

PROFICIENCY-BASED GRADING® *Scott Benedict - teachforjune.com*

What is Proficiency-Based Grading®?

Proficiency-Based Grading® is a standards-based grading system that communicates a student's abilities in a second language so as to maximize the potential of each individual student by allowing them to focus on the specific areas where they may be deficient.

While traditional grading systems base grades on the products students produce in the classroom, Proficiency-Based Grading® focuses on the basic building blocks of second language learning as the basis for assessment. So instead of utilizing homework, quizzes, projects, and tests as the components of the student's grade, Proficiency-Based Grading® employs the student's knowledge and/or ability level in culture, vocabulary, structures, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, and speaking.

Why did I create Proficiency-Based Grading®?

When I first began teaching, I graded just like everyone else did. I based my grades on homework, projects, quizzes and tests. It was simple and it worked, i.e. it produced a grade I could put on a report card. However, I quickly found that it was overly inaccurate.

As teachers, we have gut feelings as to the ability-levels of our students. We can look at Sally and know that her ability level was in the A-range, or that Billy was in the C-range. I grew ever more frustrated when the *math* of traditional grading didn't accurately match the student's actual ability level. If a student was great at projects, that could inflate the grade. If the student was a poor test-taker, that could deflate the grade. If the student always did their homework, but just couldn't do the language, their grade was an inaccurate measure of their ability. I needed something better.

Over the past five years, I have been working on and perfecting my Proficiency-Based Grading® system. And ever since, I've finally been able to say that the grade that is reflected on the report card accurately reflects the student's abilities in the second language.

Benefits of Proficiency-Based Grading®

There are two major benefits of Proficiency-Based Grading® over traditional grading paradigms. Firstly, Proficiency-Based Grading® is a more precise measurement of a student's *ability* in the second language. Rather than focusing on vocabulary building and grammar-rule memorization, Proficiency-Based Grading® measures how well a student can understand written and spoken language and how well a student can communicate through writing or speaking. These skills cannot merely be memorized or learned, but need to be acquired and Proficiency-Based Grading® is the tool that most accurately measures these abilities.

Secondly, Proficiency-Based Grading® gives a clearer picture of a student's strengths and weaknesses than traditional grading systems. A parent or student can look at the grade report and very quickly see in which areas the student is excelling and in which areas the student could benefit from some additional help. Also, as a teacher, I can finally answer that all-too-common question, "What can little Johnny do to better his grade?" With traditional grading, the easy answer was to say that little Johnny needed to do his homework and study for the quizzes and tests. And only with much effort and with Johnny's quizzes and tests in hand, could we be any more helpful with traditional grading. However, with Proficiency-Based Grading® we can see the areas where little Johnny needs some help and provide *specific* solutions to help Johnny improve his abilities. If Johnny was doing well in all areas except for writing, Johnny doesn't have to focus

on studying vocabulary or grammar rules or working on his listening, reading, or speaking abilities. He can focus his limited study time to tasks that will improve his writing and as teachers, we can assist the parents and the students with a toolbox of those tasks that will assist the student in each of the graded areas.

Basics of Proficiency-Based Grading®

Proficiency-Based Grading® is based on a good standards-based grading approach. Instead of using homework, projects, quizzes and tests as your grading categories, you will use culture, vocabulary, structures, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, and speaking as your grading categories. However, all of these categories are not created equal and therefore need to have separate weights assigned to them. I base my weighting system on Bloom's Taxonomy. The first three categories are merely knowledge-based categories. Either the student knows the culture, vocabulary item, or the grammar rule, or they don't. Bloom places knowledge at the lower end of the learning ladder, therefore, they should be given relatively low weights. Listening and reading fall under comprehension and should be given relatively mid weights. And writing and speaking fall under application/synthesis, and as these are quite high on Bloom's Taxonomy, they should be given relatively high weights. In my classroom I currently have the following weights: culture 4%, vocabulary 8%, structures 8%, listening and reading 15% each, and writing and speaking 25% each. I weigh the last four so heavily, not only because they are higher on Bloom's Taxonomy, but also because they are the true goals of learning a second language. It really doesn't matter if you can list of 1000 vocabulary items or recite all of the grammar rules if you can't apply them to everyday use.

As with all standards-based systems, also integral to Proficiency-Based Grading® are formative and summative assessments. So within each of the primary categories, I have two subcategories: formative assessments and summative assessments. I weight them equally within their category because by the nature of each type of assessment, there will be quite a few more formative assessments than summative assessments which will automatically weigh each individual formative assessment less than each individual summative assessment.

So, now that you have the basics set up, how do you plug in the grades? I use a rubric-based grading system that works well for me. I use a 4 for an A, 3 for a B, 2 for a C, 1 for a D, and 0 for an F. These numeric grades translate well for me from a rubric to the grade book. However, if you're more comfortable with percentages, they will work too. Now when I enter a grade for an assignment in the grade book, I have to think what am I truly assessing on this assignment. If it's a homework assignment and I asked the students to read something and summarize in English, I'm assessing the student's reading comprehension ability and I mark the grade in that category. If I'm having the student write an essay using the past tense, I would give two grades, one for structures (how well did the student utilize the past tense), and one for writing (how well did the student communicate a message through writing). My goal each grading period is to make sure that I have at least two formative assessments and at least one summative assessment for each grading category. Much more than that, you're spending too much time assessing and not enough time allowing the student's to *acquire* the material and less than that, you don't have enough evidence to support the final grade for the student.

Want to learn more?

Have me come to your school and personally show you how you can implement my Proficiency-Based Grading® system in your classroom and watch student achievement and motivation soar! Visit teachforjune.com for more information.