

Goal Setting Through Personal Letter Writing

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Abstract

Having students determine their own goals in language learning can foster learner autonomy and potentially increase learner motivation. Goal setting through personal letter writing is an activity which can allow learners to be more conscious of their aspirations and reflect on their goals. The process of writing letters about goals will be discussed. The activity consisted of students writing one letter about their goals, both related and unrelated to the class, to themselves at the beginning of the semester. In mid-term, the students reread their first letter and then wrote a second letter about their goals. Though the instructor kept the students' letters for safe keeping, she did not read them and provided no feedback about their goals. This led to uncertainty about the activity and its success. The study gathered data from three classes of university students who participated in the activity, specifically about the level of difficulty of individual goal setting, how often the letters should be reviewed, the type of they goals set, and advice for others students about determining goals. The strengths and limitations of study as well as potential applications of the activity will be presented.

Keywords: *goal setting, letter writing, learner autonomy, student motivation*

Introduction

This paper will introduce letter writing as a way to improve students' motivation and foster learner autonomy in their English language learning by having them set goals that they determine. The process of using letter writing in EFL lessons will be explored. By allowing students to decide their own goals, it seems that this could also increase their sense of autonomy. The activity and data collected from the students will be presented. In addition, the strengths and limitations of the study will be discussed. Potential applications of goal setting through letter writing will also be shared.

Literature Review

There did not appear to be any published material about using personal letter writing to set goals in a language-learning context. As a result, focus was given to learner autonomy and goal setting. Learner autonomy is important because students need to have a sense of control in their language learning (Benson, 2011). Goal setting is an approach to foster learner autonomy in the classroom (Benson, 2011; Little, 2016). Ryan and Deci (2000) write that if individuals see value in an activity, they also have motivation to do that activity (p. 69). Students who are actively invested in their learning have motivation even when challenges occur (Little, 2016, para. 4). It appears that if learners feel invested in their goals, they will also be motivated to achieve these goals.

As students have opportunities to determine their own learning goals, they can possibly be more aware of the way they accomplish those goals. Chamot (2004) writes "Learning strategies are the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal" (p. 14). The strategies are typically unobservable; however, the actions that meet the goals are observable (Chamot, 2004, p. 15). If the student has their own personal learning goal, over the course of reaching

that goal they will develop their learning strategies. It is possible that the more opportunities the learners have to set their own learning goals, the more awareness of their learning strategies that they will have, potentially increasing their autonomy in their learning. This could further lead to the successful completion of their goals because of their increased awareness of how they learn and in turn how they learn successfully.

Setting goals is important for learners. Providing them with opportunities to determine their own goals can increase their motivation as they learn. However, if students continually fail at their goals, that may negatively affect their learning. In Locke's (1996) words, "Commitment to goals is most critical when goals are specific and difficult" (p. 119). If students set their own goals, their level of commitment will likely be higher than if their instructor dictates the goals. For effective goal setting, progress of the goal through feedback is necessary (Locke, 1996, p. 120). There needs to be some method of measurement to help students view their progress or to make adjustments if needed after the original goal has been set.

Goal Setting Through Letter Writing

Instead of using goal-setting activity created by the instructor for the learners, it seemed that implementing a more personalized activity may increase learner autonomy and motivation. Based on an activity of students self-reflecting on the term through letter writing, I decided to have some of my classes use letter writing to goal set as a potential way to foster learner autonomy and increase their motivation as well as possibly self-reflect throughout the term.

Over the 14-week semester, students wrote two, confidential letters to themselves. The first letter was written at the end of the first class. Guided by the literature about learner autonomy, goal setting, motivation, and goal measurement, the following suggestions were used to guide students in the writing process:

1. Your goals for this class, semester, university, club activities, part-time jobs, personal life, etc.
2. Tell yourself anything that you think will motivate you to do these goals.
3. Create questions about what you have written that you will answer in the middle and the end of term to check in with yourself.

Students completed their letter, sealed it in an envelope and gave it to the instructor for safekeeping. After 7 weeks or nearly 2 months later, at mid-term, the letters were returned. The students reread their goals and wrote a new letter to themselves, put both the previous and new letter in the envelope which was then resealed and returned it to the instructor. Then at the final lesson or after 14 weeks since the first letter, students were given back their two letters in the envelope. Though it is uncertain if this occurred, the instructor hoped that rereading the letters at two specified times would provide students with an opportunity for self-reflection. If the students had kept the letters and continually reviewed their letters, that self-reflection process might not occur.

Due to the confidential aspect of the activity, the instructor could not read the students' goals, give suggestions about the goals, provide feedback or ask if the goals were accomplished. This led to an uncertainty about the level of difficulty in goals setting and thus the activity. In addition, there was also an interest in the methods that students discovered during the process that might aid other students in determining goals and ways to evaluate these goals. As a result, the students' opinions and advice could benefit the effectiveness of similar activities in future classes. The research project was created to explore these areas.

Methodology

Participants

The study gathered data from 83 surveys distributed at the middle and end of term during one semester from three different EFL classes at a Liberal Arts university in Tokyo. The first class was a mandatory English presentation class for first-year intercultural communication. Most of the 21 students were returnees and had TOEIC scores of over 700. The second was an elective cross-cultural communications class for 15 second- to fourth-year students from various faculties. The third was an elective English discussion and meeting class also for second- to fourth-year students from various faculties totaling eight students. Most of the students in the two elective classes had lower English proficiencies than the first-year students. Though the first-year class was mandatory, those students were similarly motivated as compared with the students from the two elective classes. All the classes met twice a week for 100-min lessons. Due to the frequency of the classes, the English level and the motivation of the students, these three classes seemed ideal to not only use goal setting through letter writing but to also provide their opinions about the activity.

Instruments

The instruments used to collect data were written surveys. The two surveys were distributed for in-class completion. Both surveys contained questions to gather quantitative and qualitative data from the participants. Survey 1 was distributed in Week 7 or mid-term. Survey 2 was distributed in Week 14 or at the end of term.

Results

Survey 1

All classes were given Survey 1 in the mid-term or on the 14th class of the semester to a total of 42 students. Please see Appendix A for this survey. The survey consisted of statements about (a) the benefits of letter writing and the improvement of their English skills, (b) the level of difficulty for students deciding their own goals, (c) the difference between the goals in the first and second letter, and (d) the usefulness of reviewing the letter in mid-semester. All of the questions also had an optional prompt for the students to write the reasons for their choices in either English or Japanese, in addition to Likert-scale or numeric choices. Only three responses were written in Japanese and were later translated into English by the author.

Statement 1: Setting my own goals in a letter is helpful for improving my English skills.

42 Students

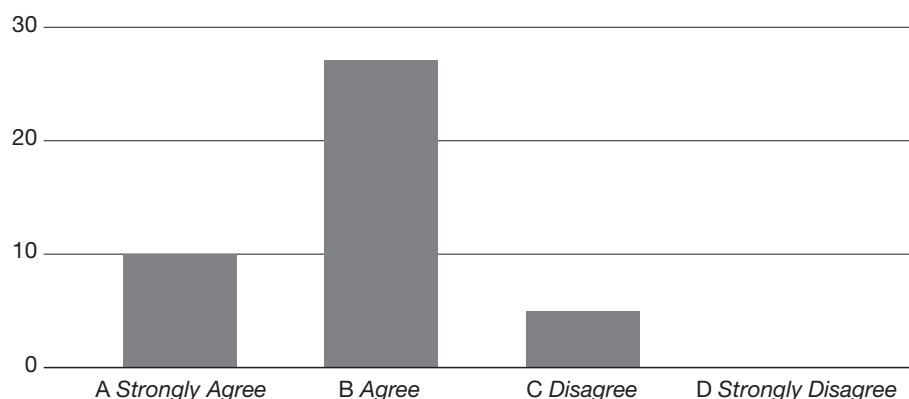


Figure 1. Participants' responses to Statement 1

The majority of the students, 37 out of 42, agreed or strongly agreed with the effectiveness of goal setting through letter writing. Four of the students who selected “strongly agree” in response to Statement 1, also responded to the optional writing prompt of “Because.” Many of their answers contained “motivate/motivation” or “achieve.” Of those who selected “agree,” nine wrote responses with “remember/remind” and “understand/know” related to their goals as well as “motivated/motivation.” For those who selected disagree, the three written responses were either related to forgetting the letter’s goals or already having goals before the class. Below is a selection of student responses:

- *If I had no goals, I took classes with no motivation.*
- *Some of the goals that I set in a letter, I kind of forgot till I open[ed] it, but I set small goals which are just for a semester so I could accomplish some of them. I'm really satisfied with it.*

Statement 2: Deciding my own goals is difficult to do.

42 Students

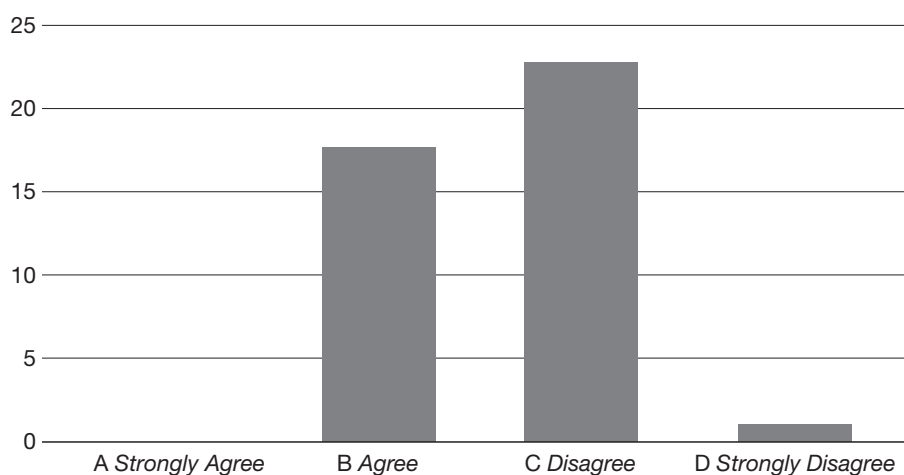


Figure 2. Participants' responses to Statement 2

In response to the above statement, 24 students disagreed and 1 strongly disagreed, while 18 agreed. The three students who agreed and responded to the optional prompt shared their uncertainty about how to measure their goals or a lack of confidence about whether their goals were appropriate. However, the majority of students that chose “disagree” expressed ease due to previously having set goals or already having goals before the class, resulting in a sense of self-awareness and motivation. Providing suggestions in the first lesson may have also reduced the level of difficulty for some learners. The following is a selection of student responses:

- *Personally, I do personal analysis often at my additional activity so that it is not difficult to set a goal [be]cause I know what is not enough or needed in my current situation.*
- *I had my own goal before I took this class, and that motivated myself if I hadn't set it.*
- *The teacher gave us some of the idea[s] for the goals so it was not that difficult for me to decide the goals for me.*

Statement 3: It is better for the teacher to set my goals.

41 Students (1 did not submit answer)

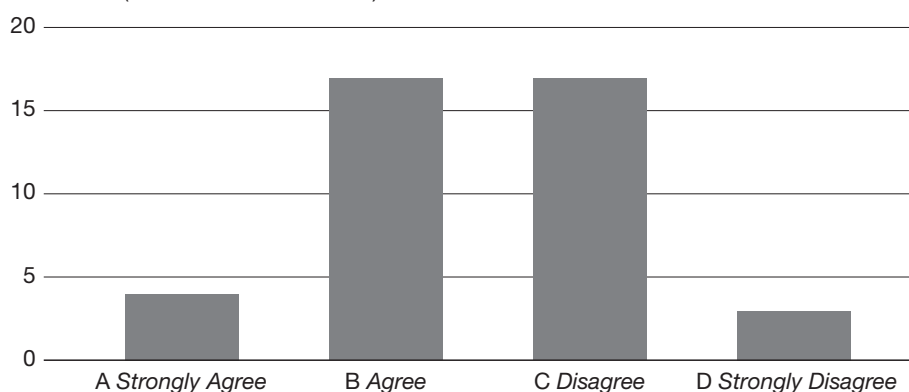


Figure 3. Participants' responses to Statement 3

There were 21 students who provided a positive response versus 20 students who gave a negative response. Of the 21 who agreed and provided a written response, their answers were that the teacher has a better awareness of the students' abilities and therefore the students' goals. Consequently, the instructor could then plan classes that will more effectively help students reach these goals. The written responses from the 20 students who either disagreed or strongly disagreed were related to the importance of the individual determining their own goals and not an outside party due to the uniqueness of each individual. The following is a selection of student responses:

- *[You c]an know the level of yourself.*
- *I don't want [the] teacher to do that.*
- *We all seem [to be] having different goals so I would think one of us think[s] of each['s] own goals by ourselves [would] be better.*
- *Because dreams' goals are different for each person.* (Translated from Japanese)

Statement 4: The number of goals that I set for myself in my first letter was:

42 Students

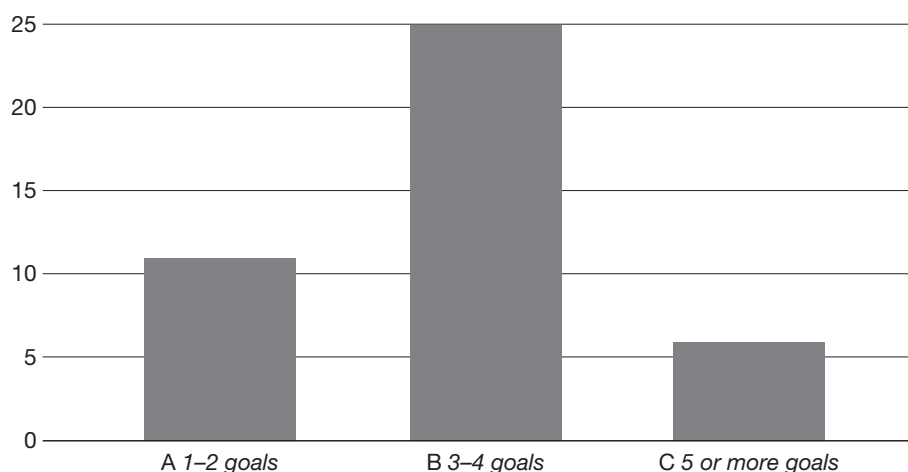


Figure 4. Participants' responses to Statement 4

The students' responses were that three to four goals was the number most commonly set for the activity as 25 of the 42 students wrote that number. Again students had the option of sharing examples of their goals. Most of the students shared that many of their goals were related to improving their English skills through achieving a higher score of 750 or 800 on TOEIC tests, increasing their vocabulary such a one new word a day, and using the class' target language. However, some goals shared were related to their part-time jobs, university club activities, and saving money. A few also wrote that their goals were to enjoy life or to try traveling alone.

Statement 5: Reading the letter again in the mid-term lesson helped me to think about my goals.

42 Students

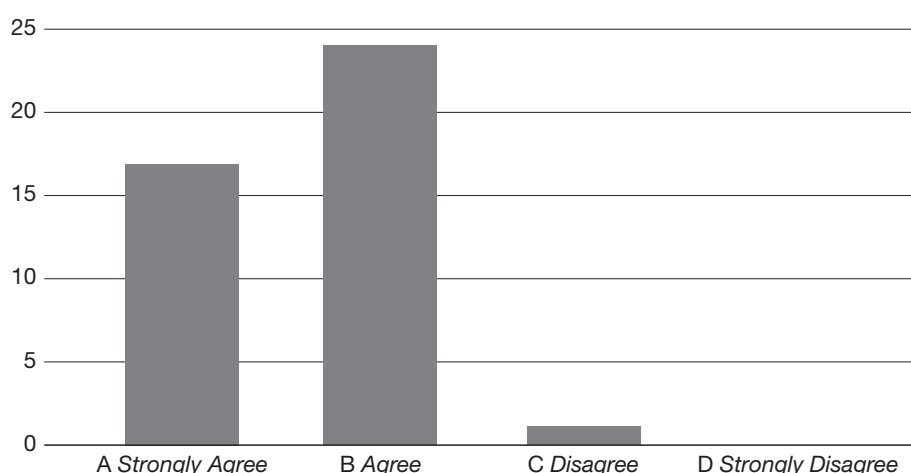


Figure 5. Participants' responses to Statement 5

The majority of students, 41, either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement confirming the benefits of reviewing the letter with only 1 disagreeing. The written responses given by the students expressed that rereading the letter helped them "remember" the goals which had been "forgotten." Furthermore, reviewing their goals caused them to be more motivated. A selection of their answers is below:

- *I could remember my goals clearly.*
- *I can remember what my goals are again and it's good for me to motivate myself.*
- *Clarifying the goals is very useful to motivate oneself.*

Statement 6: The goals that I set for myself in the second letter were:

41 Students

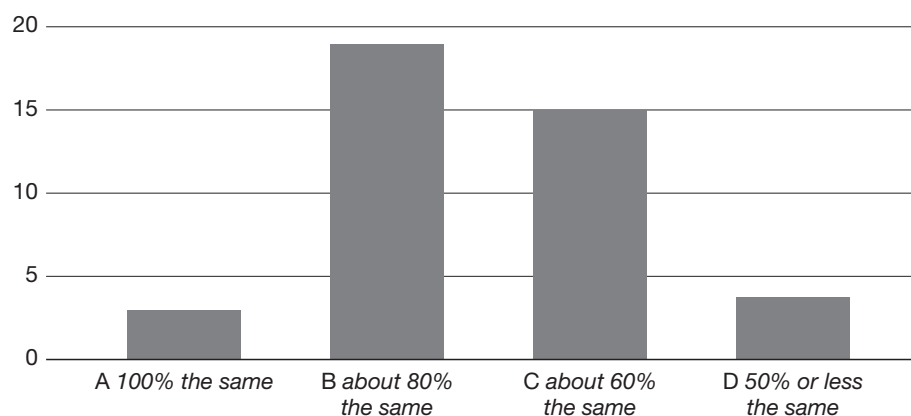


Figure 6. Participants' responses to Statement 6

This statement was to determine if a change in their goals from the beginning to the middle of term occurred. Three students reported that their goals remained unchanged. One of those students responded that their goal was 100% the same because they had not taken the TOEIC test. "About 80% the same" was given by 19 students and "about 60% the same" was given by 15 students. For these two groups of students, their written responses were related to a limited amount of change in their abilities or ways of thinking. Although one student felt their goals had become more specific and needed to be improved upon. A selection of their responses is below:

- *Since almost all goals weren't achieved yet, I want to see how it will be in a couple more months.*
- *The way to think[ing] changed a little.*
- *The goals become more specific ones.*
- *Because I achieve[d] some goals. So I put the goals in [a] higher level.*

Survey 2

Survey 2 given at the end of term, focused on (a) how often the letters should be reviewed, (b) the types of goals the students had made, and (c) their advice to other students for successful goal setting. Survey 2 is in Appendix B. The construction of Survey 2 was slightly different from Survey 1 with a greater emphasis on qualitative data. The first two questions contained numeric selections. Three of the four questions also had an optional prompt for the students to write the reasons for their choices. Students were again instructed that responses in either English or Japanese were acceptable. In this survey, all of their written responses were in English. The data from the survey is below.

Question 1: How often should the letters be reviewed to help you remember your goals?

41 Students

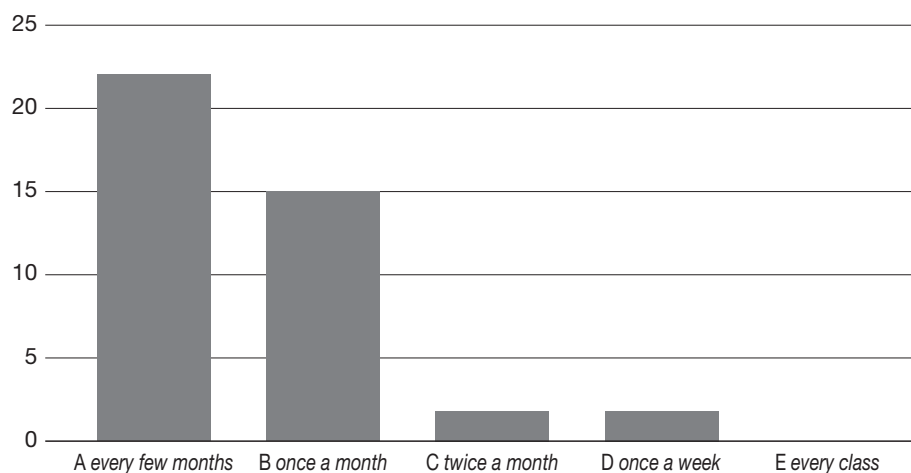


Figure 7. Participants' responses to Question 1

In the research project the letters were reviewed after 6 weeks or almost after a few months. Over half of the students, 22 out of 42, answered that every few months was appropriate. Their written responses were because that amount of time was sufficient to achieve their goals as well as being an adequate time to help them remember the goals. A selection of their responses is below:

- *Because it takes a lot of time to achieve the goal.*
- *[G]oals don't change soon. So "A" [every few months] is enough.*
- *I don't forget within [a] month, but maybe I forget in [a] few month[s] after.*

In the written responses from the 15 students who selected "once a month," they answered this period of time was appropriate to help them remember because after 6 weeks some had forgotten their goals. A selection of their responses is below:

- *Because reviewing the letter once a month would be helpful to evaluate regularly and remind myself [of my] goals for this course all the time.*
- *Today, I opened my letter, actually I forgot my goal. So, once a month is appropriate I thought.*
- *I think once a month is enough to remember your goals.*

For the options "twice a month" and "once a week," both were answered by two students respectively. Also each option had only one written response, as it appeared that anything more than one a month may be too frequent. For "once a week," the student wrote:

One term is about three months, which is so short. So if we review [the] letter once a week, we can try to improve based on reflection.

Question 2: Did you make any goals in your letter that were not connected to the class?

41 SURVEYS BUT MULTIPLE ANSWERS PER SURVEY, WITH 1 UNANSWERED

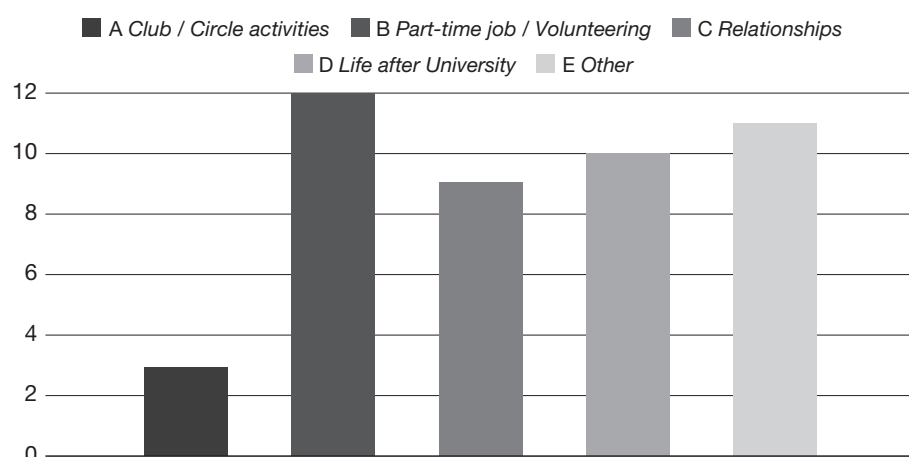


Figure 8. Participants' responses to Question 2

Only five students responded that they made goals that were solely related to the class. There were 12 students that made goals about part-time jobs or volunteering, 9 that made goals about their relationships, 10 that made goals about life after university, and 11 made goals related to other areas. This means that 25% of the students made goals in the category of "Other." However, only one student specified what the goal was and wrote "GPA, TOEFL and IELTS."

For Question 3 and 4, the responses did not have a numeric selection and only had an optional written prompt. Here is the third question: "Question 3: What kind of advice do you have for other students about writing goal-setting letters? For example, what goals or questions would be helpful? Please write them below. Optional." Over 30 students of the 41 students wrote answers. Many shared the types of goals they had written which could be categorized into academics, lifestyles, part-time jobs, and English study. Fourteen of their responses contained the words "specific," "realistic" and/or "concrete." A selection of their responses is below:

- *We should write specific goals. It would be good that when we review the letter, we can judge how we achieve this goal.*
- *Setting concrete goals. So that it's easy for us to judge if I could complete the goals.*
- *When you set your goals, it's better to set numerical goals because it's easy to be aware of your goals.*
- *I think setting a very specific objective is helpful. ex) to take over 100 on [the] TOEFL ibt.*

Many wrote about the importance of setting challenging yet achievable goals, ones that can be accomplished in a specified time. Some also reported that small goals would be preferable to help maintain motivation. A selection of their responses is below:

- *To set goals that can be done would be helpful for setting goals.*
- *First, you have to think [of] big goals, and next you have to make short goals related to big goals.*
- *Certainly, just writing goal-setting is good. However, writing how to achieve is more effective in addition to writing goal-setting.*
- *It'll be helpful to make goals we sincerely want to achieve. We sometimes need to make efforts vainly. Efforts need purpose which are so firm and never fail.*

The final question of the survey is “Question 4: If you would like to share some goals or questions you used in your letters, please write them here. Optional.” Of the 41 students, 23 shared what they wrote in their letters. Most of their responses were related to this English class and other classes currently studied. Four responses contained goals related to finances, employment and exercise. A selection of their responses follows:

- *To deepen the understanding of particular global issues: Gender and sustainability through this course. To do my best on all the assignments.*
- *One of my goal[s] in this class we ‘use various phrases and vocabulary.’ In every lesson, I tried to use many phrases, so I could achieve this goal.*
- *Be positive and active in class.*
- *Can you brush up your vocab skill? Do you have confidence when you express your idea more than before?*

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths and limitations of the study will be discussed. The data provided answers to the level of difficulty of goals setting as well as advice about how to set and achieve the goals. First, students provided their opinions about the difficulty of determining their own goals. Of the 42 students surveyed, 25 answered that this was not difficult. It seems that these students had awareness of their abilities and the agency to set their own goals. Thus, goal setting gave them more autonomy in their decisions. Second, most students provided insight in how to effectively accomplish their goals, specifically suggestions about using concrete and detailed goals, preferably smaller versus larger goals. Students were also given autonomy to decide any goals they determined as appropriate though some suggestions were presented in the first lesson. Students were also expected to evaluate how successfully they could complete their goals. Reviewing the first and second letter could also have aided with self-reflection as students had opportunity to view the progress, or perhaps lack of the progress, of their goals.

There are limitations as the number of participants sampled, only 41 to 42, and the time which was only one semester. The students were also highly motivated and most seemed to take the activity and give feedback about it quite seriously. If other participants were involved, results might be quite different. Other limitations are connected to the structure of the activity which may have influenced the data. Other than suggestions given in the first lesson about possible goals they could use and a brief overview of the activity, no support was given to the students by the instructor. If students lack experience in goal setting or confidence assessing their abilities and an understanding of their aspirations, the activity could be very challenging and potentially meaningless. Explicitly connecting goals to the class syllabus could have made the activity more meaningful to those learners who may have struggled with how to set relevant goals. The students in this study were highly motivated and quite proficient, so this activity may not work for those students who do not see the value in their studies due to mandatory classes or having negative feelings about the subject.

The instructor kept the letters, so students could not freely access the letters to remember or confirm their goals. Feedback that shows progress is beneficial when goal setting (Locke, 1996, p. 119). Though the students were told to create questions that would help them with determining the progression of their goals, no other ways to measure their progress were given. When the activity is used again, more explicit examples of goals, especially ones connected to the course and the ways to

measure the success of the students' goals will be suggested. Furthermore, students will be given the option to keep their letters instead of having the instructor keep them.

Potential Applications

This section will offer suggestions for potential ways this activity in English classes with learners who have varying levels of proficiencies in different educational settings. If the learners have a lower proficiency in English, providing samples of goals and a letter will assist with the activity. Providing prompts for feedback could also be given at the beginning, middle and final stages of the activity. For instance, breaking the goal into smaller goals, such as a certain date each smaller goal needs to be achieved by. Or perhaps using a timeline that is often reviewed and possibly revised throughout the term could also be useful. Letter-writing structure and grammar such as future tense, could also be incorporated into the activity. If the activity is less confidential, the instructor or even peers could provide feedback about the letters.

Conclusion

Using personal goal setting through letter writing can provide students with more autonomy in their learning as students determine their own goals instead of the instructor setting them. In addition, this activity could as well as possibly provide learners with more motivation to achieve their goals. This is because the students have selected goals that should be meaningful to them. The participants in this study provided feedback about the difficulty of the activity and gave advice about what types of goals are ideal. Goal setting and learner autonomy through personal letter writing in an area for further exploration in ESL and EFL lessons.

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Appendix A

Goal-Setting Letter Survey

1 Setting my own goals in a letter is helpful for improving my English skills.

A Strongly Agree B Agree C Disagree D Strongly Disagree

Optional Because... (Comment):

2 Deciding my own goals is difficult to do.

A Strongly Agree B Agree C Disagree D Strongly Disagree

Optional Because... (Comment):

3 It is better for the teacher to set my goals.

A Strongly Agree B Agree C Disagree D Strongly Disagree

Optional Because... (Comment):

4 The number of goals that I set for myself in my first letter was:

A 1–2 goals B 3–4 goals C 5 or more goals

Optional Example of the goals... (Comment):

5 Reading the letter again in the mid-term lesson helped me to think about my goals.

A Strongly Agree B Agree C Disagree D Strongly Disagree

Optional Because... (Comment):

6 The goals that I sent for myself in the second letter were:

A 100% the same B about 80% the same C about 60% the same D 50% or less the same

Optional Because... (Comment):

Appendix B

Goal-Setting Letter Survey 2

1 How often should the letters be reviewed to help you remember your goals?

A every few months B once a month C twice a month D once a week E every class

Optional Because... (Comment):

2 Did you make any goals in your letter that were not connected to the class?

A Yes

What were the goals about?

A Club / Circle activities

B Part-time job / Volunteering

C Relationships

D Life after University

E Other

B No

3 What kind of advice do you have for other students about writing goal-setting letters? For example, what goals or questions would be helpful? Please write them below:

Optional:

4 If you would like to share some goals or questions you used in your letters, please write them here:

Optional:
