

# GOALLLLLLL!

*Chase Nordengren discusses the importance of finding the right goals for language learners*

**B**ecause learning a new language is often a multiyear effort, learners require regular and consistent ways to understand their progress and link that progress back to the broader aim of being able to speak and write in the new language. Persistence in learning a new language is key to getting from those first halting vocabulary words into true fluency. Student goal setting provides a context, vocabulary, and set of systems that can help students achieve that persistence. Language researchers and educators have been at the forefront of exploring how goal setting works (Lee and Bong, 2019; Moeller et al., 2012), establishing that goal setting is one of the most impactful practices teachers can employ to drive improvements in student outcomes in any subject (Hattie, 2021; Marzano, 2009).

For nearly every part of an educational system that has data, there's a goal to improve that data. We set goals for district attendance, goals for class-wide improvement on standardized test scores, and goals for students on their IEPs (individualized education programs). These goals can be their own valuable and important motivators for the educators in a school system.

However, goals like these are fundamentally different from the kinds of goals that motivate students and support learning growth. Learning goals should be designed to help students understand where they are in their learning journey, where they are going, and how they will get there.

### Three Characteristics of Effective Goals

To meaningfully change student outcomes, teachers and students should work together to design goals that support meaningful, long-term changes in the behaviors and mindsets of learners. To do so, those goals should have three important characteristics.

First, effective goals are individualized for learners. Certainly, our hope for students learning any language is the same: speaking and writing proficiently. But each student starts their learning journey at a different place, each responds to different incentives and motivators, and each has a different relationship between the new language and the life they want to live. For these reasons, setting the same short-term goal for every learner and expecting them to reach the same benchmarks at the same time doesn't make much sense. Students need their own individual goals to account for their

individual differences.

True individualization of goals goes a step further. Students should play a central role in deciding what their learning journey will look like and the steps they will take to get there. Certainly, students need help: educators bring to bear meaningful data about each student's performance, a clear understanding of the trajectory of learning in each area, and the ability to mentor younger students as they build the skills necessary to take independent control of their learning. But the most engaging learning—the kind most likely to give students the encouragement they need to persist in language learning—is the kind students own themselves.

Second, goals should be mastery oriented. Mastery goals are those that focus on learning for learning's sake: learning to get better at something, become a more well-rounded person, or discover more about the world. Their opposite—performance goals—focus on learning for the sake of appearing competent, outperforming others, or pleasing some authority figure. Research has clearly found that performance goals have a negative relationship with student outcomes (Anderman et al., 2011; Ciani et al., 2010; Maehr and Zusho, 2008) and only mastery goals can routinely jumpstart motivation and student ownership of learning (Ames and Archer, 1988; McGregor and Elliot, 2002; Wolters, 2004).


Educators play an important role in how mastery oriented their students become. Mastery-oriented teachers demonstrate the purposes of learning by rewarding effort, describing the intrinsic rewards of learning, and celebrating students for their ability to grow. Performance-oriented teachers, by contrast, highlight

students highest on the achievement continuum, reward specific performance on assessments, and give students little role in understanding or acting on their learning data (Marsh et al., 2014). All students come to school with different ideas about learning, but educators can substantively shift students' thinking over time.

Finally, effective goals balance what is meaningful with what is attainable. To motivate students, it's necessary to give them learning targets that matter, those that produce outcomes the students will find meaningful.

At the same time, goals should necessarily be attainable enough that students feel they can regularly succeed and any failure to meet their goals is short-lived. Striking this balance is tricky, but important.

Benchmark assessment data can often provide hints about what kind of growth students typically achieve between test events. Beyond the data, tying a short-term learning goal to something a student is highly interested in (a book they want to read, a subject they want to communicate about, a place they want to visit) can



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motivate them far more than a goal that doesn't relate to their interests. None of these values should distract from the fundamental belief that all students can achieve mastery over a given language given the right amount of time and learning support. Underneath all goal-setting practice is the belief that all students can achieve at high levels. Crafting the right kind of goals, however, makes that success more likely by giving students the motivation and ownership they need to achieve at their highest potential.


**Changing How We Talk and Think about Goals**  
The prospect of setting truly individualized, mastery-oriented, meaningful, and attainable goals for each learner can feel daunting. Bringing a new way of thinking about what goals should look like can have broad implications for how IEPs are written, how school-level performance is measured, how educators are rewarded, and how we think about learning itself. More fundamentally, though, the spirit of goal setting is about the relationship between educator and student, adjusting the ways

we talk and think about learning with one another. The joy that comes from learning a new language has always had an intrinsically motivating quality. Goal setting focuses on matching that motivating quality with classroom policies and procedures that support learners as they power through their difficult moments, persist through struggle and disappointment, and gradually accumulate the knowledge and skills they need to speak and write in a new voice.

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