

Goal-Oriented Self-Checklists: Principles, Practice & Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

This paper is focused on the expanded use of self-checklists as a classroom activity in English Discussion Class (EDC). The aim is to illustrate how self-checklists can be extended beyond basic monitoring to be used in a more goal-oriented way. It examines learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation as the core instructional principles behind the activity then provides an outline of the course and classroom context in which goal-oriented self-checklists promote both principles. Details of the materials needed, preparation required and procedure to be followed to complete the activity are provided to aid instructors that wish to replicate and use the activity in their classrooms. This is followed by an outline of how the activity could be adapted for variation or to meet the needs of higher and lower ability level learners. Finally, the activity is evaluated based on instructor observation and students' written responses to several activity-related open-ended questions.

INTRODUCTION

Self-checklists are often used by EDC instructors primarily as a tool to monitor student performance in extended discussions. Implementation of self-checklists provides a basis for formative assessment, defined as “a continual growth cycle [that] includes monitoring the students' speaking, diagnosing the students' strengths and weaknesses, supplying the students with new or paraphrased strategies, and allowing the students to use that feedback to improve.” (Tuttle and Tuttle, 2011, p.18). Within this growth cycle, self-checklists provide EDC students with a tool to independently identify functions and communication skills they can improve on in discussions and monitor their own progress. However, the functionality of self-checklists can be extended beyond facilitating the identification of areas for improvement and into a more advanced form of reflection which guides goal-setting strategies (Ibid, 2011, p.23). Given that the whole process is carried out independently, it is possible that formative assessment through the use of goal-oriented self-checklists could foster a sense of learner autonomy that motivates students to improve with less reliance on external regulation.

One influential area of motivation that has gained currency in the field of education is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), defined by Deci and Ryan (2002, p.5) as “human tendencies towards active engagement and development”. In other words, SDT examines the process of will-power in individuals, or in our case, learners. Many theories of motivation treat intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation as being largely exclusive of one another. However, SDT places them on a continuum in which Intrinsic Motivation (self-determined) and Amotivation (nonself-determined) sit either side of the varying degrees of Extrinsic Motivation (Ibid, 2002, p.16). Individuals that complete activities autonomously out of their own individual interest or satisfaction and without need for external regulation are classified as intrinsically motivated and autonomous. A review of studies in which SDT was applied to educational settings indicates that students benefit from autonomy-supportive teachers that encourage intrinsic motivation, for example by allowing students task flexibility (Reeve, 2002, pp.185-186).

Autonomy in the classroom enables flexibility and empowers learners to take control of their own learning and set individual goals. Instructors can reduce learner dependency through guided practice and an allowance of creativity within limited forms by taking on the role of a facilitator (Brown, 2007, p.71). In other words, teachers must envisage themselves more as “a guide on the

side” rather than “*a sage on the stage*”. Educationalists have long advocated autonomy in learners that breaks away from a top-down instructional approach and veers towards a position that encourages participation, dialogue and critical thinking in individuals, not only as students in the classroom but also as critically aware participants in society (Freire, 1996, p.55). In EDC classes there are several opportunities for learners to exercise autonomy, for example allowing learners to determine the trajectory of their group discussions or by removing scaffolding. A number of EDC studies have identified the use of self-checklists for formative assessment as being a key moment to engender autonomy. (Langley, 2012, pp.4-57; Ragsdale, 2012, pp.4-104; Timms, 2012, pp.2-39).

Intrinsic motivation in learners can be driven and achieved through successful completion of autonomously-set goals connected to useful and challenging tasks. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2001, p.21) emphasise *proximal sub-goals* (shorter-term goals e.g. using more phases in a discussion) as opposed to *distal goals* (e.g. completing the EDC course) as these have a powerful motivating function in that they mark progress, provide immediate incentive feedback and promote self-efficiency in students. Goal Setting Theory originated in the field of industrial-organisational psychology by Locke and Latham (2006, p.265) to explain the motivational behaviour of an organisation’s labour force. The principles and explanatory power of Goal Setting Theory were soon embraced by psycho-linguists and integrated into to the L2 learner motivation paradigm (Oxford and Shearin, 1994, p.19). However, recent criticisms of goal-setting in the management field have questioned the appropriateness of goal-setting as an over-prescribed and distracting process. It is claimed that goal-setting has “*gone wild*” and can unintentionally narrow the focus of individuals, sacrifice the quality of material produced, emphasize the cost of failure, and restrict creativity (Ordóñez, Schweitzer et al. 2009, pp.6-9). Despite those claims, English language instructors and programmes continue to view goals as instrumental in validating the purpose of classroom activities and setting-out clear objectives for lessons and courses. In the view of many EDC instructors, goal-setting through formative feedback has proven to be a very successful method of improving student performance in extended group discussions (Brinham, 2013, p.14; Kuromatsu, 2013, p.155; Ragsdale, 2013, p.206).

CONTEXT

The self-checklist activity was implemented across all classes in the first semester. This activity can be applied universally amongst learners although lower level students may need additional teacher assistance at the beginning to complete the activity effectively and efficiently.

Encouraging students to set individual Function Goals (FG) and Communication Skill Goals (CSG) prior to extended group discussions is a good fit with the overall lesson goals given that in each week's lesson students aim to practice using function phrases or review a communication skill. Also, the FG and CSG that students set themselves are compatible with several of the course objectives, and subsequently with the overall goal of EDC as set out below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Course Goal and Objectives 2 and 3 of EDC

Goal:	You will learn to participate effectively in English discussions.
Objectives:	2. You will learn functions commonly used in discussion and other daily situations. 3. You will learn to develop your speaking fluency and communication skills

Student Handbook (2013, p.3)

Adding FGs and CSGs to discussions creates a cascading system of goals in which learners can see that what they are doing in the classroom is related specifically to the goals of the course. This approach is consistent with the understanding that by formulating the course goals into real-world pedagogical tasks (in this case group discussions with FG and CSG) learners can identify with them more readily (Nunan, 1988, p.130). Specific goals that are simultaneously challenging, achievable and focused provide learners with a clear sense of direction. If students only have the course goal, which is somewhat complex, or only assigned themselves the vague goal of passing the course, it may lead to “tunnel vision”, in which the focus is on achieving the goal rather than acquiring the skills to reach it (Locke and Latham, 2006, p.226).

Course goals and lesson goals are assigned goals but FG and CSG are autonomously guided goals because students have freedom to select which functions and communication skills they wish to improve on through the process of using self-checklists to evaluate their performance. Encouraging deeper student involvement in the evaluation process is important because “ In a learner-centred system, learners can be sensitized to their role as learner, and can also be assisted to develop as autonomous learners by the systematic use of self-assessment.” (Nunan, 1988, p.130). This creates a bottom-up approach to reaching pedagogical goals that is necessary to achieve lesson goals and provides a counter-balance not just to the more top-down oriented course goals and objectives laid down by the faculty, but also to teacher-centred feedback. The content and process aspects of deepening the levels of autonomy by promoting “awareness” of more general lesson goals and encouraging “involvement” in pedagogical goals are outlined below in Figure 2.

FG and CSG were set every lesson during student-centred feedback after the first extended discussion was completed and a self-checklist had been administered. This form of self-assessment allowed learners to identify their weaknesses after assessing their own performance. It has been argued that feedback is most effective when it provides concrete suggestions for improvement, and when students are encouraged to constantly self-assess and change strategies to transform weaknesses into strengths (Tuttle and Tuttle, 2011, pp.28-29). This is a crucial period of the lesson because it allows learners to prepare for the second and longest discussion which forms a major part of what they are graded on and acts as a culmination of the skills and ideas that students have accumulated during the class.

Figure 2. Autonomy: Two Levels of Implementation in EDC

Level	Content	Process
1. Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the material they are using (e.g. EDC Lesson Goals)	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles/strategies (e.g. how to fit functions, communication skills and content into discussions)
2. Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their goals from a range of alternatives on offer (e.g. selecting FG and CSG)	Learners make choices among a range of options (e.g. identifying weak points)

Adapted from Nunan (1997, p.195)

TASK AND MATERIALS

Self-checklists (see Appendix 1) were designed for ease of use and the process of goal-setting was implemented gradually in the first few lessons of the semester to allow learners that were inexperienced in self-assessment to familiarise themselves with the new system. The self-checklist

sheets were produced and photocopied before class. These were quick and easy to create and edit which allowed new functions to be added each week and other alterations to be made on an ad hoc basis. Prior to setting goals, learners first complete their self-checklist to log their performance in Discussion 1. After several lessons of practicing setting FG and CSG, a few students sometimes still needed a prompt to remind them to set goals for the next discussion. At first, no level of frequency was decided for FG and CSG, but in order to make the goal more specific and quantifiable it was decided that the target for FG would be set at x3 and for CSG x4. These particular frequencies were chosen to be compatible with the way that the tri-semesterly Discussion Test is monitored and graded. However, later on in the semester as more functions were added, the frequency for the FG was reduced to x2 to encourage students to use a wider variety of functions.

PROCEDURE

The following is a step-by-step guide to administering the Self-checklist and having students set individual FG and CSG.

1. After Discussion 1, teacher gives each student a self-checklist.
2. Students check the number of times they used both the listener and speaker phrases for each function, and the frequency of Communication Skills use.
3. Teacher prompts students to identify a weak point for both Functions and Communication Skills and formulate these as a FG and CSG.
4. Students write their FG and CSG for Discussion 2.
5. Students prepare for and participate in Discussion 2.
6. After Discussion 2, students once again complete a self-checklist for Functions and Communication Skills used.
7. Using their self-checklist, students can see if they completed their FG and CSG and put a check mark next to the goal they achieved.
8. Teacher praises students that completed goals and urges those that didn't to keep their written goals and strive to achieve them in the next lesson's discussion.

It may be noteworthy to remark that during step 5, learners sometimes opted to complete the self-checklist during Discussion 2 to help them keep constant track of their progress. This was accepted as an individual style although learners that chose this strategy seemed to gain no perceivable advantage over those that completed their checklist in step 6.

VARIATIONS

There are a variety of ways in which this activity could be adapted for students with different levels of ability. Teachers could have more involvement in goal setting with lower-level learners that require more guidance and benefit from the provision of accurate goals. Lower-level students could use the Function Phrases list at the back of their textbook to help them remember other phrases belonging to that function group during discussions. Students that really struggle to use functions in discussions could select a specific phrase (e.g. "What shall we discuss next?") from the Function category and set that as their FG for discussion 2. The teacher could then individually drill that phrase to the student to increase the likelihood of FG completion. Higher level students could be given further flexibility choose the quantity for their FG and CSG to increase the challenge. Another way to adapt the activity for stronger students could be to give them the option to set two FG and forgo the CSG so they have freedom to concentrate more on functions. The final variation could be especially useful late in semester 2 as most able students have mastered the Communication Skills and may find it unnecessary to set goals for them.

Minor changes could also be introduced to add variation to the activity and make it less repetitive. After setting FG and CSG for the second discussion, students could be grouped together with those that have seemingly compatible Function Goals e.g. Putting a student whose FG is Ask about Possibilities with another student whose FG is Talk about Possibilities. Another possibility is to have students tell their goals to their Discussion 2 group members beforehand to raise awareness and group cooperation. A final suggestion is to adapt the activity into a peer-assessment format in which learners could complete their partner's checklist and set goals for their partner.

REFLECTIONS

The activity was monitored over the course of semester two. In the final lesson, three classes (20 students) were selected at random and invited to answer five open-ended questions (see appendix 2) to support the evaluation of the activity. Throughout the course of the second semester, students gradually became accustomed to using the self-checklist, and then to setting their own FG and CSG.

On the whole, reaction to the activity was positive and it was observed that the majority of learners gave greater consideration to their strong and weak points after Discussion 1. Nearly all students that participated in the questionnaire agreed that it was *important* to complete FG and CSG. Some of the more frequently cited reasons for doing so were that goal-setting facilitated deeper and smoother discussions, generally boosted their English discussion skills, and allowed students to improve on individual weak points and achieve personal fulfillment. One student mentioned the possibility that focusing on function usage could be of use to her in future English speaking situations. However, several students thought that completing goals was not important because discussions benefit more from a flexible approach whereby students have freedom to use only language that naturally fits into the discussion. In other words, that FG and CSG push learners to force irrelevant phrases into their discussions at moments when an alternative and more useful phrase would be more befitting to the discussion flow. Irrespective of this, goal-setting via formative feedback continues to be an effective method of encouraging more frequent usage of functions and communication skills in EDC lessons.

One observation made during the early stages of setting FG and CSG was that a few learners were sometimes mistakenly setting their strong points as goals rather than their weak points, or constantly selecting the easier/older functions as FGs and neglecting more recent functions. This led the instructor to intervene and prompt students or sometimes set their goals for them. Questions 3 and 4 of the questionnaire attempted to gain some insight into whether learners thought it was effective to have teacher involvement in the goal-setting process. Most respondents clearly stated that they preferred to set their own FG and CSG as it was felt that the student has a clearer idea of their own individual weak points and some mentioned that setting their own goals was somewhat more rewarding. Amongst ambivalent respondents and a further few that preferred goals set by the teacher, comments suggested that instructors were perhaps better placed to take a more objective and professional stance on the best goals to set. Particularly interesting was that the level 4 class responses included more support for teacher intervention stating that FG and CSG set by the instructor can be more accurate and challenging. On the whole however, it remains evident that having students set their own performance goals is a key opportunity for EDC instructors to promote learner autonomy.

This evaluation indicates that goal-oriented self-assessment is one of a variety of activities that can make a positive contribution towards developing English discussion skills and oral fluency. Positive responses from students in favour of independently-set FG and CSG are consistent with the findings of research into SDT in education mentioned earlier and validate the

usefulness of extending self-checklists beyond being merely a monitoring tool. When learners select their own goals they build a sense of ownership of those goals and develop a deeper willingness to strive to achieve them. As one respondent put it, "Determining our own goals generates ambition and motivation. Without a clear target, discussions may descend into idle chatter." Another student commented that without independently set goals she would become lazy and less motivated. It is possible then, that by introducing self-checklists that guide learners to a greater degree of flexibility and responsibility in the goal-setting process, instructors may be able to install a deeper sense of intrinsic motivation in students that engenders self-determined behavior.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Lesson 6 Self-Checklist

CHECKLIST

Check (O) the Functions and Communication Skills you used. O = 1 time, OO= 2 times, OOO = 3 times etc.

Functions	Discussion 1	Discussion 2
ASK for EXAMPLES (e.g. For example?)		
GIVE EXAMPLES (e.g. For example...)		
ASK for REASONS (e.g. How come?)		
GIVE REASONS (e.g. It's mainly because...)		
ASK for OPINIONS (e.g. What's your opinion?)		
GIVE OPINIONS (e.g. In my opinion...)		
Communication Skills		
FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS (e.g. What kind of...? / When...?)		
CHECK UNDERSTANDING (e.g. Sorry, I don't understand.)		
AGREE / DISAGREE (e.g. I disagree....)		

Goal Completed ?

Function Goal for Discussion 2: _____ (3 times)

Comm Skill Goal for Discussion 2: _____ (4 times)

Appendix 2: Open-ended questions

Please write your answers in **JAPANESE**

Name (ローマ字) Date Class

1. Did you complete your Function Goal and Communication Skill Goal in Discussion 2 today? Why/Why not?

あなたは今日のディスカッション2で、ファンクションの目標やコミュニケーションスキルの目標を完了しましたか？なぜ？

2. Is it important to complete your Function Goal and Communication Skill Goal in Discussion 2? Why/Why not?

ディスカッション2の中でファンクションの目標やコミュニケーションスキルの目標を完了することは重要ですか？なぜ？

3. Is it better to set your own Function Goals and Communication Skill Goals? Why/Why not?

あなた自身のファンクションの目標と、コミュニケーションスキルの目標を設定した方が良いですか？なぜ？

4. Is it better for your teacher to set your Function Goals and Communication Skill Goals? Why/Why not?

あなたのファンクションの目標と、コミュニケーションスキルの目標はあなたの先生が設定したほうが良いですか？なぜ？

5. What other activities or features of EDC help improve your discussion performance?

英語ディスカッションクラスで、他にはどのような活動や特徴(物事)があるあなたのディスカッションパフォーマンスを向上させるのを助けますか？