences. For example, P3 captured this sentiment, stating, “I like the freedom to choose the one that suits me.”

The benefit of tailoring goals to unique learning styles and requirements was a common theme. P51 succinctly expressed this, noting, “It's better to write your own goals because you can create goals that suit you in detail.” This preference for customization reflects an understanding of the diversity in learners' goals and competencies.

Setting personal goals was also seen as a catalyst for introspection and gaining clarity. Statements from students like P46 and P30 highlighted the role of self-reflection in goal setting, with comments such as “I can think for myself and clarify my goals,” and “Because it gives me time to think for myself.”

The shift towards more autonomous learning environments was well-received. P37's observation, “I think it is better to decide on my own and write them down so that they stay in my head,” illustrates the perceived benefits of autonomy in goal setting. Additionally, many students indicated that self-set goals were more motivating and enjoyable, enhancing their engagement and satisfaction in the learning process.

In summary, this theme underscores the value students place on self-composed goals. It demonstrates how personalization and autonomy in setting their own goals can positively impact their learning experience.

Theme 4: 'Challenge' goals extend learning beyond the classroom

This theme highlights how 'challenge' goals promoted student engagement with English outside the classroom. Notably, most students chose to participate in these optional 'challenge' goals. Students expressed approval of these goals, with P35 saying, "I think it's a good initiative," and P73 adding, "I thought it was very good because it made me interested in English." While there was general approval, it's important to recognize that not all students opted to participate in these goals, reflecting a range of responses to this aspect of the intervention.

These goals were praised for expanding learning experiences beyond the classroom. P9 shared, "I thought it was good because I could try to improve my English not only in class but also in everyday life," and P12 commented, "I think it is good to create opportunities to come into contact with English."

Students also noted an increase in their engagement with real-world English. P69 described, "I could use the time I usually spend watching YouTube to watch English YouTube, and I could work on it easily," and P81 observed, "I think it's good to be exposed to speed in everyday life, not textbook speed."

The 'challenge' goals, being optional, allowed students to choose forms of extracurricular English interaction that appealed to them. P37 noted, "I think it's good. I thought that getting into the habit of seeing and hearing English in real life would improve my awareness of my difficulties with English and my motivation to learn," and P16 stated, "I don't usually do this, so having this goal has made me more willing to try it than before."

Setting specific goals for engaging with English media changed students' approach to it. P85 said, "Setting a goal, such as how many times I would listen to a song today, gave me a chance to look into listening to it a little more," and P26 shared, "I started watching a lot of foreign films and discovered new western music."

From a pedagogical perspective, 'challenge' goals cultivated an environment conducive to immersive learning discussions. T1's analytic memo reflects this: "Conversations around 'challenge' goals gave students a chance to share what they'd been doing to supplement their studies, as well as providing an opportunity for me to suggest alternative resources."

In conclusion, the ‘challenge’ goals effectively extended students’ engagement with English beyond the classroom, fostering a more immersive and personalized learning experience. They encouraged practical English usage and shifted students’ perception of language learning to a more integral part of their daily lives.

Theme 5: The online medium suits today’s learners

This theme examines learners' experiences with online platforms for goal setting and self-evaluation, in contrast to traditional paper-based methods. It's important to note that all students participating in this study had experience with a paper-based goal setting program in the previous semester, providing them with a unique perspective to compare the two approaches. Generally, students showed a preference for the digital method, citing its ease and efficiency. P20 succinctly expressed this, stating, “I can answer easily. It is easier to type.” This appreciation for the convenience and time-saving nature of online methods was a recurring sentiment.

The ability to access and review goals at any time was highlighted as a significant advantage of the online platform. P76 explains, “It is data and can be reviewed at any time,” emphasizing the ongoing accessibility and convenience of digital methods over paper-based ones. Concerns about the physical limitations of paper, such as the risk of losing materials, were also noted.

Educators reflected on the shift towards digital methods. T2, in an interview, comments on the students' comfort with using digital devices: “I think for students, they simply feel a lot more comfortable with using their own smartphone.” T1, in Analytic Memo 14, highlights the flexibility of online platforms: “Learners can access from any place or at any time, as long as they have a smartphone or other device.”

While the digital approach was widely favored, it was not without its reservations. P37 shares a concern about the intangible nature of online forms: “I thought it would be easier to forget to submit the form online because there is no substance to it,” and P74 mentions technical issues: “Occasional delays due to line malfunctions.”

In sum, this theme reveals a strong preference among learners for online platforms due to their practicality and accessibility. It captures a shift in educational practices towards

digital methods, aligning with modern technological advancements, while also recognizing the challenges and varied preferences within the student body.

Discussion

The integration of digital tools in educational settings is transforming teaching methodologies and reshaping students' learning approaches. This study explores perceptions of an online goal setting and self-evaluation tool at KSU within an EFL context. It concentrates on understanding participants' views on the digital platform and its goal setting model, how the tool engages students in reflective practices, its impact on their attitudes towards learning, and its influence on their motivation.

In examining participants' perceptions of the digital platform, their views were nuanced. Many expressed a general preference for the online approach over traditional paper-based methods in goal setting and self-evaluation, citing not just convenience but also the efficiency and user-friendliness of digital tools. This shift to digital platforms aligns with students' everyday device usage and mitigates concerns about accessibility and the loss of physical documents. Educators also recognized the advantages of digital platforms, particularly in gaining deeper insights into students' objectives and streamlining data collection and analysis. However, as highlighted by Wang (2021), a degree of hesitancy persists among some educators regarding the adoption of technological solutions. For wider adoption, the demonstrable value of such innovations is crucial, achievable through designs that are user-centric and interfaces that are intuitive for both students and teachers.

When exploring participants' views on the goal model used in the intervention, a range of perspectives emerged, illustrating a balance between choice and guidance. The study's goal setting model integrated *assigned*, *self-set*, and *participatory set* objectives. Learners particularly connected with *self-set* goals, valuing the personalization and ownership they offered. Students noted that creating their own goals fostered deeper reflection and made the goals more meaningful. However, while *self-set* goals promote autonomy, there are concerns about students' ability to set effective goals independently (Gauggel et al., 2002). In accordance with GST's principles of setting *specific*, *difficult*, and *challenging* goals (Locke & Latham, 2019), the tiered goals in this study were a hybrid of assigned and participatory set goals. This approach offered a structured framework for achievement while fostering learner

agency, as students could choose between ‘basic’ or ‘advanced’ versions of each curriculum-related goal, thereby tailoring their objectives within a guided context.

The findings suggest that the tiered goals were beneficial in enhancing students’ awareness of course requirements, serving as signposts to success – a particularly valuable attribute in compulsory EFL courses where intrinsic motivation can be low (Fryer et al., 2014) and students often struggle to achieve passing grades. These *performance-oriented* goals provided structured, *proximal* objectives, offering tangible grounding points for students. This strategy is in line with GST and echoes Hill et al.’s (2019) emphasis on the necessity of external guidance in varying motivational landscapes. The effectiveness of these short-term, specific goals is further supported by Dörnyei (2001) and Latham & Seijts (1999), who highlight the role of *proximal* goals in maintaining engagement and motivation.

The tool’s role in fostering reflective practices led to many students enhancing their reflective capabilities. This aligns with Hattie’s (2012) insights on the metacognitive benefits of goal setting and self-evaluation in boosting student engagement. The impact of reflection is further amplified in a dialogic educational environment, where learning thrives on dialogue and interactive discussions, resonating with Schön’s (1987) ideas about the value of reflective practice and Zimmerman and Moylan’s (2009) perspectives on the motivational benefits of SRL. This study highlights the transformative potential of self-evaluation, encouraging students to become more active and engaged in their educational process. However, the level of engagement with these practices varied, reflecting the diverse individual responses to the intervention.

In terms of the tool’s influence on students’ attitudes towards learning, the findings presented a multifaceted picture. Some students reported a shift towards a more engaged and disciplined approach, highlighting the tool’s potential to positively influence learning attitudes. This suggests that for these students, the tool’s structured approach to goal setting effectively contributed to their learning experience. However, this experience was not universal, with other students not reporting significant changes in their attitudes. These varied responses illustrate the subjective nature of educational technology reception and its diverse impact on student attitudes, emphasizing that while the tool had the potential to positively affect learning approaches for some, it was not equally effective for all.

The exploration of the tool’s impact on motivation among students showed a range of experiences. Some students noted an increase in motivation, which can be understood in

terms of enhanced self-efficacy through the visualization of their objectives, a concept supported by findings in self-assessment research (McMillan & Hearn, 2008). 'Challenge' goals, designed to extend learning beyond the classroom, inspired some students to engage more actively with the English language in different contexts. Others, however, did not find them particularly motivating. Discussions around 'challenge' goals during mid-semester consultations in T1's classes facilitated a 'learning coach' approach (Claxton, 2017), with such shifts empowering practitioners to direct students to resources aligned with their passions.

The harmonization of guidance and autonomy emerges as a key element in optimizing the learning experience, particularly in compulsory EFL classes where the focus can easily shift from learning to achievement. While the study suggests that the custom web application may offer benefits in integrating learning into everyday practices, it does not conclusively demonstrate that technology is a more efficient solution compared to traditional goal setting methods. The findings indicate a general preference for the online approach, but this preference does not necessarily equate to increased efficiency in goal setting.

In examining perceptions of this custom web application and its implementation in the compulsory EFL classroom, the study emphasizes the value both students and practitioners place on such tools in enhancing the learning experience. However, it is important to note that the study primarily explores perceptions and potential impacts, rather than definitively establishing the efficiency of the digital platform in streamlining goal setting. The findings contribute to a nuanced discussion about the role of technology in education, emphasizing the need to carefully consider how digital tools align with and support pedagogical objectives, and suggesting further research to more clearly define their impact.

Limitations

This study utilized convenience sampling due to its feasibility and relevance to the research context, but this approach may limit the generalizability of the findings to different populations or settings. Thematic analysis of questionnaire responses can be characterized as a shallow method of qualitative data collection, lacking the ability for follow-up questions that an interview facilitates. Whilst this study's findings may be transferable to similar settings, follow-up tests using quantitative measures to test for impact on attainment would help build an understanding of the phenomenon from a broader perspective.

Future directions

One possible route for future investigation would be to test the impact of this type of program using experimental design, utilizing a pre- and post-study with a larger number of participants. The testing instrument could be adapted from existing scales for learner reflection, motivation, and engagement. To increase the likelihood of obtaining accurate results, the scales to be used for measuring these capabilities would need to be trialed and analyzed prior to the commencement of the program.

Conclusion

This study highlights the essential role of goal setting and self-evaluation in enhancing student engagement and fostering reflective practices in compulsory EFL programs. By integrating structured guidance with personal choice, the goal model not only allows students to personalize their learning experience but also facilitates a shift from an achievement-focused approach to a more learner-centered environment. While a trend towards favoring digital platforms over paper-based methods was observed, primarily for convenience and accessibility, the diverse responses from students and teachers to this shift are important to note. This study contributes to the ongoing conversation about the use of digital tools in educational settings, particularly in how they might support learner-centered approaches. Future research is needed to further explore these tools' integration and to understand how they can be effectively aligned with diverse learning needs and preferences, thereby enriching the EFL learning landscape and the overall educational experience.

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