Beyond achievement goals: How different goals drive second language learning and achievement

Jiajing Li
Beijing Normal University, China
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3810-9277
jiajingli@bnu.edu.cn

Norman B. Mendoza
The Education University of Hong Kong, China
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0344-0709
nbmendoza@eduhk.hk

Ronnel B. King ✉
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1723-1748
rbking@cuhk.edu.hk

Abstract

Goals are central to understanding how students learn a second language. Much of the existing research on goals in the field of language learning has focused exclusively on achievement goals, particularly mastery and performance goals. However, exclusively focusing on achievement goals precludes language researchers from exploring other important types of goals such as work avoidance, social, and personal best goals. Furthermore, other key theoretical perspectives, such as goal content, goal-setting, and goal-complex approaches, are neglected in second language learning research. Hence, the paper aims to: (1) introduce second language researchers to other goal perspectives that might be useful to understanding language learning, such as achievement goal, goal content, goal-setting, and goal complex approaches,

(2) provide theoretical insights into how different goal theories can advance language learning research and (3) offer practical implications for language researchers and teachers on how to harness goal-related insights, ideas, and models to improve students' language learning.

1. Introduction

Goals are critical for learning and are especially important when learning a second or foreign language (Dörnyei, 2020). The pursuit of goals plays an essential role in directing and energizing actions, shaping one' beliefs, feelings, and efforts, and ultimately determining one's language acquisition (Lee & Bong, 2019). Given the power of goals in understanding language learning, second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) researchers have examined how goals play a role in understanding motivation and academic achievement in language learning (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).[1]

L2 and FL researchers have almost exclusively centered on how achievement goals shape students' language learning (Duff, 2019). However, aside from achievement goals, many other types of goal constructs (e.g., work avoidance, social, and personal best goals) and goal theories (e.g., goal content theories, goal-setting theory, and goal complex) are pertinent to understanding L2 and FL learning motivation and learning (Wentzel & Skinner, 2022). A near-exclusive focus on achievement goals might preclude language researchers from fully leveraging the insights of other goal perspectives (Papi & Hiver, 2020).

In view of the above considerations, the aims of this paper are to: (1) introduce goal perspectives that can deepen the understanding of language learning, (2) offer theoretical perspectives on how various goal theories can contribute to the advancement of language learning research, and (3) provide practical recommendations for language researchers and educators on the application of goal-related insights, concepts, and models to enhance students' language learning. First, we shed light on how different perspectives, such as the achievement goal, goal content, goal-

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[1] One of the major differences between L2 and FL lies in the exposure environment. L2 learners may frequently come into contact with this language in their daily lives, as they are in a community and cultural environment where the language is used. FL learners may not regularly come into contact with this language in their daily lives, as their social environment primarily uses native language (Pecorari, 2018). Some studies we review were conducted in the L2 context, and others were undertaken in the FL context. For clarity, we used the terms L2/FL interchangeably.

setting, and goal-complex approaches, conceptualize goals in the educational litera-ture and how they can be applied to the domain of L2/FL language learning. Next, we give a brief overview of the relevant literature that illustrates the linkages among ability beliefs, goals, and learning-related outcomes. Finally, we delineate the theo-retical implications, practical recommendations, and future directions for research goals in the language classroom.

2. Goals in language learning

The following sections cover the achievement goal approach, goal content approach, goal-setting approach, and goal-complex approach. Collectively, these perspec-tives provide complementary insights into the ways in which goals shape students' language learning outcomes.

2.1. Achievement goal approach

Achievement goals are crucial in understanding learners' motivations in achieve-ment-oriented contexts (Elliot et al., 1999). They influence key student outcomes such as engagement in school, learning strategies, and achievement (Huang, 2016; McGregor & Elliot, 2002). Achievement goals are fundamentally concerned with ability or competence and include competence-related aims and the standards with which performance is evaluated (Elliot & Hulleman, 2017). Although the literature on achievement goals has evolved, at the heart of the theory is the distinction between the desire to improve one's ability or competence (i.e., mastery goals) and the desire to demonstrate one's ability or competence (i.e., performance goals) (Liem & Senko, 2022).

 The original dichotomous model that distinguishes between mastery and performance goals has since evolved. Later iterations of the theory introduced the trichotomous achievement goal model (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996), which includes mastery, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals, and then the 2 x 2 achievement goal model (Elliot & Murayama, 2008), which includes mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals. The most recent iteration of the theory is the 3 x 2 model, which includes task-approach, task-avoidance, self-approach, self-avoidance, other-approach, and other-avoidance goals (Elliot et al., 2011).[2]

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[2] Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) extended the dichotomous model through the incorpora-tion of approach-avoidance distinction in the performance goal construct. Researchers next applied the approach-avoidance distinction to mastery goals as well, leading to the 2 x 2

Despite different conceptualizations of achievement goals, researchers generally agree that mastery-oriented goals are more adaptive than performance-oriented goals and that approach goals are more adaptive than avoidance goals (Urdan & Kaplan, 2020). Studies have found that mastery-approach goals correlate with positive outcomes, including enjoyment, engagement, and higher academic achievement, while mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance goals are associated with negative outcomes such as anxiety, procrastination, and poor learning outcomes (Hulleman et al., 2010).

Performance-approach goals are associated with more inconsistent findings. Some studies have detected the positive consequences of performance-approach goals, whereas other studies suggest otherwise (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2012). These findings apply to the context of language learning (Barabadi & Khajavy, 2020). For instance, Wang et al. (2022) demonstrated that the adoption of mastery goals positively influenced the engagement and academic achievement of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. On the other hand, performance-avoidance goals have generally been shown to have a negative impact on language learning. For example, Feng et al. (2023) found that students' willingness to communicate in English was positively influenced by both mastery-approach and performance-approach goals (see also King, 2016; Yu & McLellan, 2020, for exceptions). Ability beliefs are one of the most important predictors of achievement goals (Huang, 2016; Lou & Noels, 2016). Language researchers have also documented the crucial role of ability beliefs in achievement goals (e.g., Liu et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2021). For example, Liu et al. (2023) found that self-efficacy was positively related to mastery- and performance-approach goals but negatively associated with performance-avoidance goals in EFL learning.

The achievement goal framework provides an important lens on how goals relate to one's language learning. However, achievement goals are far from the only types of goals that students pursue. The actual existence of certain types of goals, such as mastery avoidance goals and even performance goals, has been questioned by some researchers (e.g., Lee & Bong, 2016; Strunk et al., 2021). Hence, other goal perspectives might be needed to address the gaps in achievement goal theory.

2.2. Goal content approach

Whereas achievement goals focus on competence-related aims, the goal content approach is broader and includes different types of goals that students could pursue in

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achievement goal model (Elliot & Murayama, 2008). Most recently, Elliot et al. (2011) proposed the 3 x 2 achievement goal model, which incorporates the approach-avoidance distinction and different evaluative referents (Elliot & Pekrun, 2011).

the learning context. These could include helping others, trying to be socially responsible, or even just being affiliated with one's friends (Dowson & McInerney, 2001, 2003; Wentzel, 1993). Within the goal content approach perspective, goals are defined as the "cognitive representation of what it is an individual is trying to achieve in a given situation" (Wentzel, 2000, p. 105-106). Hence, goal content researchers typically examine other goals such as work avoidance, social, and personal best goals alongside achievement goals. We elaborate on these goals in the following section.

2.2.1. Work avoidance goals

Work avoidance goals refer to learners' intention to minimize effort and engagement in learning tasks (Dowson & McInerney, 2001). This is characterized by the intention of doing as little schoolwork as possible. Work avoidance goals could have deleterious effects on students' engagement. Work-avoidant behaviors also relate to lower use of metacognitive learning strategies, which could negatively impact overall learning and achievement (Jagacinski et al., 2020).

Learners driven by work avoidance goals may seek to avoid challenging language learning tasks, exhibit lower effort, and prefer surface learning. Adopting work avoidance goals can thus be detrimental to language learning outcomes (Henry & Davydenko, 2020). Typically, students who hold work avoidance goals also have maladaptive ability beliefs and feel they lack control over their academic outcomes.

When students adopt work avoidance goals, this can also have upstream effects on learners' ability beliefs. Pursuing work avoidance goals can hinder students' willingness to take risks, motivation to learn, and overall academic achievement. Further research is needed to empirically examine how work avoidance goals operate within language learning, given the lack of work on this construct in this domain.

2.2.2. Social goals

Social goals refer to goals whose content encompasses the social aspects of the classroom (Murphy & Alexander, 2000). They are somewhat distinct from achievement goals, which focus on ability/competence. Students usually strive for various social goals and express strong commitment to them. Even when the effects of commonly examined achievement goals are considered, social goals still explain a substantial portion of variance in key outcomes (Shim et al., 2013a). Under certain circumstances, social goals serve as stronger predictors than achievement goals (Wentzel, 1996). It is worth noting that while achievement goals have been the focus of extensive research, social goals have received comparatively limited

scholarly attention despite their significance. One of the main barriers to research on social goals is the ambiguity surrounding their definitions which are not uniform across studies. Scholars sometimes operationalize them in idiosyncratic ways, which results in a fractionated body of literature (King & McInerney, 2019).

Some scholars define social goals in terms of the specific social outcomes that students are trying to pursue. For example, Wentzel (1991, 1993) focused on *social responsibility goals* and *prosocial goals*. Social responsibility goals refer to students' commitment to fulfilling social expectations, whereas prosocial goals reflect their inclination to assist and share with classmates. Wentzel (1991) found a positive correlation between social responsibility goals and academic achievement. Wentzel (1996) also found that both prosocial and social responsibility goals were positive predictors of effort in English classes, even after considering other motivational variables into account. Specifically, in a regression analysis that included mastery goals, performance goals, self-efficacy, and intrinsic value along with social goals, only social goals proved to be a positive predictor of effort in English classes. In addition, social goals were linked to improved academic outcomes, such as higher self-efficacy, greater intrinsic value, and stronger mastery goals. More importantly, social goals were positively associated with both concurrent English grades and those two years later.

Social goals have also been defined as social reasons for wanting to do well in school (Urdan & Maehr, 1995). Social goals within this tradition are referred to as *social-academic goals.* Dowson and McInerney (2001) identified five main types of social-academic goals that students commonly pursue. These include *social affiliation*, where students aim to achieve in school to foster a sense of belonging (e.g., "I want to do well in school so that I can feel close to my group of friends"), *social approval*, which involves striving for academic success to gain recognition from parents and teachers (e.g., "I try to do well at school to please my teachers"), *social concern*, where students are motivated by the intention to help others (e.g., "I want to do well at school so that I can help other students with their work"), *social responsibility*, which reflects a desire to follow moral norms (e.g., "I want to do good schoolwork because other people expect it of me"), and *social status,* where academic success is viewed as a path to gain social status (e.g., "I want to do well at school so that I can have lots of money later on"). Studies have found that such social-academic goals, in particular social concern and social responsibility goals, positively predicted students' engagement even after accounting for the roles of mastery and performance goals (Dowson & McInerney, 2003).

Other scholars focus on how students define social ability/competence. Social goals within this research tradition are called *social achievement goals*, encompassing *social development goals*, which focus on developing social competence (e.g., "I like it when I learn better ways to get along with friends"), *social*

demonstration approach goals, which pertain to demonstrating social competence and being seen as socially desirable by others (e.g., "It is important to me that other kids think I am popular"), and *social demonstration avoidance goals,* which center on avoiding being seen as lacking social competence (e.g., "When I am with other kids, I don't want to be made fun of"). Social achievement goals center on social ability/competence, contrasting with academic achievement goals that emphasize one's academic ability or competence. Among the social achievement goals, social development goals are linked to better psychological adjustment and well-being; in contrast, social demonstration avoidance goals are connected to negative outcomes (e.g., aggression and social anxiety) (Shim & Ryan, 2012). Social demonstration approach goals show mixed effects, being positively associated with both favorable outcomes (e.g., greater social competence and popularity) and unfavorable ones (e.g., increased aggression and social anxiety). For instance, individuals with such goals tend to exhibit higher levels of social competence and popularity, but also show increased aggression and social anxiety (Shim et al., 2013b).

Language learning researchers acknowledge the importance of social motivation and argue that language learning is a situated process, strongly shaped by the social context. However, social goals were only indirectly explored in past studies, such as those that explored affiliative motives (the desire to please the teacher) or the ought-to self (the desire to fulfill external expectations). For instance, researchers have documented that students who aim to succeed in learning English to please their "parents and relatives" or to "bring honor" to the family may demonstrate adaptive outcomes, such as increased effort and academic achievement (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). Learners, especially those in collectivist contexts, tend to view learning not only as a personal endeavor but some see it as a family obligation and social responsibility (Tao & Hong, 2014). More research is needed to examine how the different types of social goals are associated with language learning motivation.

2.2.3. Personal best goals

Personal best goals refer to "specific, challenging, competitively self-referenced targets towards which students strive" (Martin, 2006, p. 805), positing a target performance standard that matches or exceeds one's previous best performance (Liem et al., 2012). Personal best goals are generally measured by asking students to report if they are striving for better performance than past achievement (e.g., "When I do my schoolwork, I try to do it better than I've done before;" Liem et al., 2012). Pursuing personal best goals helps activate students' their potential, ignite enthusiasm, and achieve academic success by overcoming challenges and improving

themselves (Burns et al., 2019). In the domain of language learning, scholars have also found that striving for personal best goals leads to higher motivation, engagement, and achievement (Khajavy & Aghaee, 2022). For instance, Ramshe et al. (2019) uncovered that endorsing personal best goals was closely intertwined with EFL learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

Personal best goals researchers have found that students who believe in their capabilities and endorse a growth mindset are more likely to envision future success, focus on self-improvement, and set challenging targets (e.g., Burns et al., 2019). In turn, personal best goals could provide opportunities for success and potentially enhance learners' evaluation of their capabilities in language acquisition, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy (Martin & Elliot, 2016; Martin et al., 2019). However, L2/FL researchers have seldom explored how personal best goals are tied to ability beliefs. One of the few studies that revealed the relevance of pursuits of personal best goals and self-efficacy in EFL learning was conducted by Ismail and Heydarnejad (2023).

2.3. Goal-setting approach

Rather than examining what goals students have when they come into a classroom, goal-setting theorists are more interested in the process whereby individuals set their own performance standards (Locke & Latham, 1990). Goal setting refers to a process where one makes conscious efforts toward achieving a goal (Schunk, 1990). Goal-setting theory defines a goal as "the object or aim of an action to attain a specific standard of proficiency, usually within a specified time limit" (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 705). The theory stresses that people can thoughtfully and voluntarily engage in goal-directed behaviors (Locke & Latham, 2015).

Goal specificity, difficulty, and proximity are key features of effective and quality goals according to goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2019). First, goals should be well-defined and articulated (Locke & Latham, 2002). Specific goals orient one's attention to concrete outcomes to be attained, guide goal-directed behavior in a more focused manner, facilitate the use of goal-relevant strategies, and increase the probability of success. Second, the level of challenge must be at least as high as or higher than that of a previous best performance (Martin & Elliot, 2016). More challenging goals work better in leading to high performance relative to easy goals, as an individual has to do better to overcome difficulties and attain challenging goals (Cao et al., 2022). Third, proximal goals pertain to shorter-term goals that are closely linked to longer-term outcomes goals, that is, distal goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). They are more attainable and serve as stepping stones toward fulfilling higher and long-term goals.

Goal-setting theory is a generative theoretical framework that can guide teachers and researchers in facilitating students' language learning (Lee & Bong,

2019). Research highlights that setting goals in language learning helps initiate action, sustain focused effort, and achieve desired outcomes such as greater willingness to communicate, enhanced motivation, and higher academic achievement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Regarding predictors, ability beliefs have been found to orient language learners' goal-setting in language learning (e.g., Bai et al., 2021; Fryer, 2015). Students with higher ability beliefs are apt to set higher goals. For example, Fryer (2015) found that self-concept predicted EFL learners' pursuit of distal and proximal goals. Bai et al. (2021) reported that EFL learners' growth mindset, self-efficacy, and intrinsic value contributed to goal setting and language learning achievement.

The effectiveness of goal-setting interventions has sparked a growing interest in the L2/FL field (Moeller et al., 2012; Pawlak, 2018). For instance, Moeller et al. (2012) conducted a quasi-experimental study on the impact of goal setting on language learning achievement. A portfolio named "LinguaFolio" was introduced to assist high school students with setting goals in L2 classes. The findings indicated that setting goals, particularly those more challenging ones and developing clearer action plans, improved reading, speaking, and writing skills. Pham (2023) examined the influence of a goal-based writing program in EFL writing classes over ten weeks and found that the goal-setting intervention improved students' autonomy, motivation, and writing achievement (i.e., task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy).

Compared to the achievement goal and goal content approaches, goal setting is probably the most promising from a practitioner's perspective. Goal-setting theory offers a more generative framework among the different goal theories that could lead to concrete intervention approaches and offer practical guidelines that even novice language teachers could rely on (Locke & Latham, 2019). Furthermore, goal-setting interventions, being more straightforward, are particularly effective in boosting academic performance. In contrast, interventions targeting students' achievement goals and other goals can be more complex and challenging (Urdan & Kaplan, 2020). We argue that L2/FL language researchers and teachers should pay more attention to goal-setting theory if they want to promote motivation and language proficiency among their students. When assisting students in setting goals, practitioners should also take into consideration students' self-regulation abilities to effectively coordinate and pursue multiple goals.

2.4. Goal-complex approach

A promising approach that could perhaps unify the achievement goal, goal content, and goal-setting approaches is the goal complex perspective. The goal-complex

perspective conceptualizes goals as a "complex" or unit comprised of a lower-order goal that serves as the means for attaining a higher-order goal, which is the end (Elliot & Thrash, 2001; Sommet et al., 2021). The higher-order goals can be classified into those that are more autonomous, while others are considered more controlled or extrinsic (Vansteenkiste et al., 2014).[3] The pairing of lower-order goals with higher-order goals captures the function and dynamics of the relationships among multiple goals.

A core insight of the goal complex approach is that lower-order goals that are pursued for autonomous reasons are more adaptive than those that are pursued for more controlled reasons. Autonomous and controlled reasons for goal pursuit represent two distinct modes of motivational functioning (Vansteenkiste et al., 2014). Autonomous reasons involve pursuing goals for interest, enjoyment, or inherent satisfaction, while controlled reasons entail pursuing goals to earn rewards or gain approval from others.

Imagine two students – Stella and Alice – who, on the surface, might pursue the same lower-order goal of getting an A in their foreign language test. However, Stella might be doing so to stretch herself and see just how much she is capable of as a language learner (autonomous reason). Alice might be pursuing the same goal to avoid feeling guilty and being berated by her parents when she does not get the highest marks in class (controlled reason) (see also Elliot & Sommet, 2023). Without a goal-complex approach, researchers might assume that these two students will have similar outcomes, but by understanding the higher-order reasons behind the lower-order goals, we can assume that the first student will attain better language outcomes and experience better well-being compared to the second one.

The goal complex approach could integrate different research traditions, and it also highlights the issue of goal coordination (Liem & Senko, 2022). From this point of view, goals connect vertically in a hierarchy with higher-order "end goals" eliciting lower-order "means goals." For example, a student could have the higher-order goal of being a good English speaker. Several lower-order goals, such as watching English movies and learning new vocabulary, could serve this higher-order goal. When the reasons for pursuing these goals and the means to achieve them overlap, coordinating efforts becomes easier, and the connections between goals are strengthened through repeated use.

Once researchers acknowledge the multiple goals that students could pursue, there needs to be an understanding of how these different goals must be

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[3] For instance, in language learning, students may prioritize mastering essential vocabulary before tackling complex grammar rules, effectively managing their cognitive resources. They can also shield high-priority goals, such as preparing for a high-stakes language proficiency test, from disruptions caused by less critical goals (e.g., social affiliation goals of hanging out with friends).

coordinated. Hence, it is important to examine the self-regulatory processes students use when pursuing multiple goals (Kim et al., 2023). As students manage an array of academic, social, and well-being goals, they must effectively coordinate and adapt their goal pursuits. This is particularly relevant in language learning, where students often juggle various goals, such as mastering grammar, expanding vocabulary, and improving pronunciation, alongside the other goals of being with their friends, having fun, and trying to get a passing grade in the English test.

Recent studies reveal that students engage in regulatory strategies such as goal prioritizing, shielding, and switching to manage potential conflicts among their goals (Kim et al., 2023).[4] Additionally, students may switch between accessible goals depending on situational demands, such as shifting focus from written exercises to oral communication in different learning contexts. These self-regulatory processes are crucial in determining students' ability to attain their diverse goals.

Examining the self-regulation of multiple goals responds to calls for more research on how students manage simultaneous and sometimes conflicting drives. Integrating insights from goal and self-regulated learning theories offers a potentially generative framework for future research in language motivation. Practically, investigating these processes could inform interventions aimed at helping students effectively pursue their array of language learning goals.

Taken together, while the achievement goal, goal content, goal-setting, and goal-complex approaches all delve into human motivation and goal-directed behavior, they offer unique perspectives that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of goal pursuit. Table 1 is a brief description of these approaches. Achievement goal theory focuses on mastery or performance orientations, highlighting competence-specific strivings. Goal content theory delves into the content of individuals' aspirations and is broader than achievement goals as they can relate to non-achievement outcomes, unlike achievement goals, which focus exclusively on competence. Goal-setting theory primarily emphasizes the process of setting specific and proximal goals to attain specific outcomes.

The goal complex approach could be a potential integrative framework that unifies the achievement goal, goal content, and goal-setting approaches as it can accommodate multiple goals within its conceptual space. Language learners pursue multiple goals at the same time. The addition of self-regulation of multiple goals enriches our understanding further by introducing the complex

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[4] When adding variables to a model, it is important to be aware of the "piranha problem" (Tosh et al., 2021). This occurs when multiple large effects of predictors are tested, leading to a cumulative explanation of more than 100% of the variance for a given outcome (Tosh et al., 2021). Researchers may consider prioritizing the most theoretically relevant variables and prevent overfitting issues, ensuring that the number of variables included is appropriate relative to the sample size. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for alerting us to this issue.

dynamics of managing concurrent goals. This includes strategies such as goal prioritizing, shielding, and switching, which are particularly relevant in contexts like language learning, where students often juggle diverse and sometimes conflicting objectives. By integrating these perspectives, researchers could gain a more holistic view of how language learners navigate the intricate processes of goal-setting, pursuit, and adaptation across different learning environments.

Table 1 Goal approaches

	Achievement goal approach (Elliot & Thrash, 2001)	Goal content approach (Dowson & McInerney, 2003)	Goal-setting approach (Locke & Latham, 2002)	Goal complex approach (Liem & Senko, 2022)
Definition of a goal	A purpose or the reason underlying achievement behaviors within a specific achievement context	The content of life aspirations	An object or aim of an action to attain a specific standard of proficiency, usually within a specified time limit	A "complex" or unit comprised of a lower-order goal that serves as the means for attaining a higher-order goal, which is the end
Types and features of goals	• Mastery/Performance approach goals • Mastery/Performance avoidance goals	• Work avoidance goals • Social goals • Personal best goals	• Goal specificity • Goal difficulty • Goal proximity	• Lower-order goals • Higher-order goals
Implications	Encourage mastery goals and reduce performance goals	Prevent work avoidance goals; Infuse social goals into classroom instruction; Promote personal best goals	Facilitate specific, challenging, and proximal/short-term goals	Encourage more autonomous types of goals

3. Implications

3.1. Theoretical implications

Integrating multiple components of goal theories into L2/FL investigation is a promising direction. By incorporating those neglected ingredients, researchers can gain valuable insights into how multiple goals operate within L2/FL classes, thus supporting the contextualization of goal theories. In general, the theoretical implications can be reflected in the following three perspectives.

First, goal approaches could contribute to the understanding of motivation and academic achievement in language learning. Past studies reported that the overall predictive power of achievement goals was small (Hulleman et al., 2010; Wirthwein et al., 2013). For example, Wirthwein et al. (2013) reported small associations between achievement goals and achievement outcomes with r ranging from -.12 to .13. Other researchers have questioned the psychological salience of certain types of goals, such as mastery avoidance goals (Lee & Bong, 2016; Strunk et al., 2021). Another study found that other goals, such as social

goals, were more powerful predictors of learning and achievement. Therefore, examining other goals alongside achievement goals can increase the predictive power of our models. As suggested by the goal complex approach, multiple goals that stem from distinct theories can be integrated to explain students' L2/FL learning (Elliot & Sommet, 2023).

Second, students strive toward multiple goals; however, there is still ongoing research debate on which goals are more adaptive for learning-related outcomes (Elliot & Murayama, 2008). Involving previously unrepresented yet potentially salient goals that impinge on language learning helps delve deeper into this debate and may lead to the theoretical integration of goal theories (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Third, goals serve as a critical link that connects individuals' perceptions of their abilities/competence with their subsequent actions (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Specifically, goals may moderate the relationship between students' abilities beliefs and learning outcomes in the long run, or these ability beliefs and goals might synergistically interact to impact learning outcomes. This mechanism reflects the dynamic motivational processes underlying language learning. Studying the dynamic relationships between L2/FL language learners' self-perceptions, diverse goal pursuit, and learning outcomes, researchers can deepen theoretical understanding by validating and refining the propositions of the motivational processes that drive language learning (Kaplan & Garner, 2020; Shum & Fryer, 2023). Taken together, moving beyond achievement goals and harnessing other types of goal constructs and goal theories could be a fruitful direction for contributing to the goal theories.

3.2. Practical implications

Goal theories have eminently practical implications for optimizing language teaching and learning. Particularly, among the different goal perspectives, goal-setting theory provides a powerful lens that can lead to evidence-based recommendations for learners and teachers alike. We outline the key implications of this paper below.

First, teachers are encouraged to help students develop mastery goal orientations while minimizing the emphasis on performance goals in language classrooms. They can resort to strategies such as emphasizing individual progress and explicitly stressing the importance of mastering skills and understanding knowledge, attributing progress to effort (Wang et al., 2022). Moreover, teachers are recommended to reduce students' performance goals in language classrooms. Teachers may consider downplaying scores and ranks, external rewards, and peer comparisons within the classroom, conveying messages that mistakes are inevitable in making progress.

Second, it is important to prevent the development of work avoidance goals. Teachers can address this by reducing students' fixed mindset beliefs and fostering an autonomy-supportive classroom climate that minimizes students' fear of making mistakes, praises students' progress, and alleviates boredom. Thoughtfully designed instruction can reduce avoidance behaviors and promote meaningful participation.

Third, teachers can infuse social goals into classroom instruction. This involves organizing cooperative activities that encourage peer collaboration and interaction. Students might build social goals for language learning and gain optimal learning outcomes by interacting and socializing with peers, endeavoring to take responsibility, and seeking ways to help each other in the language learning classroom (Alamdari & Ghani, 2020).

Fourth, promoting personal best goals can help students stay motivated and improve performance. Assigning graded tasks, organizing engaging language learning activities, providing opportunities for success, and encouraging students to compete with their previous performance are potential avenues for encouraging students to set personal best goals to maximize potential and optimize language learning (Khajavy & Aghaee, 2022).

Fifth, goals work best when they are specific, challenging, and proximal. Educators may consider guiding students to set specific, challenging, and proximal goals.

- *Specific goals.* We recommend that teachers help students set specific goals that are critical for student self-regulation and successful completion of tasks. Given that L2/FL learning requires the development of various language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), teachers may need to tailor goal-setting strategies to help students set clear goals for each aspect (Turner et al., 2021). For instance, teachers should help students set goals such as engaging with authentic listening materials, participating in oral communicative activities, improving reading speed, and writing coherent essays.

- *Challenging goals.* Challenging goals should be provided to students as those who face challenging goals tend to make arduous efforts and get higher academic performance (Mercer, 2019). When setting challenging goals, teachers are suggested to start within students' current ability and consecutively increase the task difficulty, monitor progress, offer timely guidance to students, and adjust goals when needed.

- *Proximal goals.* Teachers should help students develop proximal goals (e.g., to learn a certain number of new words each week to improve reading comprehension skills by mastering specific strategies such as skimming and scanning). By setting proximal goals, students can track and gauge their goal progress, attain immediate feedback, make continuous changes, boost motivation, and eventually contribute to desired learning outcomes. Notably, emphasizing proximal goals does not mean that the distal goals

should be discarded. Without a distal goal in mind, pursuing proximal goals mindlessly may render drills and practices pointless and lead to a lack of commitment. Therefore, teachers are suggested to help students coordinate their short-term proximal with their long-term distal goals. In this sense, teachers could leverage portfolios to record the goal-pursuing progress and checklists with daily/monthly goal settings. It is also advised that students should be encouraged to construct larger, long-term goals that guide the proximal goals, for example, broader language proficiency and better communicative competence (Fryer, 2015).

Finally, teachers are advised to encourage more autonomous types of goals. From a goal complex perspective, the reasons behind students' goal pursuit significantly affect learning outcomes. Students who pursue goals for autonomous reasons (e.g., striving to get an A in the foreign language exam because it aligns with self-identity) attain better learning outcomes than those who are driven by controlled/external reasons (e.g., striving to get an A in the foreign language exam because of guilt/shame). Teachers should guide students in regulating diverse goals and developing autonomous reasons for goal pursuit in L2/FL learning. They can achieve this by cultivating students' intrinsic motivation and helping them recognize the value of learning L2/FL. Additionally, teachers should focus on facilitating the internalization of controlled motivation and promoting the transition from controlled motivation to autonomous motivation. This can be accomplished by satisfying students' basic psychological needs for autonomy (e.g., granting freedom to choose language learning tasks), competence (e.g., providing opportunities for academic success), and relatedness (e.g., fostering a sense of the relevance of language learning with real-world usages) (Mendoza et al., 2023).

4. Future directions for researching goals in the language classroom

Goals are of fundamental importance to students' language learning. Hence, they deserve more attention from L2/FL researchers. In what follows we make a few suggestions for future researchers who might be interested in goals in language learning.

First, it is important to move beyond achievement goals and examine other types of goals (Elliot & Sommet, 2023; Kung & Scholer, 2021). For example, researchers can consider integrating multiple goals grounded on the goal complex approach to examine the complexity of goal pursuit and the interactions among different goals. Approaches such as network analysis, latent profile analysis, and latent transition analysis offer valuable insights into the ways students concurrently pursue multiple goals. Relatedly, examining multiple goals may help address questions about

prioritizing certain goals over others and determining the optimal goal configurations that could maximize language learning and engagement. Future research could explore how factors such as learner characteristics, cultural context, and classroom climate influence patterns of goal pursuit.

Second, studies on language learning goals are dominated by research that focuses on the effect of students' goals on their academic achievement. Classrooms and schools are "social arenas" for students to express their social needs for affiliation and social contribution (Skinner et al., 2022; Wentzel & Skinner, 2022). To our knowledge, very few studies have considered the impacts of social goals on students' goals and language proficiency. L2/FL researchers may develop a research agenda to examine how the social environment relates to students' goals and academic achievement in language learning (see Luo et al., 2011; Mendoza & King, 2022, for examples in general academic contexts).

Third, longitudinal studies are needed to understand how goals develop over time (Pawlak, 2012; Scherrer, et al., 2020). Learning an L2/FL is an inherently developmental process. However, most of our research approaches fail to model this developmental trajectory, with much of the research focusing on capturing a snapshot through cross-sectional studies.

5. Conclusion

Goals offer an important gateway to helping researchers understand language learning. However, "goal" in language learning research is often synonymous with "achievement goal." This exclusive focus on achievement goals does not do justice to the multiple types of goals and the wide range of goal-related processes that are deployed when learning a second or foreign language. This paper expands the range of goals that can be capitalized on, draws out linkages among beliefs, goals, and learning-related outcomes, and offers theoretical and practical recommendations for how goals can be more effectively harnessed in language classrooms. We encourage language researchers to recognize that there are different types of goals other than achievement goals. Exploring other types of goals and their attendant theories will not only enrich theorizing but yield powerful practical implications for enhancing students' language motivation and competence.

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