

# Language Learner Autonomy, Motivation, and Proximal Goal Completion

Paul A. Lyddon  
Kanda University of  
International Studies



## Reference Data:

Lyddon, P. A. (2013). Language learner autonomy, motivation, and proximal goal completion. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2012 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

The motivation and autonomy interface has generated considerable interest over the past two decades, yet much remains unclear with regard to the nature of the relationship between these two variables. In the context of a 15-week elective training course on learner autonomy, this study examined the ongoing reflections of Japanese university learners of English on their progress toward self-selected short-term learning goals. Despite evidence elsewhere of a positive effect of proximal goals on intrinsic interest and learner self-motivation (e.g., Bandura & Schunk, 1981), the findings here showed an inconsistent relationship between demonstration of learner autonomy and successful goal completion. Through a qualitative analysis of student narratives from the perspective of Locke and Latham's (1990) Goal-Setting Theory, I attempt to explain this discrepancy. Potential implications for fostering greater learner autonomy in language learning are also discussed.

モチベーションと自律の結びつきは過去20年で相当の興味を生み出したが、それら二つの変動的要素の関係の本質は明確でないままである。本研究では、自律学習についての15週間の選択科目を通して、日本の英語学習者である大学生の、自身で定めた短期学習目標達成への進捗の継続的省察を調べた。いたるところで見られる短期目標の内発的興味と学習者自己動機付けへの好ましい効果の証(例: Bandura and Schunk, 1981)とは裏腹に、調査結果は自律学習行動を示すことと目標達成の関係には一貫性がないことを示した。Locke and Latham (1990) のGoal-Setting Theoryの観点に基づいて行った、学生の談話の定性分析を通して、この論文では先の矛盾への説明を試みる。一層の学習者自律促進への潜在的影響についても考察する。

**A**S THE number of study hours required to attain the necessary proficiency to effectively use a second language (L2) for academic and professional purposes typically exceeds what common language programs can provide (Lyddon, 2011), most learners will need to possess considerable autonomy if they truly hope to be successful in their language studies. In other words, they must have “the *capacity* to take control of [their] own learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 58, emphasis added), including determining objectives, defining scope and sequence, selecting methods and techniques, setting the location and schedule, and evaluating outcomes (Holec, 1981). Learner autonomy itself, however, is a necessary but insufficient condition, for possession of such a capacity is of little value without the concomitant motivation to actualize it. Moreover, this motivation, too, must eventually come under the umbrella of learner self-regulation, for as Ushioda (2008) duly noted, learners who rely on teachers to motivate

them are unlikely to sustain their efforts outside of class for as long as is necessary to develop their communicative proficiency. Consequently, the motivation and autonomy interface has been a subject of interest for at least the past 25 years (see Ushioda, 1996). Yet much is still unknown with regard to the relationship between these two complex variables.

In a 15-week elective course on learner autonomy, I previously investigated the effects of training on the self-motivational strategy use of 24 Japanese undergraduate preintermediate level users of English (see Lyddon, 2012). In that study, the learners each set a personal short-term goal and submitted a progress log, self-motivational strategy checklist, and reflective self-evaluation at five intervals over an 8-week period before preparing a final graded essay on how they had become more autonomous throughout the course of the semester. Statistical comparisons of the checklist data and final essay scores, however, showed no quantitative or categorical differences between more and less highly autonomous learners in their actual self-motivational strategy employment. Moreover, although the pursuit of proximal goals has elsewhere been shown to promote intrinsic interest and learner self-motivation (Bandura & Schunk, 1981), a qualitative follow-up examination of the elective course study data revealed an inconsistent relationship between learner autonomy and successful short-term goal completion. Taking the perspective of Goal-Setting Theory (Locke, 1996; Locke & Latham, 1990), in this paper I will attempt to explain this apparent contradiction and then suggest pedagogical implications for fostering greater autonomy in language learning.

### Working Definitions of Autonomy and Motivation

Neither of them denoting a discrete observable attribute, both autonomy and motivation are notoriously difficult to define and operationalize. In fact, the two often appear to overlap in numerous ways, perhaps both constructs sharing a set of common

components or even one subsuming the other. Nevertheless, it is essential to somehow differentiate them in order to examine and discuss them separately. Thus, in the context of this study, an autonomous learner is characterized as one who *can* make informed choices on the basis of awareness and control of relevant learning processes, whereas a motivated learner actually *does* engage in a particular action and expend persistent effort on it (see Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 4, on the latter). Moreover, motivation itself is seen here as exclusively neither cognitive nor affective, but situational and variable.

### Study Procedure

As mentioned above, the data were collected over the 15-week period of a one-semester elective course on learner autonomy. Taking a psychological perspective on the nature of context as one of English as a foreign language in Japan and agency as a mental and emotional characteristic of the individual learner (see Oxford, 2003), the course in question followed the same basic format as that described in Lyddon (2012), namely a three-phase cycle of raising awareness, changing attitudes, and transferring roles, including explicit instruction with respect to motivation, learner strategies, community building, and self-monitoring, as suggested by Scharle and Szabó (2000). Approximately midway through the course, the students each set a personal short-term learning goal for the remaining 8 weeks. Thereafter, the learners were assigned a weekly learning log documenting their progress toward their chosen goal. They were also required each week to submit a narrative self-evaluation, including responses to the following common set of questions:

- What was your goal last week?
- How did you try to accomplish it?
- How well did you succeed?

- Did you have any problems? If so, how did you handle them?
- Will you do anything differently next week? If so, what?

These assignments were collected five times over the remainder of the semester.

As part of their final exam, the learners all wrote an essay explaining how they had become more autonomous in their language learning over the course of the semester. As those seeking teacher approval may simply project autonomous behavior (Breen & Mann, 1997), the learners were instructed not only to describe any changes in their awareness, attitudes, and actions but also to explain them specifically in terms of their understanding of the concept of autonomy as the basis for their evaluation.

After their submission, the essays were sorted into three broad categories, roughly representing good, fair, and poor demonstration of autonomy, and then ranked within them. Unfortunately, no other qualified rater was available to corroborate these rankings, so as course instructor I was also the sole evaluator. However, I did re-sort the papers on a separate day and refine my criteria as necessary to ensure the reliability of the assigned grades.

Only 24 of the 39 learners enrolled in the course submitted all the requisite assignments for potential inclusion in this study. By chance, the number whose final essays remained in each category was exactly 8. However, a two-sided chi square test of independence comparing the distribution of the final essay scores of those who were included and those who were not was nonsignificant at the .05 alpha level:  $\chi^2(2, N = 39) = .248, p = .88$ . Thus, learner autonomy as defined here did not appear to be a determining factor in whether students completed all their assignments. To magnify the differences between learners and thus facilitate their comparison, the data from the middle category were then excluded, leaving only those of the eight

most and least autonomous learners to be used in the analysis. All learner names presented here are pseudonyms.

### ***The Disconnect Between Proximal Goal Completion and Learner Autonomy***

As Table 1, illustrates, the learning goals that were chosen most often pertained to vocabulary, grammar, or reading. While most learners did not explicitly state their understanding of what it would mean for them to “learn” new words, their learning logs implied that it entailed providing correct responses to review exercises in the commercial materials that were almost exclusively used. In any case, neither the magnitude of the goal nor its ultimate completion status bore an obvious relationship to learner autonomy level. For instance, Emi, one of the least autonomous learners, claimed to have successfully learned 864 words, whereas Shohei, one of the most autonomous, failed on his goal of learning 500. Moreover, only one of the most highly autonomous learners, Takahiro, was fully successful in attaining his goal while two of the least autonomous learners, Emi and Hana, achieved theirs. To give a better understanding of this discrepancy, I would now like to highlight some clues in the narrative data, beginning with a look at the final essays and why learners were classified as exhibiting either high or low autonomy and then continuing with the reflective self-evaluations and learner accounts of their weekly goal progress. For reasons of space restrictions, I will focus here on four of the most relevant cases, namely those of Daisuke, Shohei, Emi, and Hana, the two most autonomous learners who did not reach any of their stated goals and the first and last among the least autonomous who did.

Table I. Proximal Goal Completion by Learner

Autonomy level	Learner	Short-term goal(s)	Completion status
High	Takashi	Learn 500 words	O
		Learn 10 grammar patterns	O
	Sakura	Learn 600 words	O
		Review grammar	X
	Ryoichi	Listen to NHK English program	O
		Study accompanying text	O
	Daisuke	Read 135 pp. of algebra book	X
		Be able to explain material	X
Ryota	Finish TOEIC book	O	
Toshihiro	Master "eigo-mimi"	O	
	Finish "listening-plaza"	O	
Ryu	Read 35 English articles	O	
Shohei	Learn 500 words	X	
Low	Emi	Learn 864 words	O
	Kazuhiro	Read 24 books	X
	Koichi	Read 50 articles	O
	Risa	Learn 500 words	X
	Tatsuya	Read 40 news articles	O
	Ryunosuke	Read 45-page screenplay	O
		Talk to native speakers	X
	Yusuke	Study 560 spoken English sentences	O
Hana	Read 3 comic strips per week	O	

Note. O = successful; X = unsuccessful

### Case #1: Daisuke

The first example of a more highly autonomous learner who did not realize his short-term learning goal is Daisuke, who demonstrated his autonomy in his final essay as follows:

In order to achieve the goals of the week, I . . . *create a reserve fund 1 day per week*. Because, in such unexpected business, you may not end what you have planned. . . . By creating a reserve fund, rather than extend it one week ahead of target, it is possible to achieve the first goal.

By creating "a reserve fund 1 day per week," he was referring to building a cushion into his learning plan, not overcommitting himself, to accommodate contingencies. In practice, however, he did not implement this strategy. In his reflective self-evaluation at interval 1, for instance, he commented on how not studying often or long enough resulted in incomplete reading comprehension. In fact, he spent a total of 55 minutes on task that week between two study sessions. In short, though he indicated awareness and implied control over his learning processes, he chose not to act on them.

Although he did not modify his behavior the following week, he offered a glimpse into his true motivation at interval 2: "In [less than 2 weeks], employment candidate screening test is a public school teacher in [X] Prefecture. So, for the week before last and have the time." He was preparing for an examination for a position as a public school math teacher. While the latter half of his statement is not entirely clear and he could not be reached for later clarification, his learner logs seemed to indicate that he was announcing a planned reduction in his efforts in order to dedicate more time to his employment exam. At interval 3, which comprised a 2-week period, he worked on his short-term goal only three times for an average of 20 minutes each. In his narrative, he commented, "I was too much time may be out. . . . Until now I was taking the time to study the recruitment test."

At interval 4, he more than doubled his previous efforts with five study sessions for a total of 135 minutes in a single week. However, in his reflection he noted, “One problem is that not enough time to reach the goal before. So I change the goal and want to achieve in the week before. This week, I will read . . . from 66 page to 80 page.” In other words, he realized that he would need to dedicate more time to his goal if he truly hoped to achieve it.

The final interval comprised 3 weeks, spanning a school holiday period, during which time he spent an average of 75 minutes over one or two sessions per week, leaving him well short of his originally stated goal. Once again, however, he offered an insight into his behavior with the following comment: “During the fallow period, there was the part time job. So I studied with the spare time.” In other words, his part-time job was his greater priority.

One last noteworthy remark in Daisuke’s final essay was his assertion, “I needed to fool the brain that I needed information.” Here he was describing a satiation control strategy by which he might trick himself into believing he was studying for a higher purpose. As we have seen, however, it seems not to have been worth the effort in this case.

## Case #2: Shohei

Similar to Daisuke, Shohei had more pressing demands on his time, and he responded accordingly, though he expressed greater conflict and frustration at the choices he felt compelled to make. In his final essay, he wrote:

*I failed my plan. But, that doesn't means I don't become a more autonomous learner. . . . I couldn't continue well every day because what I can't predict occurred consecutively. Though I tried to recover my plan, I couldn't, so I remade my plan. After this term, I think I need a more flexible plan. . . . Honestly, I felt*

*stress about 20 words almost everyday. That is collapsed when I'm pushed into a bad metal state. In fact, my [new] plan is broken up. It is clear that I can't control myself and my motivation when I'm so tired. I had to decide the constant time to get it over. If the time come, I changed my motivation and just do it without pushing myself.*

Thus, he distinguished action from ability. He explained that he knew what he needed to do, and he did even make an important attempt at self-adjustment. However, he was overwhelmed by matters of a much more serious nature and, thus, understandably devoted his time to his greater priorities.

Shohei’s development as a more autonomous language learner is further illustrated in the evolution of his self-reflections. For instance, at interval 1, his stated goal was to “become a person who can communicate each other in English,” which he changed at interval 3 to “extend my vocabulary to understand English well at least 500 words” so as to make the outcome more concrete. However, he also switched at this point from an individualized program of reading self-selected science news articles to a more generic one of studying from commercial TOEFL and GRE preparation materials. At interval 4, he revealed a source of divided attention:

*This week [my] plan is broken because I have to go to Iwate as a volunteer. I have to take my time for the preparation. If I had only this task, that would be no problem. I have other one, investigation that how medical center became after earthquake. I will take my card to the volunteer, but I don't think to memorize words such places. So, maybe 500 words is impossible for me. My plan has to be improve again.*

With interval 5 encompassing the O-bon (summer) holiday, it is unsurprising that his prediction of failure would indeed come true.

### Case #3: Emi

At first glance, Emi would seem to have developed a similar degree of autonomy. In her final essay, she indicated the use of a variety of self-motivation strategies. However, the existence of her goal itself might have been the strongest motivator in her case:

During this plan, I asked my friend to cheer me and *think positive* and *other many thing do* and *practice every day* for complete my plan. . . . I studying every day at a good rate. But [after the penultimate class] I notice my dairy studying plan has wrong. . . . Fortunately, [weeks 6 and 7] we have holiday, so I *decided to study double number of English word at one day*. For this change plan, I could complete my goal [by the last day of class].

Late in the semester, she realized that her plan had been miscalculated, so she doubled her efforts toward the end rather than come up even a few words short. She remarked that successfully completing her plan helped her to build confidence, but she did not make clear that she was capable of success without instructor support, especially since she studied every single day of the term. In her self-reflection at interval 1, for example, she wrote:

My own goal is master English words on “Kikutan Score800” and get TOEIC Score 800 next year test. . . . I have no problem in now, but if I forgot my words book or plan to use all day I have. That time, I study that day’s words previous day or next day and no late for plan as well as possible.

Her plan was essentially to pour all her faith into a single book and to study it 7 days a week for the rest of the semester.

At interval 2, she voluntarily included a 9-week study plan with a 6-day per week schedule, similar to one she had been

given as a model, but she never updated it at any point in the semester, despite her actual efforts and progress. Moreover, she made adjustments to her weekly plans in arguably maladapted ways:

My last weeks goal was studying every day as well as same time. But . . . I didn’t come home every day same time, so I can’t do well. I think again, I will not able to this goal for my schejule for class, so I made new goal. New goal is more 10 min. study time longer.

In other words, rather than build flexibility into her schedule, she decided to simply increase her daily study time hereafter by 10 minutes to compensate for unexpected delays over the past week.

At interval 3, Emi indicated that she employed self-encouragement as well as benefited from encouragement from her friends:

Last two weeks, often I wanted to didn’t study . . . but I cheer up me and did this weeks goal. . . . I want to do every day this study to last goal. To study every day in my life is very good thing I think. I want to do this for last goal reary. And last two weeks, I want to thank you to my friends. Ther’s cheer was very good my power to study.

To study every day of her life, however, while perhaps a laudable goal, is a practically unrealistic one as well. Moreover, she seemed to be increasingly consumed by her desire to meet her goal for its own sake even as she experimented with a number of additional new self-motivational strategies, such as those mentioned in this excerpt from her self-reflection at interval 4:

This week, I could my own goal. . . . I get bored with study everyday same time very easily but I did this study so I in building my self-confidence. And thanks to my friends

to cheer me sometime. More I set my own enjoy playing or enjoying something to me finished day study. This is my small fun at every study. By next week, in summer vacation, I want to do this study everyday same time as same as this week. But if I have some more time, I tried study a little more and add time and words.

Finally, her failure to review her weekly study plan found its effect as she noticed only in the last data collection interval that she had miscalculated the length of the term:

This two weeks, first I notice my Daily English words Study Plan was wrong. . . . Then I decided to do at 1 day, a number of 2 days words studying in this two weeks. So I completed my goal. And I add my study time in this 2 weeks.

Honesty, I think I can't did my goal. But I did this plan all. . . . I want to do study this book next week and next week until next TOEIC examination.

In summary, Emi successfully completed the short-term goal she had set for herself, but as she had finished the book, it appeared she would now simply review the material in it for the weeks to come until the next TOEIC administration. Moreover, she gave no indication that she had attempted or even planned to attempt any evaluation of the fruitfulness of her efforts such as by taking a sample TOEIC and comparing the results with her previous ones.

#### Case #4: Hana

Finally, we come to the case of Hana, whose eventual stated goal was simply to read three *Peanuts* cartoons online every week. In her final essay, she described the development of her autonomy as follows:

On the site, *there were some day the "today story" not exist. In this case, I read passed stories. . . . Comics have pictures so it is easy to understand the meaning of saying and feeling of character. I could continue to reading because of the picture is cute, and the story is fun. But I could not understand the fun point of the story sometimes. Such case, I strived for finding fun point in my way. When I have no time to read it, I did other day instead of it.*

As a result . . . I could achieved my goal. I think I acquired ability to understand meaning of feeling of character. And I could feel the difference of fun point between country or culture. Especially, I could not understand the fun point, I thought that it is impossible to construe as author want to express reader intrinsically. But if the same citizen, it may different to each one's own. So, definitely I sought to think it is important to find myself, interesting point, boring point etc. . . . I could also know common expression or special expression. But the number of vocabulary were increase, but no so much. Because wards in comic are not so difficult and used easy English to read anybody.

From the result, I think it is better to read books or newspapers than reading comics. Because if newspaper, I can read everyday because without no published. I would like to read them for the future.

Hana counted on a new strip being posted every day, but had a plan (to read old strips) when there wasn't one. She also had a make-up plan to accommodate contingencies, but her overall goal was relatively unambitious. Her chosen materials were attractive, but she did not always understand them. She seemed to rationalize that no one ever really knows what's in another person's head. She commented that the words were easy, so she didn't really expand her vocabulary. She remarked that newspapers would have been more useful, but she stayed with her original plan.

In her self-reflection at interval 1, her goal was simply “to improve the reading,” which she modified at interval 2 to the more quantifiable “At least, read the three stories every week. (18 stories for this term.)” The narratives of her self-evaluations, however, betray a serious misunderstanding of the purpose of the assignment, which she seemed to think was to summarize her reading. At interval 1, for example, she wrote, “On Monday, I read the ‘today’s peanuts’. The story is that a boy write a letter to snoopy stay in the hospital. He wrote the soon recovery. And, he feels jealous to the nurses.” After one-on-one teacher-student conferencing, her entry at interval 3 was the marginal improvement “This story’s fun point is controlling his feeling.” At interval 5, she even wrote, “In this week, I’m not sure the correctly understand the meaning of story.” In other words, she completed the assignment presumably because she knew she was required to do something for course credit, but she did not seem compelled to seek help from either any of her peers or her teacher.

### Summary and Discussion

The four cases presented above contrast two more highly autonomous learners who did not succeed in completing their short-term learning goals and two less highly autonomous ones who did. In demonstrating their autonomy, all four learners expressed the ability to plan and adapt their behavior and showed an awareness of self-regulatory strategies. However, the more autonomous learners chose to abandon their stated goals, whereas the less autonomous ones followed through on theirs for the sake of completion. Although these findings seem to contradict Bandura and Schunk’s (1981) conclusions about the positive effects of proximal goals on intrinsic interest and self-motivation, it must be noted that the choice of learner activities in the Bandura and Schunk study was restricted by the teacher and limited to time spent within the classroom, whereas the

learning goals in the cases of the learners in the current study generally required substantial time commitment outside of class as well.

From the perspective of Goal-Setting Theory (Locke, 1996; Locke & Latham, 1990), for optimal commitment and performance, goals need to be specific, difficult but attainable, and important. While all the stated goals in these four cases were specific in the sense that they were at least to some degree quantifiable, those of the more autonomous learners may have been too difficult to attain because they were not truly important. In fact, the more autonomous learners may have reached their goals had they had sufficient time to devote to them in class, but faced with bigger life concerns of job hunting and disaster relief volunteer work, they chose to pursue more urgent priorities rather than go through the motions of completing a self-imposed assignment of arguably very little benefit.

The ultimate personal value of the less autonomous learners’ short-term goals is likewise questionable, yet these learners demonstrated the necessary commitment to accomplish them in the end. Nevertheless, in one case the student’s plan required a level of dedication and effort that would have been unsustainable beyond such a short duration, and in the other it was so relatively undemanding as to necessitate very little, if any, time expenditure outside of class. Ironically, the nominal successes of these two learners betray their relative lack of autonomy, albeit in starkly different ways.

### Implications for Fostering Greater Learner Autonomy

While a necessary condition, learner autonomy in itself is insufficient for raising language proficiency levels, for students may demonstrate the ability to set goals, create learning plans, and employ self-motivational and other learning strategies on

demand but simply elect not to sustain these efforts on their own. Japanese university students are notoriously busy with a myriad of timely opportunities such as part-time jobs, club activities, and job hunting. As such, we need to help our learners develop their time management skills if we realistically hope for them to incorporate independent out-of-class language study into their already tight schedules. At the same time, however, we must also admit that learning English may simply not be a high enough priority for many students, who might rather devote any extra free time to putting other areas of their lives in order. No matter how explicit, challenging, and attainable the goals we teach them to set, learners are unlikely to expend the requisite effort on them if they lack real importance. Consequently, we must first strive to help learners find the personal value of advancing their English abilities, and whether or not we succeed, we can at least try to raise their awareness of their true priorities and, thus, lay bare the reasons for oftentimes low levels of ultimate proficiency attainment and minimize the stereotypical negative self-talk.

For those persuaded of the value of advanced language proficiency, it is essential that they learn the importance of setting distal goals and of visualizing the future to attain them (Miller & Brickman, 2004). Moreover, these learners need to acquire the ability to articulate their proximal goals within the larger framework of these long-term aspirations. In short, instructors must go beyond modeling the formulation of measurable goals and concrete, detailed learning plans and not only demonstrate the application of self-motivational strategies but help learners to bridge the gap between stages in their learning as well. Unfortunately, such an ambitious charge is unlikely to be accomplished in the course of a single semester and, thus, will probably require longitudinal efforts at the program level.

## Conclusion

Independent completion of individual proximal goals requires motivation but does not necessarily imply greater autonomy, whereas both of these attributes are essential to the eventual attainment of advanced language proficiency. As such, learners need to understand the personal value of their language study to ensure that the learning goals they set are not only specific, challenging, and attainable, but, above all, important. They also need to recognize their true priorities and possess the time management skills necessary to attend to them accordingly. Finally, they need to be able to envision the role of English in their future, to set distal goals to that end, and to situate and sequence their short-term learning goals along this extended timeline.

## Bio Data

**Paul Lyddon** is Associate Professor and Assistant Director for Assessment in the English Language Institute at Kanda University of International Studies. He has a PhD in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching from the University of Arizona.  
<palyddon@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>

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