# Goal Orientation vs. Performance: Taking Theory 'To Task' in the Japanese EFL Classroom

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## Goal theory in EFL

Within the broad and often overlapping research of motivation in EFL, goal orientation is consistently observed as an integral driving force behind the time and labor-intensive process of L2 acquisition (Dornyei, 2007, Honicke & Broadbent, 2016, Robson, 2016). Despite this observation, teachers are regularly unable to adapt the current understanding and theory of goal orientation into their classroom practice (Cheng & Dornyei, 2007). This study examined the goal orientations of a group of Japanese foreign language students with regard to their English learning. By examining the student orientations in relation to the multitude of goal theory literature, classroom and institutional strategies are proposed to target and influence the initial, pre-actional motivations that drive academic performance (D?rnyei, 2002).

The following is a list of relevant goal definitions within the current literature. It should noted that these orientations are not necessarily in competition with each other. In fact, it has been shown that students can simultaneously adopt various goal orientations to achieve success (Li & Shieh, 2015). Further still, strategies deemed in some studies have proven successful in others, most likely as a result of the large variety of socio-cultural and psychological variables that influence students' outlook on the utility of English (Robson, 2016). Self Determination Theory or SDT is a prime example of a theory that presupposes certain traits about learners, but up to now, has not been validated in a Japanese EFL setting (Robson, 2016) As such, SDE was excluded from the following overview of goal orientation research in EFL.

**Table 1. Summary of goal orientation theory in EFL**

| Goal orientation | Relevant literature | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Mastery and performance | Pintrich and Schunk (1996) Huang (2011) | Students who focus on mastery are generally more successful than those that focus on performance, however both strategies can be simultaneously employed, |
| Approach and avoidance | Dwek & Benpechat (1983) | Students who use 'approach' strategies, seek success in their study, and have shown to be more successful than those that study to avoid failure |
| Proximal and distal | Dornÿei (1998) | Proximal goals are related to short term objectives, whereas distal goals are 'long term', and associated with greater success in L2 acquisition |
| Internal and external | Deci and Ryan (1985) | Internal or intrinsic goals are those formulated from a personal and self-driven perspective, and associated with more successful outcomes that externally driven goals, such as striving to pass a test |
| International posture | Yashima (2009) | International posture can be recognized through either |

Despite the clear evidence that, internal, mastery and approach driven goals together represent an ideal orientation for L2 learners, many EFL teachers are not able to clearly implement goal orientation strategies into their own teaching practice (Cheng & Dornyei, 2007, Tsukamoto, 2016). This discrepancy between theory and practice can be attributed to a lack of information on students' goal orientations, and lack of knowledge on the subsequent strategies available to positively influence students' self efficacy (Cheng & Dornyei, 2007).

## Purpose of research

This study was designed in a pilot fashion to determine the kind of goal orientation models that would best represent a group of Japanese foreign language students, and how those models correlated with academic performance over the

course of a year. Based on findings by Li & Shi (2015) and many others, it was hypothesized that higher achieving students would indicate a more 'concrete' and consistent set of internationally based, mastery goals, meanwhile expressing a higher percentage of internal/distal goals about English in their future (Duggan & Honeda, 2016, Huang, 2011). Of greater relevance though, was the goal orientation of low performing students. By confirming a clear correlation between goal orientations and low performance, hypothesized as being external, approach avoidance and/or performance based, a more customized set of strategies could be devised to positively influence student performance.

**Method**

**Participants**

A sample of twenty two students were taken from all years of a language major course at a university in Western Japan. All students were taking at least one lesson in English per week at the time of the study.

**Instruments**

Save for one question, an identical survey was administered to students at both the start and end of the academic year. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for observation of any possible changes in feedback over the academic year, and how this may have correlated to academic performance. To gauge language anxiety feedback about the classroom and the teacher, two questions using a 5 point, likert-type scale was applied. For goal orientation questions, an open-ended question format allowed for a more unbiased and detailed range of data. Rather than strictly attempt to validate a particular model of orientation, the most relevant theory that matched the data was applied to draw conclusions and make practical suggestions. Both surveys contained questions on distal goals, specifically "Will you/How will you need English in the future?" The second survey differed only by one question that aimed to interpret any proximal goals by asking, "What is your 'English goal' for the coming year?".

**Academic Performance**

The difference in students' TOEIC or TOEIC Bridge scores, from the initial test in April 2015 and the final test in December 2015, was used to indicate the

level of academic improvement over the year. All students involved in the survey took either TOEIC or TOEIC Bridge in both the first and second semester of the study. TOEIC Bridge is a mandatory test for first year students, while TOEIC is mandatory for second year students. Third and fourth year students are not required to take these tests, however they are encouraged to do so. As such, 9 third and fourth year students who took the TOEIC test twice in the year were able to be included in the study.

## Results

This study attempted to identify students' goal orientation in regards to learning English, and how this compared with academic performance. Students were grouped according to their academic improvement over the year, regardless of the type of TOEIC test they took. Group A contained students that improved by over 50 points on their TOEIC test over the academic year. Group B showed an improvement of between 0-50 points, and group C showed no improvement in their test scores.
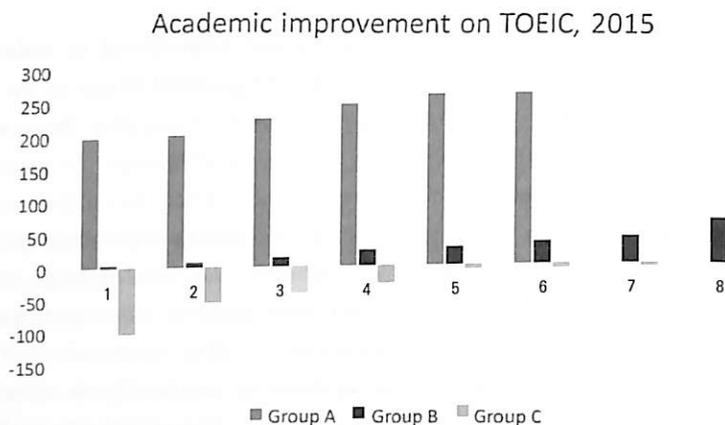
Academic improvement on TOEIC, 2015



Figure 1. Individual Academic improvement on TOEIC scores, 2015

## Language anxiety

As shown in figure 2, students scored progressively lower on language anxiety over the year, while higher academic achievement correlated with lower overall anxiety. This consistency in anxiety reduction indicates that language anxiety

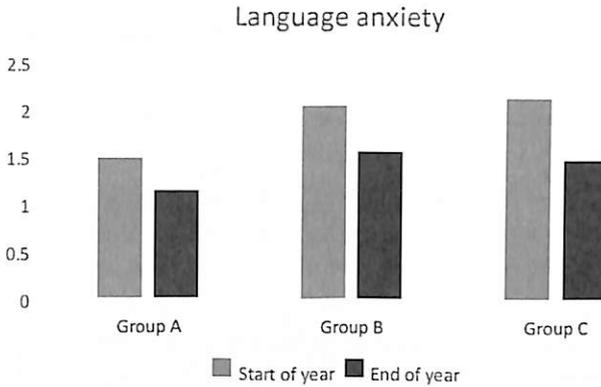was not a contributing factor in academic performance for any particular group.

### Language anxiety



Figure 2. Language anxiety vs. academic improvement

**Orientation**

In line with the dearth of current goal theory, the highest performing group, or group A, expressed a predominantly internal, mastery and approach based orientation, and this type of orientation correlated directly with academic performance across all three groups (Robson, 2016). In a similar yet converse fashion, groups B and C were predominantly shaped by external, performance driven goals, or simply responded differently on the two surveys. International posture, while evident in all groups, mainly displayed an attitudinal or behavioral propensity', such as wanting to go 'abroad', rather than 'knowledge orientation', such as interest in foreign affairs or specific foreign matters (Yashima, 2010). Arguably, the former orientation is representative of a less substantial commitment, and a less potent driver of success.
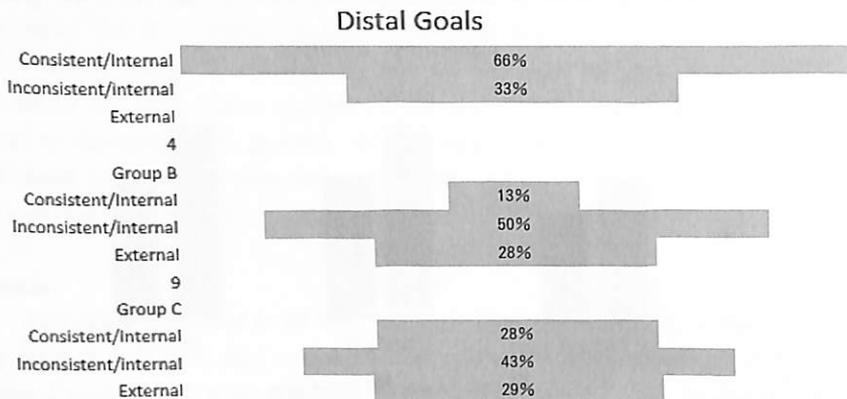
## Distal Goals

| | |
|---|---|
| Consistent/Internal | 66% |
| Inconsistent/internal | 33% |
| External | |
| 4 | |
| **Group B** | |
| Consistent/Internal | 13% |
| Inconsistent/internal | 50% |
| External | 28% |
| 9 | |
| **Group C** | |
| Consistent/Internal | 28% |
| Inconsistent/internal | 43% |
| External | 29% |

**Figure 3.1 Distal Goals**

## Proximal Goals

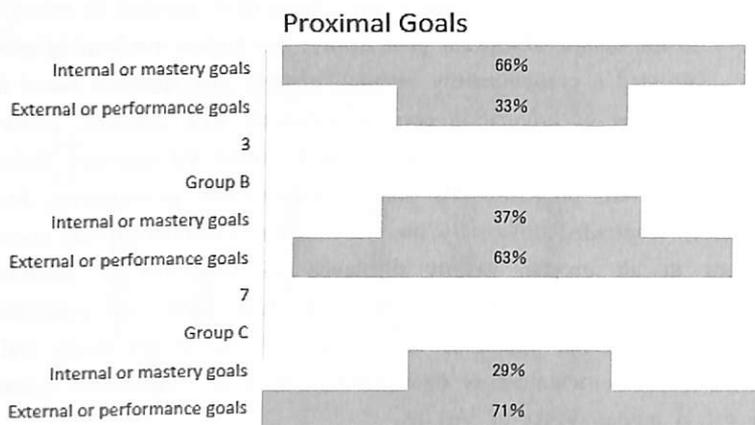| | |
|---|---|
| Internal or mastery goals | 66% |
| External or performance goals | 33% |
| 3 | |
| **Group B** | |
| Internal or mastery goals | 37% |
| External or performance goals | 63% |
| 7 | |
| **Group C** | |
| Internal or mastery goals | 29% |
| External or performance goals | 71% |

**Figure 3.2 Proximal goals**

## Discussion

As hypothesized, both internal, distal goals and proximal, mastery goals cor-related highly with academic performance. The utility value of English to high achieving students was a pronounced feature of the data, with 66% of students in group A, consistently expressing their desire to use English in their future

employment. While confirming previous findings about the value of internal/ distal goals, the specific correlation with perceived utility and performance, while not specifically addressed in the study, appears to be an important indicator within internal goal orientation (LI & Shieh, 2015, Sherlock & Nakao, 2016).

Considering the high percentage of under-performing students in the sample population, a more detailed analysis of this group's data was warranted. A cursory glance reveals that under-performing students were over represented, in terms of external/performance driven goals, particularly in a proximal sense. The detail within these responses likely reflect students' inability to see the value of English in their current situation, evidenced by the large percentage of vague and/or inconsistent answers provided by groups B & C in both surveys, and supports Sherlock and Nakao's (2016) argument about the crucial role of utility value in performance.

Given the clear correlations presented in these findings, a simple orientation profile of the student population can be constructed. High achieving students are generally driven by internal, distal goals, typically seeing themselves as using English in their future job. On the other hand, underachieving students are more likely to have undeveloped distal goals, while likely being oriented towards performance based, proximal goals; namely performance on tests.

### Suggestions

Despite the sociocultural norms that influence the entrenched culture of test performance in Japan, the lack of internally driven orientation is perpetuated by institutional and teaching norms, and many of these require review if the outlook for this set of EFL learners is to improve (Yashima, 2010). As classroom teachers, there are regular chances to instill changes in student perspective (Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015). Varasteh, Ghanizadeh & Akbari (2016), for example, have suggested introducing motivational, cognitive and self regulation as core components of the class curriculum, in order to improve academic performance. Another concept, successfully implemented in non-EFL classes by Rohe, Funke, Storch & Webber (2016), is the concept of 'motto goals', wherein students create their own personal motto that activates a person's resources, particularly during times of stressful or unpleasant high end activities. The idea of a motto goal has shown to be advantageous to traditional performance goals, and may provide benefits for

some Japanese EFL learners who are struggling to maintain focus on seemingly abstract topics (Rohe et. al, 2016).

Outside of the classroom, there are various opportunities to present students with the inspiration to build their own long term, internally driven goals about English. The positive correlation of career goals and performance suggest that students could benefit from information about careers, and if possible, more exposure to specific international experiences, such as international exchange or host programs.

**Further study**

While statistically revealing, the sample size of this study is not large enough to warrant conclusive findings. Further examination of a larger size sample population, within the institution's new, 'cross-strand' curriculum format is required to give a clearer picture of current orientation trends within the college. The new school department system, which integrates three very unique departments into one, will have a potentially harmful effect on student goal formation, and therein academic performance in English. An initial survey of over 100 students has already been administered, with a follow-up survey due in 2017. From a pedagogic perspective, design and implementation of pilot studies to test the motivational strategies mentioned in this paper are also needed, in order to validate their inclusion in an EFL setting.

**Conclusion**

This paper serves as a preliminary study into the specific goal orientations of a group of Japanese college students, and how these orientations impact on academic performance. As is the trend with other universities in Japan in this age of shrinking student populations, the college in question is now implementing a cross-strand course that allows students to study a broad range of subjects. This move to 'cross-strand' curriculum may present difficult challenges for EFL educators, as the labor intensive and time-consuming task of language learning may be neglected in favor of traditional subjects that are less intensive. The findings of this study indicated that high performing students are oriented towards careers, whereas under-performing students focus on test performance. Given the likely negative impact of the new curriculum for foreign language on the kinds of

strong, internal goal formation needed to master a language, specific strategies such as increasing student knowledge of the relevance English may play in their future career, should be further explored by both staff and teachers.

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