

Goal-Setting Displayed by Vietnamese EFL Students

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Abstract

Goal-setting behavior for learning courses displayed by college students of English as a foreign language (EFL) has yet to be substantively documented in the current literature. The present study, therefore, examined this topic to activate students' goal-setting behavior in learning, which is deemed to increase their engagement in learning and ability to initiate action plans for goal attainment. The study results also provide pedagogical implications for teachers to tailor their teaching methods, techniques, and course contents in alignment with students' goals. Thus, the main research questions raised in the study are what goal patterns students set for their specific learning courses and what action plans they make to meet the goals set. For data collecting instruments, an assignment template was completed by 58 EFL students from a university in Vietnam, followed by short phone conversations between the researcher and involved students for self-report validity. The analyzed data results identify three common goal-setting patterns displayed by students and confirm their ability to self-initiate action plans for set goals.

Keywords: Action plan, course, EFL students, goal-setting, template

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Introduction

Human beings are goal-driven actors in almost all real-life practices. Goals for human life can be about personal relationships, education, entertainment, satisfaction, or career (Fishback & Ferguson, 2007; Starkey, 2004). Thus, concerning duration, a person's life goal may last relatively from a couple of minutes, like having a cup of hot tea on a cold day morning, stretching over month/year-long terms, like eating less, exercising more, earning a college degree to the entire life, such as professional achievement and goals undoubtedly impact people's cognitions, behaviors, judgments, attitudes, and emotions (Berkman, Falk, & Lieberman, 2012; Fishback & Ferguson, 2007). It follows that at college, students should attend to specific goals for their learning and future employability. Student life is generally the vital period for young people to shape their future work self via setting career goals known as high-order goals or temporary interests (Fishback & Ferguson, 2007) and initiating proactive behaviors for set-goal attainment. Proactive behaviors are characterized by "self-initiated, anticipatory action that aims to change and improve the situation or oneself" (Parker & Collins, 2010, p.635). That said, proactive behaviors or self-initiated actions serve as both instruments applied for set-goal outcomes and as an indicator of one's perceived ability to make change and improvement, which promotes creativity skills.

Although learning outcomes are universally defined in terms of target knowledge, skills, and competencies of a given college course are explicitly stated in the course syllabus from the outset as a directional guideline, students taking the same course mostly vary in setting and striving for their individual goals resting on expected course grades via mid-term tests, final exams or other assessment formats. In other words, learning goals set by students would highly reveal their current individual states, expectations, value beliefs, and needs for reaching desired states in learning concerning future work self. Getting to know individual students' specific goals at specific points/stages of learning, therefore, could provide prompts for teachers to support students over learning courses by tailoring course content components and teaching techniques towards their set goals and needs alongside incorporating other helpful guidance activities because this type of coaching supports indicative of goal-relevant stimuli has been found to generate a positive impact on boosting intrinsic motivation, goal-pursuit attention, and appropriate proactive career behaviors (Fishback & Ferguson, 2007; Huang & Hsieh, 2015; Uncuoğlu-Yolcu & Çakmak, 2017). Thereby, consciously and intentionally aligning instructional activities with students' learning needs presented in their set goals is worth responsibly considering and taking responsive actions by college teachers in charge. However, not much has been documented in the existing literature about how EFL college students arrive at their learning goals at different points/stages along the college life road, what internal processes they manipulate over the goal-striving course, how setting goals impact their subsequent behaviors and emotions, or why some students fare better than others in this regard (Clements & Kamau, 2018).

On the aforementioned grounds concerning only a few investigations on goal-setting performances by EFL college students in the current context of those non-English speaking countries such as Vietnam, the present study, therefore, aims to fill the gap. To the end of this initial study, two focused research questions are raised: (1) what are typical patterns of goal-setting displayed by EFL college students regarding grade-point average and the discrepancy between the current state and desired goal? and (2) what action plans do they self-initiate to attain set goals? Finding out specific answers to these questions is meaningful because they will provide further understandings about EFL learners' internal processes, common tendencies of needs, and expectations over their learning courses at college and pedagogically offer blueprints for in-charge

teachers to gear their teaching plans to substantially serve the learners' set goals. In other words, goal-setting activation will likely benefit both learners and teachers involved (Çıkırıkçı & Gençdoğan, 2022; Gkizani & Galanakis, 2022).

The following sections in this paper are to further ground the present study theoretically with other worthwhile notions regarding goal-setting behaviors, followed by the research methods and conduction procedure. Then, obtained results and discussions are presented, leading to the conclusion of the present study.

Literature Review

Goals convey internal representations of desired outcomes, events, or processes. The relevant literature (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Çıkırıkçı & Gençdoğan, 2022; Dempsey, Eardley, & Dodd, 2022; Gkizani & Galanakis, 2022; Oflu, Baluku, & Otto, 2022; Ozimek, Bierhoff, & Hamm, 2022; Fishback & Ferguson, 2007; Konstantara & Galanakis, 2022; Locke & Latham, 2002; Max & Bacal, 2004) has reported two common patterns of goal-setting. The first one is the *approach orientation* commonly practiced by those with a high level of self-efficacy. The second is the *avoidance orientation* applied by those who fear errors and failure. With a low level of self-efficacy, avoidance-orientation individuals would not take challenges or risks in setting ambitious or challenging goals “because challenges and risk may take them into unfamiliar, unsafe realms” (Schienle, 2009, p.13), i.e., they have a high level of intolerance of uncertainty. Intolerance of uncertainty refers to “the tendency to fear the unknown and to worry excessively about potential future negative outcomes” (Arbona et al., 2021, p.699), namely errors and failure. Past research has shown that a high level of uncertainty intolerance appears to hinder proactive career behaviors and has a close linkage with anxiety sensitivity, which includes fear of negative evaluation and pain (Arbona et al., 2021; Carleton, Sharpe, & Asmundson, 2007). Additionally, the fear of uncertainty and failure may evoke negative emotions such as feeling unqualified, hopeless, shameful, or guilty (Fishback & Ferguson, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2004), which tend to impact task performance negatively (Caniëls & Baaten, 2019). When these negative elements occur, one may perform under his/her current capacity or be unlikely to complete the given task as expected. In contrast, the approach-orientation group appears to be more committed to goal-related actions or tasks, and goal commitment is believed to empower them, to try harder in ambitious goals because “goals mobilize effort” (Blerkom, 2009, p.36). Furthermore, Erez and Kanfer (1983) posited that “The most significant finding has been that specific and hard goals result in better task performance” (p.454). Unfortunately, this has not been expressly or conclusively recorded in the EFL learning field, probably due to insufficient research on goal setting.

Another widely acknowledged notion is that rational goal-setters would likely take into account their self-efficacy (i.e., self-confidence), personal strengths and weaknesses, environmental resources, and past related outcomes, and then knowingly figure out if they are competent to accomplish given course tasks or performance requirements (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Fishback & Ferguson, 2007; Jeffrey & Putka, 2000; Konstantara & Galanakis, 2022; Locke & Latham, 2002; Max & Bacal, 2004). Additionally, the act of setting goals for a specific college course is also affected by students' deliberations over the salience of that learning course for themselves (Konstantara & Galanakis, 2022), meaning that students are inclined to commit themselves to self-ask and answer such questions as why they need to take that course or what possible rewards/values they may earn resulting from successfully finishing the course. This self-weighting process over the cost-effectiveness of a given learning course fits the *expectancy-value*

theory (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011): (i) the individual's expectancy of success in a given task and the rewards that successful task performance will bring; (ii) the value the individual attaches to success on that task, including the value of the rewards and of the engagement in performing the task. It is also widely reported that the pathway from the current to the desired state in goal-setting is not always in a linear mode because common follow-ups for goal-striving (which include strategic action plans, feedback on the goal progress, sometimes adjusting or breaking down the original/end goal into smaller, more manageable sub-goals) are relatively subject to emerging environments or in the face of roadblocks, etc. (Blerkom, 2009; Erez & Kanfer, 1983; Jeffrey & Putka, 2000; Kernan, Hance, & Heiman, 1991; Starkey, 2004). At least, for goal-striving, i.e., manipulating relevant actions to meet the set goals, three core processes are involved (Berkman, Falk, & Lieberman, 2012; Steel, Svartdal, Thundiyil, & Brothen, 2018): *Goal maintenance*, i.e., retaining the mental image of the set goal in the working memory at least until the goal attainment like attending a student festival at the weekend, reviewing lecture notes for a term exam, quitting smoking or possibly much longer like being a vegetarian for the rest of one's life. *Performance monitoring* is being aware of one's current status relative to the goal end, frequently assessing progress made referencing the desired end, and timely adjusting performance properly in response to context-specific requirements. *Response inhibition* refers to attentionally removing all habitual responses potentially impairing the goal, or blocking these responses if they appear to take place.

As a result, once learning goals are considered, established, activated, and pursued, several cognitive, metacognitive, and behavioral processes occur to all college students in some way, at one point or another over the course participation and even after course completion as a reflective deliberation (Steel et al., 2018). Considering a complex dynamic system inherent in the pursuit of a four-year long EFL college program degree typically involving a scheduled sequence of multiple discrete learning courses, both compulsory and optional, it is crucial for all EFL college students to frequently reflect on their goal-striving progression in one way or another, cognitively transcending and connecting the past, present, and future-contingent events and making sound decisions and proactive plans for the upcoming learning moves. Thus, the present study is designed to offer them such type of constructively compelling reflection, which is detailed in the following section.

Methods

Participants

The present study was framed as qualitative exploratory research (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) because it was the first one to investigate goal-setting behaviors exhibited by a group of EFL-majoring sophomores from a local university in Vietnam. No similar study was previously conducted at this university. Participants in the present study were convenience sampling in terms of sampling methods (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell, 2014), grounded on the fact that these participants were already shaped formally by the institutional system. All these sophomores, aged between 19 and 20, speaking Vietnamese as their mother tongue, were at the early beginning of their second academic year of 2022-2023 when taking part in the present study. They all enrolled in one compulsory course in their 4-year undergraduate program in EFL major. This course was taught by the researcher (who authored the present paper). Noticeably, despite coming from different provinces of Vietnam, those course participants shared (i) the first language (i.e., Vietnamese), (ii) the young adulthood of 19 – 20 years old in their specific ongoing student life, (iii) the previous educational background situated in Vietnam (they

all were born in Vietnam, had never been or lived abroad before, educated from primary to secondary under the Vietnamese educational system in the Vietnamese setting), (iv) the end goal of their tertiary education (earning a college degree majored in EFL), (v) the current learning setting hosted by this local university, and (vi) the EFL training program run by the faculty of this university. The fact that the existing literature offers virtually no information about whether these participants with such multiple identical core antecedents have any concrete goal-setting and striving behaviors in common at their second-year college stage of EFL acquisition or how they differ, if any, in this regard motivated the researcher to carry out the present study in his regular teaching classes at this university. After obtaining the official permission granted by the Department in charge, the researcher started conducting the study.

Research Instruments and Data Collection Procedure

As mentioned above, the present study aimed to find out empirically: (1) what are the typical patterns of goal-setting displayed by EFL college students concerning grade-point average and the discrepancy between the current state and desired goal?, and (2) what action plans do they self-initiate to attain set-goals? For answers to the research questions, before ending the first session of his regular teaching class, the academic 2022-2023 year, the researcher delivered the goal-setting displayed template (which had been devised by the researcher himself) to all present students in that first-session day as follows:

Table 1. *Goal-setting template*

Courses	My grade-point average (GPA) course profile			
	<i>Listening Skill</i>	<i>Speaking Skill</i>	<i>Reading Skill</i>	<i>Writing Skill</i>
Last semester’s GPA already gained (2021-2022)	(1)
	(2) <i>Tick one</i>			
	- Very satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>	- Very satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>	- Very satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>	- Very satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>
	- Satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>	- Satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>	- Satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>	- Satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>
	- Not satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>	- Not satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>	- Not satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>	- Not satisfied <input type="checkbox"/>
	(3) <i>Attribution</i>			

This semester’s GPA goals (2022-2023)	(4)
	(5) <i>Tick one</i>			
	- Very confident <input type="checkbox"/>	- Very confident <input type="checkbox"/>	- Very confident <input type="checkbox"/>	- Very confident <input type="checkbox"/>
	- Confident <input type="checkbox"/>	- Confident <input type="checkbox"/>	- Confident <input type="checkbox"/>	- Confident <input type="checkbox"/>
	- Not confident <input type="checkbox"/>	- Not confident <input type="checkbox"/>	- Not confident <input type="checkbox"/>	- Not confident <input type="checkbox"/>
	(6) <i>Action plans</i>			

As seen from Table 1, the displayed template contains only four EFL skills because together with other courses (such as philosophy, physical education, English phonology, and grammar) these English language courses are currently compulsory that all participants took the previous year as freshmen (2021-2022) and also in the second year (2022-2023) as sophomores at this university. Thus, each of these specific courses formulates a discrete sub-goal for participants. The researcher openly and carefully guided participants to fill in the given template item by item:

- (1) the last semester's GPA they gained in these skill courses, respectively;
- (2) on that gained GPA, their responding emotion resulted - how they truly felt then;
- (3) how they should account for that result, i.e. why they gained such a very satisfying, satisfying, or not satisfying GPA;
- (4) exact GPA goal for the upcoming semester in each of the skill courses given;
- (5) how confident they feel for that self-set goal, that is how they estimate their capacity to meet the set goal; and
- (6) what they should do to meet the goal.

Although this university currently co-applies two interchangeable grading schemes of 1-4 and 1-10 (that is: A=4 equates to 8.5 – 10 points, B=3 for 7.0 – 8.4 points, C=2 for 5.5 – 6.9 points, D=1 for 4.0 – 5.4 points) (Do, 2022), participants were requested to display only GPA in 1-10 format for ease and consistency across templates submitted. Visibly, for items (1), (2), and (3) individual participants are required to consciously recall and reflect on what already happened in the previous semester. That metacognitive-skill promoting process from (1) to (3) should likely exert its impact on the subsequent process reflected in (4), (5), and (6) moves, respectively in the template as a logical reasoning flow. This cause-effect contingency template represents inherent goal-setting behaviors documented in the literature reviewed above (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Berkman et al., 2012; Ozimek et al., 2022; Fishback & Ferguson, 2007; Jeffrey & Putka, 2000; Konstantara & Galanakis, 2022; Locke & Latham, 2002; Max & Bacal, 2004). Also, the template closely echoes a three-step model of self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002), comprising (i) *forethought* of strategic planning, and outcome expectations or goal attainment; (ii) *performance/volitional control* via utilizing different strategies, and techniques to self-motivate and monitor the learning processes oriented towards the set goals; and (iii) *self-reflection* by evaluating progression and noticing emotional reactions drawing on learning outcomes. Template items also refer to the questionnaire scale measuring self-regulation with two major components: *knowledge of cognition* and *regulation of cognition* (Schraw & Dennison, 1994).

As a result, this mental-working template is deemed to intensively engage participants in their learning attention and responsibility in the sense that it appears to compel them to take sufficient time and profoundly deliberate over at least a two-semester successive time to be assumedly packed with multiple different learning events already happening, particularly significant ones such as exam-sitting days and exam-scores report received, followed by envisioning what should be done in the upcoming semester to mobilize motivation and available resources for goal-directed actions. Thus, the entire process appears to beneficially develop students' metacognition and emotional control, particularly abstract reasoning and critical thinking skills, which can potentially be transferred into their career life after college.

Considering the ethical codes in research, although the goal-setting practice is conducive to learning, the researcher used the template only as a homework assignment and also clearly informed students from the onset that the given assignment was aimed to explicitly practice goal-setting skills, which was worthwhile in the learning process at college and completely optional, meaning that they did not have to submit it in any case and it had nothing to do with the course grades at hand. Otherwise, they volitionally decided to partake in the present study by submitting the completed template via personal emails within the following week and at their self-decretion permitting the researcher to contact them individually for further information on an absolute-confidentiality basis from that point on. This translates that under no circumstance could any personal information, especially real names, be identified in the final result report by prospective

readers. In return, the researcher would provide detailed comments and constructive guidance to improve goal-setting skills and proactive learning plans.

Then, during the following week, the researcher received 58 completed template copies submitted. The fact that all these 58 template copies were properly fulfilled with the expected information shows the validity of the template format used in the present study. Then, the researcher arranged short phone conversations of approximately ten minutes each per template submitter to (i) acknowledge the template submission and voluntary participation in the study; (ii) confirm the validity and truthfulness of the information displayed in the template by the participant; (iii) obtain relevant information in detail; and (iv) offer constructive comments and action guidance if needed. Having gained sufficient confirmation from all 58 template submitters (35 females and 23 males), with the research questions in mind, the researcher started the process of scrutinizing all the submitted templates one by one, and then linking them collectively and reiteratively, in terms of numbers counted and content analysis. The following section will detail obtained results from the submitted templates regarding the targetted research questions in order.

Results

Research Question One: Goal-Setting Patterns Displayed

The following table presents goal-setting patterns based on discrepancies or the gap from the item (1), i.e., previous semester GPA gained, to the item (4), meaning this semester's GPA goal targetted by 58 students involved displayed in the templates (Table one). Thus, the discrepancy is simply calculated by (4) minus (1). For simplicity and visual focus, Table two displays only item (1) results and discrepancies aimed at by the students involved.

Table 2. *Goal-setting patterns displayed by 58 students (N) via the given template*

	Courses	Listening Skill	Speaking Skill	Reading Skill	Writing Skill
Item (1) Present GPA	A= 8.5 – 10 points	N= 4/58 6.89%	N= 10 17.24	N= 7 12.06	N=17 29.31
	B= 7.0 – 8.4	N= 13 22.41%	N= 19 32.75	N= 15 25.86	N= 31 53.44
	C= 5.5 – 6.9	N= 36 62.06%	N= 29 50.00	N= 34 58.62	N= 10 17.24
	D= 4.0 – 5.4	N= 5 8.62%	N= 0	N= 2 3.44	N= 0
Discrepancies aimed	Less than 1 point	N= 18 31.03%	N= 37 63.79	N= 26 44.82	N= 39 67.24
	From 1 to below 2 points	N= 37 63.79%	N= 19 32.75	N= 30 51.72	N= 19 32.75
	2 points & higher	N= 3 5.17%	N= 2 3.44	N= 2 3.44	N= 0

First, Table two shows that among the four skills, students appeared to be struggling with listening, and reading courses with more than 70% for listening, and more than 60% for reading, earning only either an average C or poor D in present GPA, representing the previous semester learning outcomes. This follows that these two skill courses observed more than 50% aiming at a discrepancy of between one and two points: listening 63.79% and reading 51.72%, which overrides the other two skills of capturing only 32.75% each. In addition, 100% of students whose present GPA fell in C or D denoted an emotional response of "not satisfied" across the four skills for the item (2), Table one.

Secondly, results from both the item (3) attribution, Table one, and subsequent individual phone conversations reveal that most of the 2-or-higher-points discrepancy setters, from either D or C advancing towards B or A, confidently approached their goal desire and anchored to two antecedents of (i) concerted effort for learning and (ii) firmly-acquired strategic methods/techniques of specific-skill learning. They cited clearly that both these antecedents were deliberately activated in the ongoing semester but weak or almost absent in the previous one.

Thirdly, contrary to the up-moving direction underpinning the first and second patterns, the third pattern is *maintaining a high GPA*, either B or A. This pattern applies to those who earned B or A GPA the previous semester. Unquestionably, the A-maintaining group is logically expected because such a GPA level is the highest band score. Meanwhile, the B-maintaining goal group openly cited during subsequent phone conversations that by self-reflecting on the previous semester and self-envisioning toward the upcoming semester they concluded their current capacity could hardly meet the new semester's coursework demands satisfactorily. In one sense, the latter group appeared to seriously consider their strengths and weaknesses concerning upcoming task requirements, prompting that their existing capacity could probably not catch up with growing task demands. In another sense, they somehow showed an *avoidance orientation* (Schienle, 2009) at this specific point of their learning pathway.

Research Question Two: Action plans displayed

Table three below presents the results from the item (6) action plans, and Table one is displayed 58 returned templates by the students involved. Then, concrete illustrations from the templates are provided. For anonymity, as ethically required in research, all the templates will be coded by Tem1, Tem2, Tem3, and so on, meaning from template 1, template 2, template 3, etc., respectively.

Table 3. Overall results of action plans displayed in the given template, item (6)

Content items	Total number	%
Templates providing action plans for all four skill courses of English listening, speaking, reading, and writing	58/58	100
Templates navigating relevant learning resources	58	100
Templates identifying features or distinct characteristics of each of the four skills	25	43.10
Templates referencing others' assistance	23	39.65
Templates prioritizing tasks in the order of importance	18	31.03
Templates stating self's strengths and weaknesses in each of the four skills	15	25.86
Templates designing concrete steps for doing tasks	15	25.86
Templates including self-evaluation on task performances	12	20.68
Templates setting concrete lengths of time for doing tasks	10	17.24
Templates locating suitable environments for doing specific tasks	10	17.24

The following extracts are illustrative of the obtained data. For English listening skills, Tem two conveys time frame, learning steps, focal attention on weak points while doing tasks, listening genres, and learning resources:

To get the expected goal score I will make a study plan for listening practice as follows: Every day I will spend 45 minutes or one hour practicing listening at hours like 7 pm every Monday Wednesday, and Friday. In my spare time, I listen to audio and podcasts to practice more. In terms of listening practice I will follow the steps: for each listening, underline keywords, concentrate attention on these words or their synonyms; identify my weak points, and improve them. I will also practice different types of listening (lecture, conversation, conversation, etc.). About materials to practice listening: I will practice listening in IELTS test formats, Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS Listening, Basic IELTS Listening practice materials, Get Ready for IELTS Listening. I can practice listening on websites: ieltsolinetests.com, and breakingnewsenglish.com

For speaking skills, Tem five conveys content items of skill-specific demands, techniques of practice, learning resources, others' assistance, self-motivation, determination, and reasons for tapping into these strategies:

English speaking skills are difficult for foreign language learners like me. I will have to practice a lot in different ways such as: No matter how poor my vocabulary or pronunciation, I will show confidence and speak as much as possible when given the opportunity. No one laughs when I make a mistake; on the contrary, they can be more enthusiastic to help me correct it. The more practice, the more I will improve my fluency and vocabulary. I will often listen to English news on TV or songs on websites for pronunciation skills. Besides, I will also learn more vocabulary and expressions. The more I speak, the more I learn. I'll try my best to improve my speaking skill.

For reading skills, Tem32 conveys content items of skill benefits improved, levels of reading texts, textual types, content topics, other skills integration, self-motivation, and learning resources:

Reading is a quiet place for me, so if I improve on it, I will gain a lot of things: First, vocabulary is added. Second, I will learn a lot of the grammatical structures found in the reading passages. Third, I have a platform to promote the remaining skills to develop, especially Listening and Writing skills. The most effective solutions help achieve my reading improvement goals: + Practice more readings, from easy to difficult, + Read articles in English or bilingual books, + Search for favorite topics in English to increase interest and help me remember better.

For writing skills, Tem40 conveys content items of detailed steps of practice, time frame, and post-task reflection.

I will study for writing three days a week, dedicating one day to task one and the other two days to task two. Both types of lessons are divided into three similar learning stages: phase one is the consolidation of vocabulary, collocation, and grammar; phase two is learning in the form of lessons and phase three will be practice questions. About the writing process, I follow four steps: the first draft, then reading the example, then correcting mistakes, and finally drawing new words, paraphrases, and collocations.

Discussion

First, grounding on the empirical data presented in Table two, the present study points out the first typical pattern of goal-setting in EFL skill courses, which is *passing over a low GPA*, that is meeting either B, good, or A, very good. As a result, most students share the desire to improve learning outcomes and demonstrate a straightforward *approach orientation*, especially when their GPA is low, in goal-setting behavior. However, of the C-or-D GPA group or low-achievers, approximately 20% of all four skills expressed a "not confident" in item (5), Table one. In other words, an above-average GPA desire is typically adopted by students disregarding whether or not their self-confidence is advantageously matched. This pattern signifies that low-achievers appear to *tolerate a temporal uncertainty*, i.e., lasting an academic semester in the timeframe. Otherwise, reasonably they are subject to repeatedly coping with a feeling of *failure* or *shame* when communicating or thinking of their learning outcomes in comparison with their peers or relative to standard criteria in learning (Arbona et al., 2021; Carleton et al., 2007; Fishback & Ferguson, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2004). So, the first pattern modified should be read *passing over-low GPA driven by an approach orientation and a temporal uncertainty tolerance*. This tendency is partly

justified by the fact that the previous year was their first year at college with multiple novel learning environments and coursework demands in comparison to those undergone at high school. Additionally, as noted above the repetition of all four courses of English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in the second year of the EFL college program supports their confidence in terms of *task familiarity* (Dörnyei, 2005). From another interpretation, their confidence in the second year also signals that they, to a certain extent, made good use of the learning feedback resulting from the previous year or past experiences (Zimmerman, 2002) via self-reflection. Accordingly, the present study relays this pattern in goal-setting among EFL students as *approaching high GPA driven by strong self-confidence*, that is meeting B or A levels straightforwardly. It is evident that the approaching high GPA pattern primarily occurs when sufficiently increased self-confidence is warranted (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Fishback & Ferguson, 2007; Jeffrey & Putka, 2000; Konstantara & Galanakis, 2022; Locke & Latham, 2002; Max & Bacal, 2004).

Secondly, from the empirical data provided in Table three, it is evident that all students can self-plan actions for setting goals with the first two content items displaying actions for each of the skills under deliberation and locating relevant learning resources, scoring 100% each. As a result, a positive answer to the second research question posed by the present study is gained. A wide variation is identified among the templates in terms of figuring out and detailing exactly what needs to be done, why, and how to do it successfully for subgoals represented by each skill course GPA targetted as seen in item (1), Table one, and Table two above. Since goal-setting theories universally underline that more realistic, measurable, attainable, and detailed action plans pay a more viable path to success (Blerkom, 2009; Erez & Kanfer, 1983; Jeffrey & Putka, 2000; Kernan et al., 1991; Starkey, 2004; Steel et al., 2018), it is gratifying to find that some involved students appeared to have taken it rigorously by playing out details of action plan although the template was only optional and had no impact on the course grade.

In addition to a remarkable variation in self-initiative plans, as seen from Table three, another sound insight captured from the data is that based on the previous semester's GPA given in the templates, high-achievers appeared to outperform the low-achievers in terms of detailed action plans. In other words, high-achievers tend to fare well in setting learning goals. This finding in the present study to some extent contributes to filling the gap in goal-setting issues (Clements & Kamau, 2018). In another sense, it sheds light on constructively pedagogical implications. First, if class time is permitted, in-charge teachers could attentionally select, bring in, and showcase some exemplary action plans for each skill to the whole class because in general terms students can learn from peers or classmates, not just from their teachers. This way has been utilized by the researcher of the present study himself and it worked. Yet, two essential conditions must be warranted: (1) the template writer's voluntary consent and (2) absolute anonymity as required by ethical codes. Secondly, the template format applied in the present study could be used as an obligatory homework assignment and partly counted in grade course assessment rather than merely optional because as a strong learning demand, it will likely and beneficially boost students' rigor in self-reflections and reasoning skills substantively inherent in the self-regulation system, which are essential for college students at large during college life and career progression (Blerkom, 2009; Dörnyei, 2005; Erez & Kanfer, 1983; Jeffrey & Putka, 2000; Kernan et al., 1991; Schraw & Dennison, 1994; Starkey, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002). Then, students will potentially and fruitfully produce a wider meaningful repertoire of strategic action plans, which can be shared among peers right in the classroom or via some sort of virtual device.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to find out the common goal-setting patterns displayed by EFL students from a university in Vietnam and their self-initiated action plans to attain set goals for specific learning courses. The obtained results reveal (i) a variation in goal-setting directions displayed by involved students even though they share multiple background antecedents (first language, young adulthood, previous education, tertiary education goal, and current specific-learning setting), (ii) a complex mechanism of multiple functional processes packed with both metacognitive and affective components via self-reflecting on past/previous learning outcomes and upcoming learning stage in goal-setting behaviors under discussion, and (iii) students' ability to self-initiate action plans to attain set-goals.

Although tentatively configured due to limitations in a small selected sample and being situated in a specific learning setting, the three patterns of *passing over low GPA*, *approaching high GPA*, and *maintaining high GPA* found out by the present study are hoped to openly encourage further research on relevant issues. Potential directions could be (i) involving a larger sample within EFL majors or cross-disciplinary students for a better generalization in goal-setting patterns for specific learning courses seen as subgoals at university education, (ii) situated in different learning contexts/situations for examining the possible impact of contextual variables involved, (iii) over an entire undergraduate timespan for looking at possible shifts in the concerned behaviors within individuals, and (iv) replicating the template used in the present study for testing its validity. Future studies are essentially needed to not only enrich understandings of inherent issues and thus gradually narrow the existing gap in the literature but also likely bring about various productive pedagogical implications within EFL education and beyond like those suggested in the present study.

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