

The Advantage of Power of Goal-setting Theory Coupled with the Power of Choice in Iranian EFL Learners' Writing

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Abstract—This study attempted the effectiveness of implementing a basic goal-setting choice model in Iranian EFL students' essay writing course. It explored a motivational strategy, power of goal-setting theory coupled with the power of choice, to motivate students to choose the challenging tasks when given the choice. To boot, the difference between male and female learners with regard to their choice of goals was surveyed. The findings of the study on 93 EFL university students revealed that the majority of students preferred to pick the most challenging goal when presented with the choice to select their own goals. Furthermore, the results indicated that there was no significant difference between male and female learners regarding their choice of goals. The findings of this study can draw the attention of teachers to the fact that goal-setting theory can serve as an extremely promising pedagogical strategy in teaching L2 writings.

Index Terms—writing, goal-setting theory, power of choice, EFL learners, gender

I. INTRODUCTION

Why some students participate eagerly in classroom activities while others not? The reason for this disparity can be clarified through the concept of motivation. Generally motivation means “the reasons underlying behavior” (Guay et al., 2010, p. 712). It is “what gets people going, keeps them going, and helps them finish tasks” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, cited in Pintrich, 2003). Student motivation is one of the problems commonly cited by teachers; thus, they want to know what factors affect motivation and what strategies can boost it.

One of these factors is goal-setting which is an important source of task motivation (Bandura, 1986; Locke, Motowidlo, & Bobko, 1986; Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Given the fact that goals are fundamental elements to the study of motivation, it is not surprising that researchers interested in student motivation and learning are concentrating considerable attention to the role of goals during learning. Hence, Goals are assumed to be central components of motivation and learning (Schunk, 2003).

Therefore, in this study we aim at throwing more light on the power of goal-setting theory combined with the power of choice and employing it as a model for motivating Iranian EFL learners. This model is on the basis of motivational goal-setting theory. Dailey (2000) asserts that management and organizational behavior theory recommends that goal-setting is assumed to be a useful strategy in enhancing motivation. In addition, goal-setting theory held the first rank in validity and second in efficacy in comparison with other motivational strategies (Lee & Early, 1988).

In 2002, Nunley presented a very successful method for curriculum design entitled as Layered Curriculum™. This approach has been effectively employed in many subjects including language learning and works on three layers of curriculum objectives relating to deeper levels of understanding. Moreover, students are provided with the opportunity of picking their own learning goals in this method. Accordingly, the power of choice for selecting proximal goals can be a useful motivational strategy in educational contexts.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Gardner (1985), motivation is generally “a combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes towards learning the language” (cited in William & Burden, 1997, p.116). As a matter of fact, motivation plays an indispensable role in the process of learning while it still provokes much discussion and debate as identifying specific factors influencing motivation in language learning. Teachers and managers have experienced that motivation is needed for success. Experience indicates that students must sustain motivation to be successful even if they do not enjoy their learning tasks (Melendy, 2008).

Wlodkowski (1984) put forward a remarkable motivational sequence for learning. Based on his motivational sequence, there are three stages that can contribute to motivation. The beginning stage includes attitude and needs; stimulation and affective strategies are in the middle; and competence and reinforcement strategies are in the final stage.

In the first stage, the attitude component implies that teachers make an attempt to facilitate positive attitudes towards learning the subject and to build expectancy that task requirements can be satisfied successfully. Furthermore, the needs component relates to providing a collaborative rather than competitive environment. In the second stage, stimulation involves the stimulation of learners' attention, and the affective component refers to establishing a positive group atmosphere. In the third stage, the competence component relates to designing activities which bring about feelings of accomplishment and progress as results of effort. At last, the reinforcement element refers to creating activities resulting in praise and rewards by dint of indicating the positive results of tasks.

In 1988, Glasser proposed a similar motivational model which had four elements: survival, love and belonging, power, and freedom. It is very similar to Wlodkowski's sequence. Firstly, the survival element refers to feelings of comfort and security. The love and belonging element refers to a more cooperative and desirable group atmosphere which is less competitive. Next, the power element refers to feelings of empowerment as a result of attaining one's goals. At last, freedom deals with providing students with more autonomy and more opportunities to make choices.

Power and freedom are of special interest; power deals with the empowerment and satisfaction in making progress towards one's goals. That is, as students get better, they enjoy experiencing a sense of power from enhancing their skills and acquiring more knowledge. Hence, power can be regarded as highly motivating. Freedom is also greatly motivating because when students are provided with the opportunities of making choices, they tend to become more intrinsically motivated to attain their goals.

"Goal setting involves establishing a goal and modifying it as necessary" (Bandura, 1986, 1988, cited in Schunk, 1990). Goals encourage people to invest much effort, show persistence, and make people attend to task features and the strategies which facilitate their accomplishment in the task (Locke & Latham, 1990). Goals do not intrinsically promote learning and motivation; however, the goal properties of specificity, proximity, and difficulty are of utmost importance (Bandura, 1977; Latham & Yukl, 1975; Locke, 1968; Locke et al., 1981; Schunk, 1984). Specific goals tend more to improve learning and performance than no goals or general goals (Locke & Latham, 1990; Locke, 1968; Locke et al., 1981; Rosswork, 1977; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Gaa, 1973; Schunk, 1983, 1985; Tollefson, Tracy, Johnsen, Farmer, & Buening, 1984). Proximal goal setting refers to splitting complex or larger tasks into simpler completed parts (Wolters, 2003; Schunk & Gaa, 1981). Another property, namely, difficulty is the needed task proficiency being measured on the basis of a standard (Locke, et al., 1981). The amount of effort students exert to achieve a goal relies on at which level it is set. Furthermore, the research shows a positive relationship between task performance and difficulty level of a given task (Locke, et al., 1981; Rosswork, 1977; Schunk, 1983). To conclude, abundant research confirms the value of goals in enhancing students' motivation, self-efficacy, and achievement (Bandura, 1988; Locke & Latham, 1990; Schunk, 1990).

Reviewing the literature, it seems that plenty of studies has been carried out in the realm of motivation (Ames, 1992; Bandura, 1991; Bandura & Cervone, 1986; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Britner & Pajares, 2001; Broussard & Garrison, 2004; Choi & Medalia, 2010; Dev, 1997; Dornyei, 1994a, 1994b, 2001, 2003; Elliot & Dweck, 2005; Hosseini Fatemi, Pishghadam, & Vahidnia, 2014; Hosseini Fatemi & Vahidnia, 2013a, 2013b; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995; Yusuf, 2011). Although some research compared goal theory of motivation with task motivation (Bandura, 1986; Locke et al., 1981; Locke et al., 1986), few studies (e.g., Melendy, 2008) have examined the role of power of choice in proximal goal-setting. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, Melendy (2008) is the only researcher who has investigated the effectiveness of the power of choice of proximal academic goals as a strategy for enhancing student motivation in an undergraduate composition. The results of his study indicated that more students selected the most challenging tasks when given the choice. In addition, the implications of his study showed that this approach could be an effective motivational strategy in academic writing courses.

Therefore, paucity of research in this realm makes this particular study significant, with the prime purpose of testing a motivational strategy which was the power of goal-setting combined with the power of choice. Moreover, this research was about to explore the value of implementing a basic goal-setting choice model in essay writing courses within an EFL context. The chief objective of this study was to ascertain whether offering the Iranian EFL students the choice to select their own goals could motivate them to pick the most difficult task or not. In addition, this research aims at exploring the difference between male and female learners with regard to their choice of goals.

Research Hypotheses are as follows:

H.1: Students are not willing to perform more difficult tasks when given the choice.

H.2: There is no difference between male and female students concerning their goal choices.

III. METHOD

A. *Setting and Participants*

This research was carried out in Mashhad, Iran. A community sample of 93 Iranian EFL learners, 38 male and 55 female participated in this study, among whom 38 were in MA level and 55 students were in BA level. They were university students majoring in English translation, English literature, and English language teaching at Ferdowsi, Khayam, and Imam Reza universities of Mashhad, Iran.

B. *Instrumentation*

Writing Task

Participants of the current study needed to have passed writing course in advance due to being assessed with essay examinations. A week prior to the exam day, the researchers introduced two possible examination topics and three goal choices (A, B, and C). The students had the choice to select the goal they wanted to pursue for the exam day. The goal A was a six-paragraph essay with six references, goal B was a five-paragraph essay with five references, and C was designed as a four-paragraph essay with four references.

Each goal needed a longer composition with more research, so the goals were resource based. Since the preparation time for the exam was limited and the requirements for the task were presented in detail, the goal-setting was proximal and time specific and the goals were specific and measurable. Hence, this goal-setting model clearly followed the basic requirements outlined by goal-setting theory.

It is worthy to note that the candidates were expected to receive extra score for participating in this project and they were told that they were taking part in a writing competition in which top ten writers would be rewarded. The researchers explicitly told them that their grades were directly related to their choice of goals and the quality of their writing.

A week later, the researchers selected one of the topics to be written about on the exam session. The candidates were recommended to spend around 90 minutes on this task. Two writing examiners, one of whom was the researcher, marked learners' essays based on the scale adopted by Engelhard et al. (1992). This rating scale consists of five domains: content and organization, style, sentence formation, usage, and mechanics. The overall score of the five domains considered to be 100 full score, each domain having 20 points. It is worth noting that the inter-rater reliability for the scores was found to be .86.

IV. RESULT

First of all, this part deals with the willingness of Iranian EFL learners to perform more challenging tasks if given the choice. Then, the difference between male and female learners with regard to their choice of goals will be explored. Table 1. depicts statistical information about goal choices set by students.

TABLE 1.
Statistical Information about Goal Choices

Goal	Frequency	Percentage
A	42	45.2
B	16	17.2
C	35	37.6
Total	93	100.0

As Table 1. demonstrates, there were 93 Iranian EFL learners taking part in this study. As the table shows, among 93 students, the frequency of students who attempted goal 'A' equals to 42, the number of students who chose 'B' as their goals is 16, and 35 students selected goal 'C'. The next column labeled as percentage shows the percentage of the study's population who picked each goal. As indicated in Table 1., 45.2% of students opted for the goal 'A', 17.2% of learners picked 'B', and 37.6% preferred goal 'C'. It implies that EFL learners tended to pursue the most demanding goal when presented with the choice to choose their own goals. Therefore, the result can be summarized as follows:

$$\text{Goal A} > \text{Goal C} > \text{Goal B}$$

To conclude, goal 'A' was the most favored goal among EFL students, goal 'B' was found to be the least favored option among them, and goal 'C' ranked the second.

To spot the difference between male and female learners concerning their choice of goals, Chi-square was run. Table 2. was created to present the findings of the Chi-square.

TABLE 2
CHI-SQUARE: GENDER IN TERMS OF GOAL CHOICES

Goal Choice	Gender	Observed N	Expected N	Df	χ^2	Sig.
A	Male	16	14.7	2	.557	.757
	Female	26	24.2			
B	Male	7	6.5			
	Female	9	9.5			
C	Male	15	16.8			
	Female	20	21.3			

As the results of the Chi-square ($\chi^2 = .557$, $p > .05$) indicates, there is no significant difference between male and female learners regarding their choice of goals. Since the Sig. value is .757 (which is greater than .05), we can say that male and female students in general seem equal in choice of goals.

According to table 2., male and female students equally preferred goal 'A' (Female N = 26, Male N = 16) more than was expected (Female N = 24.2, Male N = 14.7). It implies that most female and male learners judged themselves capable enough to pursue and attain high (hard) goal. Alternatively, both male and female students opted for the goal 'C' (Female N = 20, Male N = 15) a bit less than was expected (Female N = 21.3, Male N = 16.8) which carries this implication that they were less likely to set the low (easy) goal. As indicated for goal 'B', male students tended to choose this goal (N = 7) a little more than was expected (N = 6.5), while female students desired to pick this goal (N = 9) a little less than was expected (N = 9.5).

All in all, as can be seen in Table 2., both male and female learners exhibited strong desire to attain the harder goal and as a result seemed to favor great effort and persistence. To put it another way, most female and male learners sought challenging goal which provided them the opportunity to develop their competencies. In closing, the most favored goal among female and male students was 'A', and goal 'C' found to be the second prevailing goal among both of them. Furthermore, goal 'B' was detected as the least favored option among male and female students.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The obtained result greatly depends on goal-setting theory and power of choice which contribute to students' motivation. Dailey (2000) asserts that management and organizational behavior theory recommends that goal-setting is assumed to be a useful strategy in increasing motivation. In addition, goal-setting theory held the first rank in validity and second in efficacy in comparison with other motivational strategies (Lee & Early, 1988). Moreover, in line with Glasser's motivational model (1988), freedom, one of the four motivational elements, is greatly motivating; if students are provided with the opportunities of making choices, they tend to become more intrinsically motivated to attain their goals. Accordingly, it can be inferred that due to having the opportunities for selecting their goals, learners of this study became motivated to choose the challenging goal.

Another explanation for this finding maybe rely on the fact that the participants of this research were told that they were taking part in a writing competition in which the top ten best writers would be rewarded by presents and the higher grades directly correspond to their goal choices and their quality of their writing. As a result, they became motivated to pursue the most challenging goal hoping for surpassing others in higher grades and being one of the ten winners.

The results of the present study confirmed that of Melendy (2008). He investigated the effectiveness of the power of choice of proximal academic goals as a strategy for boosting Thai students' motivation in an undergraduate composition and rhetoric course. He concluded that more students in the sample group attempted the most challenging tasks when given the choice (Melendy, 2008). Hence, Iranian EFL learners and Thai students are the same in opting for the most difficult goal: they all prefer to pick the challenging goal when given the choice; this demonstrates that there seems to be a universal trend among Asian learners. There exists some differences as well, for instance, from 93 subjects of our study, 45.2% of students selected the most difficult goal, 17.2% picked the moderate, and 37.6% preferred the least difficult one; however, 50% of TS selected the most difficult goal, 37% picked the moderate, and 13% chose the least difficult one in that study (Melendy, 2008).

Another finding revealed by this research was that there existed no significant difference between male and female learners with regard to their choice of goals. Therefore, the second hypothesis of this research is confirmed. Consequently, it can be inferred that goal-setting theory is more culture-bound rather than being related to gender. To the best of the present researchers' knowledge, two genders' similarity or difference in goal choice among EFL learners, in the global context in general and in the context of Iran, seems rather unexplored. Hence, the present researcher cannot draw a comparison between the difference between male and female EFL learners regarding the choice of goals. Of course, future research is necessary to ensure the two genders' similarity in these areas.

Examining the results of this study, several implications are put forward; first, it will bring about consciousness-raising of those involved in EFL/ESL learning or teaching through informing them about the importance of setting goals at different stages of leaning. Thus, teachers should make their best shot to take on the responsibility of training their students to set high, specific, and realistic goals. Moreover, shifting the focus of classroom instruction toward spurring setting goals could turn out well in enhancing L2 motivation in universities. Second, this study will carry some weight in cross-cultural studies which aim to compare different cultures and figure out the sources of cross-cultural differences. A further notion that may be highlighted by this study is that incorporating this motivational strategy into course and curriculum design can be effective for pedagogy and encouraging students to invest more effort into their work. Our study also underscores the significance of paying attention to writing skill and attempting to probably change the attitude of learners toward this skill, because students frequently consider this skill as a laborious and boring skill.

As it is clear from any scientific research, nothing can be obvious unless verified by observation or experimentation. To conduct any kind of scientific research, one may confront with problems and limitations. The present study could have obtained rather different findings if it had not faced the following limitations. First, since this study was done in only a few universities in Iran, its results cannot be safely generalized to other EFL contexts; thus, further research is called for to be conducted in other universities in Iran or in other countries to compare the results. Second, in this study EFL learners' educational level and age were not taken into account as variables, so another study is required to take these points into consideration. Furthermore, this research did not delve into the influence of EFL learners' motivation and self-efficacy on their choice of goals, which can be the subject of further inquiries. Last but not least, the subject of

future investigations can focus on the value of the power of choice of proximal goals for different groups of students, such as high school students and for different subjects.

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