Getting the Most out of Practice: Goals & Goal-Setting

Goals as Part of Effective Practice



Setting goals is an important part of practice. Goals help us to:

- Structure our practice activities in a systematic (planned, thought out) way
- Make effective use of practice time by focusing our attention on skills or aspects of performance that are especially relevant to us at a given moment on our learning journey
- Remember that skill acquisition (and practice) are a cycle, not a straight line
- Measure our progress as we acquire and develop skills

How do I know what goal(s) I should be working on?

When you begin to learn to interpret, or when you begin to add new skills or aspects (e.g., taking notes) to your repertoire, your instructor will likely set goals for you. For example, "increase stamina and focus while doing active listening" might be a goal set for you early in your training; when you begin simultaneous, you might be told to "always finish your sentences."

As you gain skill, your instructor will likely set fewer, or more general, goals for you—and you will be expected to start setting your own goals, based on your analysis of your areas of strength/ weakness as well as on feedback provided by instructors & peers.

Remember that you can have 'larger' and 'smaller' goals. Larger, longer-term goals usually need to be broken down into smaller goals that are more manageable and can be worked on one at a time. For example, if my goal is to "use notes appropriately to support consecutive interpretation," I will need to break that down into a series of smaller goals (or 'milestones') that I can work on one-by-one in order to achieve the larger goal.

What should I keep in mind when setting goals for myself?

Goals should be:

- **Specific:** When we are learning a new skill, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the number of things we could pay attention to (monitor). It can also be hard to decide which aspect of the environment or our performance we should pay attention to in order to help ourselves make progress. Goals are very helpful for directing our attention to specific aspects of our performance, but they need to be specific enough to do so. Avoid broad/general goals like "do a good job." Instead, make sure your goal gives the details of what you want to do, such as "re-direct parties consistently and smoothly to use the first person and talk directly to each other" or "employ circumlocution when a target language word doesn't come immediately to mind."
- **Measurable:** In order to be able to say that we have met (or not met) a goal, we need to have criteria (a 'yardstick') against which to measure (evaluate) our performance. If I set a goal of "produce good target language output," I will have a hard time deciding whether or not I actually did what I set out to do. However, if my goal is both specific and measurable, such as "produce

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grammatically correct target language output" or "correctly use specialized terminology," then I will be able to assess whether I met the goal.

- **Attainable:** Motivation is a key part of learning. While it is important to push ourselves hard and work to increase our skills, we must also be careful to set reasonable goals for ourselves. If we frequently set goals that we do not or cannot achieve, we may become so discouraged or demotivated that we stop making progress. At the same time, we must push ourselves in order to learn, so we should avoid setting goals that are too easy, that do not stretch our current skills. It is important to set goals that you can attain, that encourage learning and skill development, but do not lead you to give up. In doing so, you need to take into account your current learning stage, in relation to where you have been and where you are headed (see 'Progressive,' below). You may have a bigger, longer-term goal that you are working toward—but for an individual practice session, or series of practice sessions, it is important to consider smaller, achievable steps toward that goal. For example, if you have just begun to learn note-taking, an attainable goal might be "use horizontal and vertical space on the page effectively to indicate the structure of the content." At the same learning stage, "integrate symbols into note-taking for a technical speech" would likely not be an attainable goal. That goal is likely achievable after some amount of time, but today's practice requires a goal that works for today's skill level.
- **Progressive:** Goals are not set in isolation from each other. Rather, the various goals that are set for us and that we set for ourselves should come together as a whole, to form a logical, reasoned progression that will help us to advance and develop our skills over time. While all learning is individual, we also know that there are certain commonalities and patterns in how skills, including those involved in interpreting, are acquired and developed. We also know that some skills serve as the foundation for other skills, so we introduce them in a certain order. Your program and your instructor will have planned out a skill development progression as part of the development of the curriculum, and you will learn about how specific goals you are given fit into this progression. As you develop your ability to monitor and assess your own abilities, you will also begin to identify goals that you need to work on in order to support your own learning and progress. Self-identified goals should also be thought out and build on each other progressively. Think of our goals like pieces of a puzzle—they need to fit together coherently, they need to build on what we can already do, and they need to increase in difficulty based on the things that we achieve over time.



Further Viewing/Reading:

Effective Practice for Skill Improvement, via the CATIE Center:
https://grad2cert.org/effective-practice-for-skill-improvement/

ATA *Chronicle* Article:
https://www.ata-chronicle.online/wp-content/uploads/4406_19_herring.pdf

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