Goals, growth, and grades: Student ownership of learning through reflection

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Abstract

As students feel empowered to select their own goals, they forge their own journeys to success. A culturally sustaining tool, student reflection is an informative practice for self-paced growth in language learning and beyond. A French and a Spanish teacher share their protocols to bring goal-setting into any classroom, along with the research and results from their own experience.

Keywords: assessment & feedback, planning & program design, student experiences

Introduction

A hot topic on Teacher Twitter is how to approach participation grades, often a nebulous or subjective area. What is included in participation can range from oral participation quantity and quality to body language and note-taking. While the debate of how to grade participation dates far before social media, online discussion has offered space to air multiple perspectives. In a tweet, Erica Fischer (2011) asked, "So having a participation grade motivates students to participate?" If a participation grade is tied to a specific set of practices such as daily oral responses, novel and complete sentences, eye contact, or group discussions, participation becomes a grade for compliance rather than a reward for students' practicing speaking. And some students would prefer a lower grade over the social anxiety of not giving a grammatically correct, content-perfect answer. Just this past February on Twitter, Julie Matthew (2022) added an equity lens: "I don't grade participation…since each kid brings [with] them their own needs, identity, & emotions that I work to take into consideration when thinking about what being engaged is for that kid." If language teachers are looking to grade for equity, a standard of participation may be inaccessible for some students based on their learning style, cultural background, knowledge and skills, or current mindset.

To offer students the opportunity to define for themselves what "successful participation" looks like and to eradicate the compliance-driven participation score, two world language teachers from Lexington High School implemented a growth-based portion of the grade through goal-setting. Drucker's (1954) Management by Objectives and Locke's (1968) Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives remind us that challenging and specific goals, focused feedback, and planning are three main indicators of high performance. This work influenced Doran's (1981) acronym SMART to focus on the attributes of the goal: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time bound. With this research in mind, we support students in writing their goals and focusing on what matters in our classrooms via two goals per quarter: a personal goal and a language goal. Now in our third year of quarterly goal-setting with students, we see this not only positively impacting learners' academic and language performance, but also increasing their efficacy in creating and working towards other life goals.

Below we share with you the steps we take in our quarterly growth protocol.

1. Share with students the purpose behind and process for goal setting and growth-based grading. *We recommend using multiple input and output options to be inclusive of various learning and expressing styles (instructional video, instruction sheet, journal template, PowerPoint template) and copious examples for each goal at the beginning of the year that reflect the school and course goals.*

In adopting a proficiency-based curriculum, we also solidified growth-based attitudes toward student learning: in particular, using Can-Do Statements to focus on what students can do with the language. As the teacher mindset shifts from deficit to abilities, we must coach students to likewise value their progress along the path to proficiency rather than how many points away from an A their quarterly grade is. When we analyzed how a classroom participation grade fit into our courses, we realized that we were only valuing progress in the "communication" goal area of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015), as we were primarily assessing students' oral communication in our classrooms. While participation grades have historically been correlated to interpersonal speaking during class, we wanted to expand our practice to mirror the type of participation we want for our students in the global community.

For this reason, we ask students to write both a personal goal and a language goal. The former is connected to our school's grade-level goals (such as appropriate communication, healthy risk-taking, and personal goal-setting) for under- and upperclassmen. Other schools may have a similar document, such as a vision of the graduate, that can serve as a springboard for this work. Oftentimes, students' personal goals end up having a positive effect on their language study. For example, we had a student facing a long recovery from a surgery who set the goal of balancing health and academics and, in working towards this goal, improved her listening skills through copious amounts of French television shows. The latter, inspired by the "communication" and "cultures" goal areas, is tied to a specific way in which students want to improve their understanding of the target language and cultures. This represents the more classic participation grade yet is specifically tailored to where the student needs to grow from complexity of thought to pronunciation. Our hope is not only to show students that we value their growth both in and out of our classroom as both language learners and young adults, but also to demonstrate our belief that being a successful language student and a successful global citizen are intertwined. For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the specifics of how students write, measure, and reflect upon their language goal.

When introducing our growth grading system to students, we tell them that, in lieu of a participation grade, which can favor students who are extroverted or quick to

respond or who come from a cultural background that values speaking up, we want to co-construct individualized goals for their growth as classroom citizens. We discuss how this practice honors progress over perfection and is inclusive of everyone in the class.

In order to do this, at the beginning of each quarter, students reflect on their strengths and areas for growth, keeping in mind the course level and overall course goals, which are listed on our syllabi. Students then select an area for linguistic growth and draft a goal for the quarter, specifying what they would like to improve upon, how they will know if they have reached the goal, and what evidence they will be able to provide. Students submit their drafts in Google Classroom, and we either approve it or suggest revisions along with a due date for final drafts. Figure 1 is a screenshot of the portion of the Google Form where they decide on their Language Goal.

Figure 1
Language Goal Google Form

What domain would you like to work on this quarter?
It's best to have a different domain each quarter if possible.

○ Speaking

○ Listening

○ Reading

○ Writing

○ Autre :

What is your language skill baseline? From where do you need to grow?

Votre réponse

How do you want to grow this language skill this quarter?
This is your actual goal. Find something that is meaningful, doable in a quarter, and will show progress in your French language competencies.

Votre réponse

What 2 pieces of evidence are you thinking about for your language goal?
Think about where you are now, what activities you will engage in, and how that will prove that your goal is met. Remember that you need 2-4 pieces of evidence.

Votre réponse

For example, an Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish student who wanted to improve his interpretive reading skills proposed that he would read one short story per week from a book called *Cuentos en español*. He committed to submitting as evidence a list of vocabulary he had culled from these stories, as well as a written reflection on how he felt his reading comprehension had improved and what connections he saw between the stories and the course curriculum. This goal was approved. Another student in the same course stated that she wanted to incorporate subjunctive structures more regularly and fluidly into her oral contributions. The teacher's feedback guided her to clarify if there were specific structures she wanted to focus on and what kind of system she had in mind for tracking her progress.

2. Give feedback on goals, highlighting that their goal should be achievable within the quarter. *To help narrow the scope of the goal, we recommend dialoguing about what evidence students plan to use. We ask students to avoid unmeasurable words like "be comfortable with" so that the end result is tangible.*

High school students have not had copious practice in setting specific, measurable, and achievable goals. "I want to speak more fluently" or "I want to get an A on the next paper" or "I want to be more comfortable with past tenses" are just as prevalent in the first drafts as goals students cut and paste from our list of suggestions. We recommend that students use our model goals during the first quarter, then we refer back to that list as students use more creativity in future quarters. Using a model goal that is measurable and achievable moves our high flying students from "I will speak like a native" to "I will identify which consonants are pronounced in each word I say."

Another tool that helps students narrow their goal into something achievable is the evidence they will use to measure progress. For example, a French IIIH student wrote that he will "be comfortable with" speaking in class, citing evidence of raising his hand right after a question is asked, rather than waiting. Accordingly, we were able to rewrite his goal to include an increase in risky participation as a way to measure his growth, rather than relying on a self-reflection about comfort level. Sometimes the evidence is quite clear: for example, a student who chose improving their spoken language skills by identifying and pronouncing nasalized vowels could offer a practice recording of themselves reading a text aloud, an annotated version of the text to point out which vowels are nasalized, and a final recording to show growth. Once students identify the evidence, they can reign in their goal to something manageable within the time frame of a marking period.

A French 4 Honors student wrote a grade-based goal for her next writing assignment. We do not accept goals based on grades, so we looked at her last rubric together to see what writing areas needed improvement. She had met expectations in each area except "connected sentences," so we wrote a goal that included using a variety of transition words, connection between thoughts, and paragraph structure. Unsure of a second piece of evidence, she decided to create a Quizlet (quizlet.com) to help her memorize transition words along with a graphic organizer for her essay. Her reflection included how these tools helped her grow towards her goal.

3. Check in with students throughout the quarter. *We recommend having a midpoint date by which students have included one piece of evidence or a self-evaluation example to give the baseline before growth.*

Whereas a traditional participation grade may not be considered until the end of a grading period is approaching or has passed, a goal-setting approach works best when students are given frequent reminders or checkpoints. Without this guidance, many students will

forget to collect evidence or may forget entirely about their goal. Just as we've implemented this process in order to honor the idea that we grade what we value, we also believe in using class time for what we value; therefore, we set aside independent work time twice per quarter for students to keep up with their goals. For students who are prepared with their evidence, class time can be used to gather evidence and write a reflection on how it brought them closer to their goal. Other students may need to create or find tasks that they can complete during class time. Particularly during the first quarter, it is helpful to offer feedback on the evidence and reflection to set the expectation for future quarters.

Students accustomed to compliance systems may struggle initially with the growth mindset necessary to persevere through the obstacles that stand between them and their goal. Similarly and oppositely, some students are unable to give up on a goal that is no longer attainable based on circumstances outside their control. Checking in with learners can significantly reduce stress as you tweak the goal together. For example, a Spanish II student was worried about her goal toward increasing her target language use in class. She had identified a variety of strategies, but struggled to remember to use them and felt that her extroverted, talkative nature was impeding her own progress. It was helpful for the teacher to connect with this student at the end of each class, or via email, to let her know what he had observed and to offer one specific strategy she could focus on as she worked to understand that she could still chat with her classmates, but not always in English.

4. Collect and review evidence and reflection. *We recommend that this be done as a dialogue first quarter so students are clear on the expectations.*

For logistics, we have attempted to collect goals, evidence, and reflection in a few ways. Our learning platform is Google Classroom, so we post a document that explains the process, a Google Slides for visual students to use as a template, and a Google Doc for students to fill out each quarter. In the first week, students fill out the goals section with a first due date and completion grade, then by the end of the quarter, the entire document is submitted and graded against the rubric. While this is effective for managing progress and comments each quarter, there is a disconnect between goals each quarter as the documents are stored in different posts. Figure 2 provides a screenshot from the google form mail merge, which takes the students' answers from the Google Form, fills them into a template, and emails the students with the template.

Figure 2
Screenshot of Google Form Mail Merge

Topic	Evidence / Examples / Reflection
Personal Goal: <<grow as a student and human>>	<<What 2 pieces of evidence are you thinking about for your personal goal?>> Reflection:
Language Goal: <<How do you want to grow this language skill this quarter?>>	<<What 2 pieces of evidence are you thinking about for your language goal?>> Reflection:
Community Citizenship	<<Which value will you work on most this quarter?>> REFLECTION: <<Which value will you work on a bit this quarter?>> REFLECTION: (level up reflection: <<If you are looking to exceed expectations, what is your third value?>>

Evaluating students' growth with a grade can feel as nebulous as the original Participation Grade that started this journey. First, we are clear with students that the grade is not a reflection of if they completed their goal but of the journey that they took to get there. To "Meet Expectations" (85% or B), students must give two pieces of evidence per goal along with their goal reflection. "Meeting Expectations" looks like students taking consistent steps towards that goal, but does not require success. Typically, students who meet expectations grow in their goal during class periods. To level up to "Exceeding Expectations" (95% or A), students are working both inside and outside of class to make progress. Their evidence is more specific, and multiple pieces of evidence show growth over time. The reflection is deeper and shows signs of lifelong learning. Students who do not meet expectations tend to be lacking in robust evidence and depth of reflection. Time for feedback at the end of the quarter is short so the quantity of feedback is directly tied to preparing students for the following quarter's goals. Google Classroom's bank of comments can be helpful in targeting some common issues.

A Third Dimension

As COVID turned us virtual and hybrid for various parts of our years of experimenting with this reflective goal-setting practice, we have included a third section to our growth goals, which is their contribution to our community. Several members of our department collaborated on a Community Citizenship self-evaluation that includes statements such as "I seek opportunities to engage with the Target Language, Target Culture, and/or Target Communities outside of class" and "I respect others through empathy, curiosity, and an openness to learn from them' (see Figure 3). From risk-taking to honest work and from preparation to contribution, we ask students to be active members of our community as we prepare them to be active global citizens. Both at the mid-point check-in and at the end of the quarter, we ask students to reflect on how they have modeled these pillars of our community and how they will increase their engaged citizenship. These indicators are also noted in our grading criteria as we ask our students to expand from their own engagement and participation in our class to including and supporting others, as well.

Figure 3
One version of our Community Citizenship Indicators

Lessons Learned by Students & Teachers

The adage that the journey is more important than the destination has kept our grading focus on students' process and growth, and the impact that their goals have on them as students and as people, rather than whether they achieved the goal or not. That being said, our students never cease to inspire us. Here are some of their reflections:

- AP Spanish, Senior, Language Goal Reflection: "In larger groups (of three or four), I think I have been successful in my goal of using the subjunctive once a week. Especially on discussion days, I have tried to incorporate subjunctive at least once into my speech. However, it is still difficult for me to do that fluidly. I often have to put conscious thought into using subjunctive and it doesn't usually come out naturally. I am going to continue working on this."
- French IIIH, sophomore, Personal Goal Reflection: "The obvious standard for success according to the education system, and the culture at LHS, is an A--or an A+ if possible. This is one way to measure success, but I think the fact that it compressed several dimensions of work into one letter cultivates hyperfixation on certain aspects of learning and constantly comparing oneself to others. This quarter I tried to use the feedback other than letter grades to assess my success. I think this goal was the hardest of any I picked this year, and I also don't think that I fully met it. There were rough moments where I continued to feel any of my work was pointless because I got what I've been told to consider as a bad grade, even when trying to remind myself there are other measures of success. However, I think even trying to work on this goal was a good thing for me because it forced me to start thinking 'if grades don't define me, what does?'"

We have also learned throughout the process what we value and how to best support students in their paths towards their values. Our most important lesson learned is to offer support in writing measurable, attainable goals, because this process is easier when students can reference mentor texts and other resources, such as ACTFL's (2012) Performance Descriptors for Language Learners or course-specific goals and rubrics, to guide their thinking. We would also note that, as part of the planning process, scheduled class time for students to check in with teachers and to reflect on their progress and gather evidence is essential to ensure that students make progress.

As we continue implementing this element of our grades, we acknowledge that more work is needed for student buy-in. Although our students understand our reasoning for eschewing a "participation" grade–which often prioritizes behavioral compliance or oral contributions–they are often so accustomed to receiving this kind of grade that they may forget to work toward their goal, invent some of their evidence, or write goals they don't care about just to comply with the assignment. In addition, we recognize that it is difficult to attach a grade to what is principally a qualitative process, and that some educators may have a hard time envisioning how a growth grade could work within the confines of their department or school grading system.

However, students who faithfully complete the exercise have shared with us how it has impacted them as language students and lifelong learners. One sophomore commented: "Looking all the way back to the very first interpretive reading practice we worked on in class, I saw an even bigger difference in my comprehension and my confidence in my reading and answers. I felt successful because I had concrete evidence that I had learned something from my studying and my past mistakes." Likewise, a graduating senior wrote: "You gave me the suggestion that I could make my project more engaging by adding some food

for thought for the audience or even a deep question. I realized that I could implement this skill into presentations for other classes. I did just that for my recent English final presentation and I plan to do this in college and in the future whenever I'm presenting. Thank you!"

When we posted our initial documents on Twitter for feedback from the language teacher community, we were met with some praise and some skepticism. Megan Budke (2019) asked, "What if [students] were just graded on the standards & still completed this growth & reflection work each quarter? [Because] in the end, this work will ultimately benefit their academic performance." So while our journey towards defining participation in an equitable, differentiated manner has supported students in their personal, classroom, and language journeys, we are still engaging in the conversation of what grades stand for. One camp, related to student motivation, suggests that we should grade what we value, whereas another large camp espouses that proficiency levels are grades. Whether this activity replaces a traditional participation grade or just offers a reflective activity for students on their path to proficiency, we find that it supports students to think more globally about their learning and participation in today's world.

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