

Learner Goal-Setting



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Research shows adult students are motivated to learn when what they study is related to their individual goals and needs. According to Comings, Perella, and Soricone in their article, “Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports,” 1999, “Learners who have specific goals in mind are more likely to persist in their studies.” Adult learner goal-setting involves students establishing learning goals and staying in school as long as they can to achieve those goals.

Learner goal-setting may include the establishment of classroom, study and learning, educational, job/career, financial, personal, and community goals. By creating student-centered lessons, instructors can provide adult ESL students with opportunities to articulate goals, determine steps to achieving goals, define timelines for reaching goals, and participate in goal-attainment activities. Instructors need to develop and facilitate a variety of classroom goal-oriented activities. Goal-setting may be carried out in whole class, pair, and small group configurations. When individual students reach their set goals, instructors need to provide those students with opportunities to set and implement new goals.

What can instructors do to help students set goals, monitor progress, and reach goals? How does implementing goal-setting build learner persistence and a connection to a broader school learning community?

Here are some specific suggestions: Some goal-setting activities should be done near the beginning of a term, while others may be implemented throughout the term. Through the continuous activation and implementation of goal-oriented activities, goal-setting becomes a conscious part of the instructional process for both instructors and students. The result is that learners become more involved in the focus and direction of their own learning and that instructors build more connection with the needs, interests, and goals of their students.

1. Build Goal-setting into Initial Classroom Lessons

It is essential that instructors include goal-setting in the early part of a term. The first few weeks are best for initial goal-setting. With instructor guidance during the first few weeks of a term, students should establish general English learning goals as well as specific/realistic language learning goals that are limited to the term of the class.

Implement an Initial Needs Assessment: Start with an initial needs assessment of each student. On the Needs Assessment form, provide structured questions. Have each student fill in his or her country, previous and present occupation or life role, and specific reason for studying English, i.e. his or her language learning goal.

| Question | Answer |
|---|--------|
| 1. What is your name? | |
| 2. Where are you from? | |
| 3. What was your job/role in your native country? | |
| 4. What is your job/role now? | |
| 5. Why are you taking this ESL class? | |
| 6. Which skills do you want to work on in this class: speaking, listening, reading, or writing? | |

Have student pairs interview each other using the same questions. *(At lower levels, students may need to rely on pictures or words for answers. Create several picture prompts with the words beneath them and have students circle their answers.)*

Collect the information and compile a teacher's chart (*see below*). Refer to the chart during the term as you develop your lessons. Include student goals in your lesson planning. (For example, if several students work in restaurants and want better communication with their supervisors, in the unit on food you can include dialogs that an employee would have with his or her supervisor related to customer service.) With open enrollment, as new students enter class, have them complete the needs assessment form. Integrate their information into the chart.

| Student Name | Country | Job/Role in Native Country Job/Role Now | Language Learning Goal |
|-------------------|---------|--|--|
| 1. Emily Bautista | Mexico | Housekeeper Housekeeper and Mother | Improve speaking skills with children at home |
| 2. Shun Chen | China | Student Carpenter | Contractor job language |

2. Help Students Establish Term Goals

A goal is a short-term learning objective that can realistically be accomplished within one instructional cycle.

REEP (Arlington Education and Employment Program)

After implementing an initial needs assessment, help students establish their language learning goals for the term. These are time-limited goals. They may be set using both words and pictures. By having a class of students discuss their goals in pairs and groups and determine the steps to achieve them, instructors build students' connections to the class community and, at the same time, support student persistence.

Posters (*Beginning Levels*): In this activity, have students draw construction paper or looseleaf paper posters that show where they want to speak English, who they want to talk with, and what they want to talk about/do. Have students explain their posters to the class.

I want to talk to my doctor about medical problems.

I want to talk to my boss about a promotion.

Place these posters on the walls of the classroom, or have students keep them at the front of their binders as goal-reminders.

Refer to each student's goal during the term: *Remember when Roberto and Rita told us they wanted to learn about body parts and talk to the doctor about medical problems? Next week we'll be studying about health. We'll learn about body parts and we'll practice speaking to the doctor.*

Affirmative Statements (*High Beginning and Intermediate Levels*): Have students set time-limited, realistic term goals for: work, finances, health, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar or pronunciation by making affirmative statements. Have students present their goals to the class and keep the goal statements in the front of their notebooks.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ I will learn 20 new vocabulary words/phrases I can use at my job.■ I will have a conversation with my son's teacher about his progress in school.■ I will make a budget and stop eating out. I will save \$100.00 a month. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ I will learn to take a telephone message.■ I will learn three things to talk about with my coworkers.■ I will learn to use the computer mouse and keyboard and read an article on the Internet. |
|--|---|

3. Embed Goal-setting in Ongoing Lessons

Based on the information from the initial needs assessment, embed goal-setting activities into ongoing classroom lessons. Life skills topics lend themselves well to goal-setting activities: *work, money, family, community*, etc. Ask specific questions to guide students in determining which areas they need to work on. Begin by asking whole class guiding questions and then have individual students respond to specific questions (*see below*).

Guiding Questions: In a unit on work, have the whole class discuss these examples, eliciting the steps each student should work on:

A student who is a bus boy now wants to become a server. What vocabulary words does he need to learn? What conversations will he have with customers? What steps does he need to take to reach his goal?

Possible answers include:

- Listen to conversations between servers and customers
- Talk to other servers
- Record new vocabulary words and definitions
- Ask the teacher for help

A student wants to become an X-ray technician. What education does she need? How long is the required training? How much does it cost? What are the steps to reaching her goal?

- Look online for programs for X-ray technicians
- Find out the educational requirements
- Find out the length of the training program and the costs
- Find out about dates and deadlines
- Make a plan for saving money

Next, introduce questions that guide individual students in defining their own goals and determining the steps needed to reach the goals. *What is your job now? What job do you want in the future? What are the steps to getting there? What can you do in this class during this term to help you reach your goal?*

Have students clarify their specific goals (*My goal is to talk to my doctor about my medical problem*) and the steps to reach them (*I need to learn the necessary vocabulary and conversation.*) Create dialogs, role-plays, problem-solving activities, vocabulary, exercises, and reading and writing activities that engage students in the goal attainment process.

4. Encourage Successful Study Skills and Study Habits

Students often come to class without pencils or paper. Many come without knowing how to study or learn, not having previously acquired the skills needed for academic success. Do an assessment of your students' study skills and study habits to find out what they already know and what they need to learn about how to study. Good study skills help students organize, digest, record, practice, review and retain information, and evaluate and reflect on what they have learned. Good study skills encourage students to track their own progress and assess their own strengths and weaknesses.

School Supplies (*Beginning Level*): Teach beginning students the vocabulary of school supplies: pencil, pen, eraser, binder, dividers, lined paper, etc. Use Total Physical Response activities to contextualize the actions that go with the materials: *Open your notebook. Pick up your pencil/pen. Write the date in the upper right corner. Write on the line. Open your textbook to page _____. Let students know it is essential for them to bring their supplies to every class.*

Organized Learning (*High Beginning and Intermediate Levels*): Provide students with class time to consider the importance of developing good study skills and study habits. Organize pair interviews and small group discussions in which students talk about setting up a home learning environment (desk or table, chair, lamp, designated time for study), organizing school papers in chronological order, spending time studying at home, and creating and reviewing lists of vocabulary words and phrases, grammar structures, content material, etc. Have students ask each other: *Do you have a desk or table where you study at home? Do you organize your papers in your binder? Do you write your words on a vocabulary list?*

5. Promote Self-Reflection and Self-Monitoring

Be sure to provide students in-class time to reflect on and monitor their own learning.

Summarize Learning:

At the end of each class, review the main concepts covered. Ask students to tell you what they learned.

Did we study making a budget? What do you remember? Did we discuss reading an electric bill? What information can you find on an electric bill? Did we study the present perfect? Give me an example.

As they finish each unit, have student groups discuss what they learned. *What did we study about in Unit 8? What did you learn? What do you want to know more about?* This helps students keep track of the content studied and the skills they are developing. Have students make statements about what they learned. *I can dial 911 in an emergency. I learned the parts of the body.* Create charts to help students track their test scores so they can monitor their own progress. Self-monitoring and self-reflection help students evaluate their progress in reaching their language learning goals.

There are some 21st century core texts that guide students to regularly monitor their own language acquisition. As units begin, students are presented with lists of competencies and the unit goals. Throughout the unit pages, students reflect on the language content and skills they are acquiring and make statements about what they “can do.” Often, the end-of-unit activity prompts students to review the unit goals and check off what they have learned. There may be problem solving and role play activities which encourage students to activate the language and skills acquired. Guided in this way, students reflect on their own progress and articulate what they have learned or need more work on. Most texts provide end-of-unit online or paper and pencil assessments.

6. Create Follow up Activities to Check on Student Progress

After students have completed their goal-setting activities, how can we monitor their progress in an ongoing way? One way is to establish biweekly goal support groups. During the term, plan time for students to meet in goal support groups in which they discuss progress toward reaching their goals. Provide the groups with a set of structured interview questions.

- What is your goal? What are the steps you are taking to get there?
- Have you been studying the vocabulary words?
- Have you been speaking English with customers on your job?
- Have you been speaking to your children in English?
- Do you need more time to work on your goal?
- How can our group help you to reach your goal?
- How can the teacher help you to reach your goal?

A second way to follow up on student progress is to hold student-teacher interviews both in the middle and at end of the semester. Meet with individual students to determine their progress in working on their goals. Acknowledge student progress toward goal attainment and provide students who need additional in-class goal work with support.

Conclusion

By incorporating learner goal-setting activities into classroom curriculum in various ways, instructors help students evaluate their own needs and interests and set achievable educational goals. Through interactive goal-setting activities, instructors build student connection to the class and broader school learning community, and support students in continuing their studies. By helping students set, monitor, and achieve their goals, instructors help students to move more effectively along their individual life paths.
