Considering the Importance of Course-Based Learning Objectives for Developing Learners' Ability to Negotiate Their Own Learning Goals

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This paper will consider several questions raised during a JALT2011 workshop that described how to create resources to support and develop students' self-directed learning abilities. The questions focused on whether differences between learner identified goals and course-based learning objectives would impact on how learners engage with the resource, and whether such a resource would help learners with no defined learning goals. This paper will build upon the responses made during the workshop. It will argue for the importance of providing course goals and objectives to help learners to develop the ability to negotiate their own learning goals.

本論文は、2011年開催の全国語学教育学会年次大会にて行われた、学生の自律的学習能力を高める教材の効果に関するワークショップにおいて参加者から提示された質問やコメントについて考察するものである。参加者の質問は、学生自身の学習目標と教員が提示する授業の学習目標との間に食い違いがあった場合、学生の教材に対する取り組み方に影響があるかどうか、また、自身の学習目標がない学生でも教材を使うことによって自律的学習能力を育成できるかどうかに関するものが多かった。本稿では、このワークショップにおいて著者がこれらの質問に答え、口述した内容を踏まえ、その思考をさらに展開させている。学生が自身の学習目標を決定する能力を育成するために、授業の学習目標を提示することの重要性を訴える。

MOST TEACHERS would agree that our role as educators is to help our students to not only be successful with their learning in our classrooms, but to also become successful learners. In other words, that while helping them to negotiate the content of our courses, we should also equip them with knowledge, skills and attitudes that they can take with them to succeed in other classes, as well as in their own lifelong learning. In our oral communication courses, we try to achieve this by introducing students to self-regulated learning practices introduced to them through a supplementary learning material, called a *Study Progress Sheet* (SPS). At our workshop at the JALT2011 National Conference, entitled *Developing resources for self-directed learning*, we firstly introduced to workshop participants the concepts behind self-regulated learning, and discussed how teachers can approach the creation of a

similar resource. This was followed by practice in writing can do statements, and finally an open discussion where we encouraged participants to raise and discuss concerns they may have or potential issues they can identify to do with creating or using such a resource in their own classrooms, and with their own learners. The commentary in this paper will focus on the main questions raised during the discussion which were primarily concerned with the goal element of the SPS. The paper will use these questions as a starting point for a deeper examination of the relationships between learner goals, course objectives, and self-directed and "undirected" learners in the Japanese tertiary learning environment.

The Study Progress Sheet

The SPS was developed for use in first and second year oral communication classes for non-English majors at a Japanese university. It was first implemented in 2009, and improvements and modifications based on teacher and student feedback have been incorporated into subsequent versions. The SPS contains several components which aim to develop learners' ability to self-regulate their learning. The underlying concept which runs throughout the SPS is a self-reflective learning cycle which guides learners to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning. This is supported through various activities embedded within the resource which are specifically designed to promote these reflective steps, bilingual messages regarding effective learning practices, and various examples that learners and teachers can use for modeling.

The starting point for engaging with self-reflective cycles of learning is goal setting, and the SPS encourages learners to embark on two simultaneous learning cycles based on different levels of goal setting. One is based on the students' own, semester-based learning goal, which they are encouraged to set at the beginning of the semester, reflect upon and amend as

necessary mid-semester, and then evaluate and again adjust as necessary at the end of the semester. The other is based on the course-based learning objectives which are presented to students in the form of can do statements in the SPS. These can do statements are directly linked to the course textbooks and were written by the researchers. After self-evaluating their ability to complete each can do statement at the completion of each unit of work, students choose a learning objective to focus on (their unit goal), decide how they will practice this learning area, and then put their study plan into action in the portfolio section of their SPS. Thus, supported by the SPS, throughout the semester students are actually engaging in several learning cycles, sometimes simultaneously: cycles based on their own semester goals, as well as several cycles based on the course-based learning objectives. More detail about the SPS, its development and use, and results of early research can be found in Collett and Sullivan (2010). Our research into the SPS is ongoing and includes content analysis of learner SPSs, student surveys, and student interviews. Findings from interviews with students who have used the SPS will be referred to in this paper.

Workshop Participant Questions About the Goal Element of the SPS

After introducing the features of the SPS and the philosophies and objectives behind its creation and use, we had workshop participants create and compare their own can do statements based on a stipulated textbook unit. We then opened the floor for discussion, encouraging participants to identify concerns and potential issues they could imagine facing if they were to use a similar resource in their own classes. This interactive discussion was the most important part of the workshop, as it forced participants to imagine the SPS in contextualized use, rather than just as a useful-sounding concept on a piece of paper. It is imperative for teachers designing and implementing resources and activities to

develop learners' ability to self-regulate their learning to realize that so much of the success (or lack thereof) of these attempts lies in their own use and presentation of these resources to students, their students' self-beliefs about and past experiences with (independent) learning, and the level of the teacher's understanding of these student beliefs and experiences.

While the discussion produced many perceptive comments and questions, many of these focused on queries regarding the goal setting phase of the self-reflective learning cycle. The key questions can be summarized as follows:

1. What if students' own goals are different to the course-based learning objectives?

2. What if the student's goal is to "get credit" in order to meet graduation requirements?

3. What if learners have no goals at all?

These questions represent concerns that attempts to develop learners' ability to self-regulate their learning will not be successful if the content of the course-based learning objectives does not match their own goals, and if learners do not have their own learning goals in the first place.

The reader has no doubt also come across learners who seem to fall into one of the above categories. Each situation does indeed seem to have the potential to disrupt attempts to have students engage in a self-reflective learning cycle, such as that promoted in the Study Progress Sheet. However, if self-regulated learning strategies are indeed learnable, as they are said to be (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008), it should also theoretically be possible to assist students in the planning or goal setting stage of the self-reflective learning cycle. Rather than suggest methods of achieving this, the remainder of this paper will instead focus on developing an understanding of each of the above situations, in an attempt to offer a mindset, rather than a set of strategies,

for the teacher to equip themselves with when engaging with learner goals, goal setting, and the presentation of course-based learning objectives in the classroom. The argument is that course-based learning objectives can support learning in general, as well as students' engagement with self-reflective learning cycles, and that can do statements, and the metalanguage used within them, may actually help students in identifying possible learning goals. However, this will only work if a classroom learning narrative is established, and if the necessary amount of support and scaffolding is provided by the teacher.

Control Over Goal Content and Self-Directed Learning: *What if Students' Own Goals are Different to the Course-Based Learning Objectives?*

This first question is connected with the idea that successful self-directed learning is intrinsically connected to control, in particular control over learning content. It suggests that not being able to see a direct relationship between one's own goals and the learning objectives of the course, or indeed not being able to have a say in the development and selection of the course learning objectives, will lead to an inability to identify and engage with the learning goals presented by the teacher, such as the can do statements incorporated in the Study Progress Sheet.

Phil Benson (2011) defines autonomy as the ability to take control of one's learning, and he suggests that learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content are at least three areas over which learners can exercise control. For Benson, control over learning content is the most important of these three areas and he suggests that "there is good reason to believe […] [it] is fundamental to autonomy in learning." As the setting of goals and establishment of learning content begins the cycle of learning, Benson argues that the self-determination of goals is particularly important.

I would not wish to deny the importance of choice in learning content. As teachers, valuing the experiences, knowledge and identities learners bring in to the classroom, and allowing chances for personalization, or even negotiation, of the classroom agenda is definitely important; among many reasons, it is intrinsically connected with learner motivation. However, this does not necessarily mean that the presentation of course-based learning objectives is detrimental to the development of self-directed learning, nor does it mean that there cannot be reconciliation between the goals that learners bring in to the classroom, and the learning goals that teachers, researchers, departments and universities believe are important for learners to engage with. As long as the learner is able to value and internalize a goal, they should be able to pursue it, and to self-regulate, even if they do not find it to be innately interesting (Lemos, 1999). While there are many occasions for negotiated curriculums, in the current tertiary education environment in Japan, where faculty development advancements are specifically moving toward notions of accountability, the syllabus as contract between teacher and learner, and explication of course goals and learning outcomes, the positioning of learning objectives is currently being strengthened.

Let's consider this topic a little further. First, just because the learner cannot immediately see the connections between their own goals and the course-based learning objectives that does not mean they are not interrelated. In many cases the learner may lack the ability to unpack their goal and identify the commonalities it shares with course objectives. If the teacher can demonstrate to the learner the intersections between their goals and the course objectives, the learner should be more likely to see the links themselves, and as a result, to make the most of the learning opportunities to be had by positively engaging with course-based goals within the self-reflective learning cycle. By showing learners the connections between classroom learning and the bigger picture of learning and using a foreign language outside the classroom, the teacher can equip students with an ability to make classroom learning opportunities work for them.

Second, the question also should be asked as to whether only learning what one is currently interested in, or knows about now, is truly beneficial. Learning should as much as possible be related back to the learner's experiences and current knowledge. However, we should not forget the role of social interaction and the experiences and conversations which emerge from this in learner development. If our interests and approaches to learning are deeply influenced by our experiences to date, then surely wider exposure to different ideas, knowledge and approaches can only help our learners to further develop and expand their potential. In this sense, if course learning goals can be effectively presented to learners, and related back to their current interests, and to real world language use, then any potential conflict due to differences between learner goals and course-based learning objectives can essentially be overcome.

Using Learning Objectives to Guide the "Undirected" Learner: *What if the Student's Goal is to "Get Credit" in Order to Meet Graduation Requirements, or if They Have No Goals At All?*

The second and third questions will be considered together as they both refer to a seemingly "undirected" learner—a learner who has no specific learning objectives that they can use to help guide them through their studies, both in and outside of class. The presumption here is that even if course-based learning objectives which can be used to set goals and plan learning are presented to the learner, if the learner lacks a greater purpose to engage with this material to begin with, attempts to have them set goals in order to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning will not be successful. Goals are necessary not only to plan cycles of learning, but also to monitor progress, which is crucial to

create and maintain motivation (Pintrich, 1999; Ushioda, 2008); thus, for this kind of learner, their lack of purpose can negatively impact upon their feelings and attitudes towards learning and themselves.

Considering the Social Context of the "Undirected" Learner

With the slowing birthrate and large number of universities looking to fill their student quotas, we have entered a period in Japan where those who want to enter university, and have the financial ability to do so, will be able to without the high levels of competitiveness that previous generations have had to contend with. If we add to this situation the current economic recession, and the resulting effect this is having on the job market, as well as the steadfast demand among companies for university graduates, there is no doubt that we will continue to see more and more students enter university without a particular purpose except to graduate and find a job within their four year stint. We can thus expect to find increasingly more students entering university without explicit learning goals to guide them, and helping these students to identify potential goals will increasingly become the role of tertiary-level educators.

The "Undirected" Learner and University-Level Independent Learning

In our interview research with learners who have used the Study Progress Sheet, the idea that university education offers too many academic freedoms and not enough structured support was an interesting reoccurring theme, and has possible repercussions especially for the "undirected" learner. These interview participants identified university as a place for independent learning, where students need to have their own goals, be responsible for their own learning, and to be able to manage

and regulate their learning themselves. These students did not begrudge this fact, but indeed argued that this is the way that university education should be.

However, they also pointed out several problems that they themselves, and their peers, have with negotiating the independent learning that university education expects of them. Many students have not needed to take on responsibilities or manage their lives and study as high school students, where their everyday lives were very much coordinated by their teachers, parents, and cram schools. Many have also not yet discovered what they are interested in and want to focus on in their lives, and have not been able to find a purpose for their studies as a result. Several students who participated in our interviews noted that in regard to setting goals and managing their learning, a balance between self-regulation and structured support, or co-regulation, from teachers and the university, is what they need to successfully negotiate their transition from high school to university education.

I would now like to return to questions two and three posed by the participants at the workshop, and specifically consider these concerns by again referring to findings from our student interviews. One 2nd-year interview respondent made a particularly interesting observation regarding what universities can and cannot do for the "undirected" learner. When asked what universities can do for students who are unable to learn independently or manage their own learning, this student astutely responded that it is an issue of motivation, the lack of which is due to the fact that these students do not have goals to spur their learning. In this student's words, because people are fundamentally interested in different things, there is not much use in universities trying to provide learners with specific goals, per se. Indeed, while it may be a bit late for their university years, most people only find their true interests after they start working and enter the real world. However, she suggested that

universities could offer learners many different opportunities and experiences which may become a catalyst that can work to guide learners and help them identify their interests and goals. I would argue that the presentation of various learning objectives could perhaps help some "undirected" learners to at least begin to productively engage with learning at university.

The Role of Can Do Statements and Metalanguage in Improving Goal Identification Skills

Indeed, the explicitness in which can do statements present to students the content and nature of what it actually is that they are being asked to engage with in class may very well be just what they need to find the language with which to identify and verbalize their interests in relation to their foreign language studies. When asked what their goal for their foreign language studies is, many of our learners typically respond that it is to be able to speak fluently, or to be able to understand movies without subtitles, or perhaps to be able to communicate effectively with foreigners when they travel overseas. While such end-purpose goals are crucial to have, they do not necessarily help students negotiate and navigate their everyday learning, nor to work effectively through the self-reflective learning cycle (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008). To do this learners need more achievable goals that they can use to monitor their progress—something which is especially important when we consider that learning a foreign language is a lifelong endeavor. However, learners are not linguists, and it is quite understandable why many have difficulty unpacking the various skills, competencies, and knowledge sets that make up the vague notion of foreign language proficiency. (Indeed, we should not forget that it has only been over the past 40 years that applied linguists have become able to do this themselves!)

Here, the metalanguage contained in can do statements and descriptions of course objectives may help learners to better understand what is involved in becoming competent in a foreign language. While issues to do with goals and goal setting dominated the workshop discussion, the wording of can do statements was also raised by a number of participants. While some attendees wondered if it was important to make sure the language used in can do statements is simple and free of jargon or specialist terms, others asked if it was necessarily in the teacher's and students' best interests to purposely avoid the use of metalanguage. For example, instead of a can do statement that reads "I can use phrases such as 'really?' and 'are you serious?' to respond to other's opinions", a wording like "I can use discourse markers such as 'really' and 'are you serious?' to respond to other's opinions" which specifically introduces linguistic terms may make students more aware of language function and sub-competencies.

Of course, there is the issue that students are probably not aware of these terms, let alone concepts, in their native language. And for some teachers, and in some classroom environments, it may in fact be quite challenging to explain such concepts. Nonetheless, the idea that can do statements, and the use of metalanguage within them, can demonstrate to learners the various components that make up communicative competence, and provide the language to describe them, which may help learners to both identify and describe their own learning goals, is one which is worth further consideration.

A Reconsideration of "Wanting Course Credit" as a Learning Goal

As a final caveat, I would like to briefly digress and specifically consider what students may mean when they say that their course aim is to "get credit" in order to graduate. For the

teacher, *tani ga toritai* or *tani ga hoshi* ("I want to get the credit for this course") can be a rather disillusioning phrase, which suggests that the student is not interested in the content of what is being taught, but just clearing another hurdle that needs to be passed. The most natural way to express this idea of "wanting to get credit" in English is most probably "wanting to pass the class" or "not wanting to fail the course" (in Japanese *tani o otoshitakunai*). While some teachers may still look unfavorably upon "wanting to pass" or "not wanting to fail" as a learning goal, as it suggests a lack of ambition or deliberate underachievement, it is probably more favorably received than the Japanese equivalent.

However, it is interesting to note that while "pass" and "exam" collocate naturally in Japanese (*shiken ni goukaku suru* or *shiken ni ukaru*), "pass" and "course" or "class" do not. Thus, when an English speaker would say "to pass a class", a Japanese speaker would say "to get the credit" (*tani o toru*), and when an English speaker would say "to fail a class" a Japanese speaker would say "to drop the credit" (*tani o otosu*)—it is a matter of differing collocations in the two languages. Why this has come to be the case is a matter for the linguist. Nevertheless, if we keep this point in mind when students say they want to "get the credit" for a course, and perhaps encourage students to think of this instead as wanting to "pass the class", and then to consider what they need to achieve in order to pass through the use of clearly established learning objectives that are transparently linked to assessment, we may hopefully, if slightly subversively, be able to start encouraging even seemingly "undirected" learners to engage and identify with course goals.

Some Final Thoughts

This paper has attempted to further respond to questions and comments made during the workshop. The questions raised indeed have been a continuous point of interest and concern for the presenters, and the chance to discuss these with such a responsive audience was crucial for reflecting upon and furthering our research agenda. This opportunity has forced the writer to directly consider potential conflicts relating to learners' own goals, or lack thereof, course-based learning objectives, and attempts to develop learners' ability to self-regulate their learning, which specifically demands the presence of meaningful and achievable goals. The conclusion at this point is that course-based learning goals need not be incompatible with learners' own goals, and that the provision of clear course goals may indeed help both self-directed and undirected learners to identify and articulate their own learning goals. However, what is important here is the role of the teacher in mediating this process, and this is an area which will need to be further researched.

Acknowledgment

Bio Data

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