
Opinion & Perspective

Grading from the Right Direction

Ted Bonnah

Ritsumeikan University

Go to the staff lounge of any Japanese university in April or September and you will see the interesting phenomenon of educators teaching each other how to teach. At the institution where I teach writing and communication courses, I often overhear instructors talking about classroom management and discipline, or asking how to get students motivated. Sometimes they ask how to use equipment or computer programs they are not familiar with, such as Excel, PowerPoint, or Prezi. One question that inevitably comes up with new teachers is how to mark written assignments.

Although this type of experience sharing is essential for both the development of the individual teacher and the teaching profession as a whole, the lack of concrete knowledge about evaluation points to a serious gap in ESL/EFL teacher training. Even certified, professionally licensed teachers, such as those in the Canadian school system where I have worked, sometimes feel a lack of skills, and they can be prone to an “imposter syndrome” where they may feel they are not being taken seriously as a professional. This tendency is only amplified in Japanese college ESL teaching circles, where English educators have a wide array of academic backgrounds, from literature and linguistics to science or arts. However, many may have only touched on pedagogic theory or

practice in the course of certification or may lack any grounding at all. While school system teachers and doctors get their professional certification from specific institutions, ESL/EFL training remains an alphabet soup of organizations and credentials that do not always ensure sufficient grounding in sound evaluation methods. Additionally, institutions may also offer little or no direction, and one Kansai teacher I contacted while writing this article commented that the structure of university classes was “scarily ad hoc.”

To understand how to create a solid assessment methodology, teachers first need to reflect on why they actually use grades. As Stiggins (2001) notes, we need some form of external means to certify that learning has taken place inside the student, and evaluation is the tool for the job. Usually, the overall distribution of marks is dictated by the syllabus, but often the exact method of deciding how to gauge student product or performance is left to the teacher. For scoring student essays or presentations, educators may receive rubrics or search the Internet for them, but these are often confusing for new teachers as well as students or may have no connection to the content or level being taught. Having a firm idea of why to evaluate allows the teacher to better choose or formulate the best assessment tool to do so. Besides giving an accurate picture of student learning, a well-designed evaluation tool allows the teacher to have consistent results. Also, it can be used to show students what they need to work on to succeed. Finally, it gives teachers full accountability in case students wish to question their marks.

Another problem with how teachers assess student learning is that although education theory and practice have advanced (and in my opinion greatly improved) over time, many ESL/EFL teachers decide their method of assessment based on memories of how it was done when they were students. One example of this type of pedagogic holdover, as identified by Woollock (2008), is the dominance of ascending grading as the default setting, a tendency which was evident

in my school days. Woollock questions why teachers start grading from zero, and he suggests instead that they give students full marks and whittle down from there.

Although Woollock's point of giving students the benefit of the doubt is valid, his choice of descending grading is just as arbitrary as the choice of ascending grading he critiques, since using either blindly ignores the demands of the situation. When grading a performance such as a speech or a product such as a student paper, there are three options for evaluation: grading down from 100%, grading up from 0%, or grading from a median score. Each direction has its own rationale, and multiple directions can be used for different aspects of a single product or performance. Ideally, the aspect of the product or performance being assessed should dictate whether the evaluation will be ascending, descending, or starting from a median score.

To give a concrete example of how this works in practice, when I evaluate a student paper, the syllabus only states that it represents 20% of the final mark, but it offers no particulars on how to assess the paper. To give equal weight to all aspects students are supposed to have learned, and to reduce possible bias by simplifying calculation, I employ four categories worth five points each: format, syntax, paragraph structure, and style. Each of these has different requirements in terms of direction of grading. I do not use a preconceived list or scale of descriptors that characterizes most rubrics because these slow my judgment to a game of hunt and peck, and cannot possibly represent the range of possible writing a student may produce.

Descending grading is best used in situations where students can be expected to have mastered the basic material, and where there should not be any problems with performance. At my school, placement exams taken at enrollment have verified that the syntax of students in the program is appropriate to the course level, and I also make sure that I sufficiently teach the prescribed format. As both format and syntax are Lower Order Concerns (LOC) and can thus be expected not to pose

a major problem for students, I use descending grading to evaluate these categories. For format, students start with five out of five, and for every mistake (such as spacing, placement of title or student name and number, or incorrect font), they lose half a point. Similarly, I start syntax with five points, and the student will lose half a point for every error (such as verb tenses, articles, prepositions, awkward phrases, or incomplete sentences).

It is important to note that I mark only types of syntactic errors, so a student with repeated article errors or omissions will lose only half a point for articles, not for each instance. This is in keeping with the writing center methodology I learned while working at Memorial University in Canada, which aims to help students improve their writing by identifying error types and providing strategies for fixing them. Errors accrue quickly for a student who has written sloppily or who has failed to follow my advice to have a fellow student proofread, and they will deservedly receive a lower mark. I mark directly on the student's paper, so they can clearly see where they were mistaken, and then I get them in groups so they can help each other by peer editing. During peer editing sessions I let students use whatever language they want. I agree with Leki (1992) that the cognitive burden of discussing errors in the L2 reduces students' efficiency. The type of peer editing that I use helps them improve their second draft markedly, and the higher of the two marks becomes their final grade.

Returning to methodology, ascending grading is used in situations when students are expected to show that they have mastered specifically taught elements, or present their achievements in a specified manner. As for the essay structure category, students have been taught to include a Topic Sentence, Body, and Conclusion, and since these High Order Concerns (HOC) are more clearly defined than the previous LOC of format and syntax, I grade up from zero. Students get 1.5 points each for having a Topic Sentence, Body, and Conclusion, and half a point for Background. They can also lose a half point for going off topic,

having a weak Conclusion, an uneven Body, or any other thing that mars their argument or structure. Once again, all my comments are on the student's paper, which I return so that students can see where they need work and make appropriate changes during peer editing and later at home before the second draft deadline.

Finally, median grading is appropriate when the student is expected to have a base level of competency, but which will then be modified by the superiority or inferiority of their actual performance. Therefore, for the style category I start from a generous 3 out of 5. This reflects the subjective mastery of language, and so as long as students are writing in English I feel this high starting point is justified, although I may adjust it up for weaker classes or down for stronger ones. The median score is first increased by student's vocabulary, use of transitional phrases, voice, ideas or other good writing traits. Next, it is reduced by the vagueness, logic faults, and other problems with student thought and expression. As with format and syntax, students who write sloppily can expect to lose marks justifiably here, while students who show an effort to actually think about the topic and take risks with advanced expressions will be rewarded for it.

With the ability to formulate a methodology and the understanding of the rationale behind directed grading firmly in mind, an educator should have no hesitation when marking any assignment. Thinking through the rationale for every step of grading also helps teachers avoid the five dangers of traditional grading identified by Milner and Milner (2003). A clearly defined and transparent grading scheme avoids the pedagogic danger of focusing on teacher need over student ability; the psychometric danger of bias or distortion; the personal danger of inuring student self-esteem with unclear grading; the cultural danger of focusing on grades and numbers instead of achievement; and the moral danger of testing without equity. Just as students have learning styles, teachers, too, have instructional styles, so adapting the above concepts so that they can be understood and implemented by the

individual instructor will ensure a further rise in teacher confidence and evaluation accuracy.

On a final note, I feel that the use of statistics or formulas to ensure that a certain class average is reached, although an accepted practice in many institutions and with many teachers, seems like a numbers game. Moving the line of scores by such statistical gymnastics after the fact is akin to widening or moving the net after a soccer game starts. If student ability has already been gauged by valid placement tests, and if the teacher has taught well, carefully chosen his or her methodology, and then used formative assessment to apprise students of expectations, scores should naturally fall into a curve representing student ability. Deciding valid evaluation methods and letting students know how they work ensures more representative results, as well as more teacher and student confidence in getting them.

I hope that this explanation of my assessment methodology and practice for the writing requirement of my courses helps fellow educators understand the necessities of good assessment and assists them in devising their own methods and thereby improving their evaluation validity and accountability. I also use this method for marking the presentation requirement of my course, and I believe that the principles presented in this article can be applied to evaluating any form of student product or performance. Although supported by teaching practice and theory, in the final analysis this article represents one teacher's way of putting concepts of valid assessment into practice. As a reflective educator who is always trying to improve, I welcome a discussion of any issues regarding assessment methods that readers might raise, and I look forward to reading any responses to this article and the concepts it presents.

References

- Leki, I. (1992). *Understanding ESL writers: A guide for teachers*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook.
- Milner, J., & Milner, L. (2003). *Bridging English*. Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Stiggins, R. (2001). *Student-involved assessment for learning*. Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Woollock, A. (2008). Grading from the wrong perspective: The case for descending grading. *OnCUE Journal, 2(1), 59-64*.

* * *

Ted Bonnah is a Canadian educator and writer. He has taught English, French, and Japanese at all levels from children to university students in Japan and Canada, and has published literary criticism, short stories, a book on grammar, ESL articles and travel articles. He now works at Ritsumeikan University in Shiga. tbannah@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp