

POINTS AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

by Barbara Pflanz

University of Redlands

Student motivation and learning go hand in hand, as many writers have pointed out. Since the primary goal of the educator is to produce learning, how then, can one achieve motivation in the learner? Motivation is certainly not the result of any **one** aspect of a course or of the teaching. In addition to teaching techniques, the subject matter and even instructor personality can be factors in student motivation. It will be suggested here that another aspect, namely, the evaluation system, can play an important role in the motivation of students to learn.

"He gave me a 2.7" is a comment heard not infrequently when semester grades come out. Probably no instructor likes to hear that she/he "gives" grades; students earn grades, but they sometimes seem to feel that the evaluation has not always been arrived at as a direct result of their efforts. And in some cases that may even be true. A solution to this for both student and instructor would seem to be a carefully-structured grading system whereby the student can accurately monitor her/his progress during the semester. With such a system the grade is seen fluctuating as a direct result of student effort and achievement and not as an end-of-semester decision by the instructor, based on a few tests and a final examination. Student motivation, usually highest only before a final testing, could thus be maintained at a high level **throughout** the grading period.

In an attempt to create such a situation the author developed a point system for grading and evaluation in German language courses at the University of Redlands. The system functions as follows:

1. **Structure:** In the syllabus which describes the goals and structure of the course, the following section explains the system of evaluation.

The evaluation of your work will be based on a point system with a total of 1500 possible points distributed as follows:

8 vocabulary tests	20-30 points each	190
8 short tests	20-50 points each	250
2 films	30 points each	60
3 semester tests	200 points each	600
classwork	100 points	100
final examination	300 points	300
	TOTAL	1500

Your final grade will depend upon the total number of points you have achieved. The percentages of this system are given in parentheses:

1440-1500 = 4.0 (96-100) 1215-1259 = 2.7 (81-83) 990-1049 = 1.3 (66-69)
 1380-1439 = 3.7 (92-95) 1155-1214 = 2.3 (77-80) 930-989 = 1.0 (62-65)
 1320-1379 = 3.3 (88-91) 1095-1154 = 2.0 (73-76) 885-929 = 0.7 (59-61)
 1260-1319 = 3.0 (84-87) 1050-1094 = 1.7 (70-72) 0-884 = No Credit

2. Testing instruments: The syllabus provides a calendar for the entire semester listing all evaluating instruments and their point value. Here is an example for a two-week period occurring in mid-semester. The numbers in parentheses give the point value of the test or activity.

DATE	CLASSWORK
17 October	Vocabulary test (20) Film (30)
19 October	Test: Lesson V (30)
25 October	Vocabulary test (30)
27 October	Test: Lesson VI (30)
28 October	2. Semester test (200)

3. Point totals: As a convenience for keeping a running total of points achieved (and as an incentive to do so), the following chart is provided in the syllabus. Sample entries here show how the student enters and tallies her/his point total. The dates given are those on which tests are returned to the student.

Figure 1

DATE	Vocabulary Tests	Short Tests	Semester Tests	Films	Classwork	Final Test	TOTAL
16. September	15						15
19. "		18					18
23. "	17						33
30. "		21					17
3. October	12						50
6. "			165				21
							71
							12
							63
							165
							248

etc.

4. Evaluation Chart: By using the following table (Figure 2) the student can determine her/his grade on any date given in the heading of each column. These dates represent days on which tests are returned to the students and correspond to the dates on the preceding chart (Figure 1). The number in parentheses under each date in Figure 2 represents the total possible on that day. The table begins with 30 September, since the total number of points that could be attained before that date is too small to be of significance in starting an overall grade. Example: the fictitious student whose grades were entered on the chart (Figure 1) achieved a total of 248 points on 6 October. In the table (Figure 2) under the column for 6 October this falls in the range 239-250. Reading from the first column on the left, the grade is found to be 2.3.

Figure 2

DATUM NOTE	30. IX (90)	3. X (110)	6. X (310)	11. X (330)	14. X (360)	18. X (410)
4.0	86-90	106-110	298-310	317-330	346-360	394-410
3.7	83-85	101-105	285-297	304-316	331-345	377-393
3.3	79-82	97-100	273-284	290-303	317-330	361-376
3.0	76-78	92-96	260-272	277-289	302-316	344-360
2.7	73-75	89-91	251-259	267-276	292-301	332-343
2.3	69-72	85-88	239-250	254-266	277-291	316-331
2.0	66-68	80-84	226-238	241-253	263-276	299-315
1.7	63-65	77-79	217-225	231-240	252-262	287-298
1.3	59-62	73-76	205-216	218-230	238-251	271-286
1.0	56-58	68-72	192-204	205-217	223-237	254-270
0.7	53-55	65-67	183-191	195-204	212-222	242-253

(Datum = date Note = grade)

The following formula was used to determine the lower range for each grade in the table: total points possible on given date x lower percent grade figure. For example, on 6 October the total points possible is 310. The lower figure of the range for the grade of 2.3 (77%-80%) is thus: $310 \times 77 = 239$. The upper range for that grade is one point less than the lower range for the preceding grade. In the case of the 4.0 grade this top figure is, of course, the total points possible.

The advantages and disadvantages of this system of evaluation can be summarized as follows:

A. Advantages:

1. The student can determine her/his grade with a high degree of accuracy before and after each test; in the author's classes this possibility occurs twenty or more times during the thirteen-week semester. Thus the motivation usually present only before a final test, is generated at all testing times.
2. The student can early detect when she/he is not performing up to her/his expectations and request assistance.
3. Since the student can at all times see how she/he is progressing and also review the results of previous efforts and how these effected her/his present level of achievement, the stigma of a subjective grade is removed from the instructor. The student sees herself/himself as almost totally responsible for the grade received.
4. As a result of 3, the student under this system usually takes more of the responsibility for achieving learning.

B. Disadvantages:

1. The system requires a relatively high degree of organization and planning on the part of the instructor. For it to function effectively the instructor must: a. plan the entire semester (at least the tests and other evaluative instruments) in advance and make his information available to the student at the beginning of the semester; b. accept the responsibility for making known test results on the designated days; c. exercise great care in setting up the system since the possibility of mathematical error is quite high; d. (if the course is to use such testing instruments as the essay-type question) be willing to objectify her/his evaluation of such questions.
2. Due to a built-in arrangement for make-up tests at semester's end, and the varying number of points assigned to the vocabulary tests and the short tests, the grade chart is slightly inaccurate. The degree of error here is, however, insignificant. In addition, a simple mathematical formula can be used to compute grades when tests have been missed.¹

Conclusion

After using the above-described point system in seven courses the author has judged it to be far superior to the usual system of assigning a percentage grade to each test and weighting these to arrive at the final grade. In the author's opinion, the high degree of student motivation and

concern for her/his own progress far outweighs the initial burden of preparation placed on the instructor. Some might call the system a "numbers game". Perhaps it is. But if this "game" produces a learning-motivated student throughout the semester, if it changes the role of the instructor from "grade-giver" to "learning assistant", what does it matter what you call it?²

FOOTNOTES

¹This formula for any given day is:

$$\text{the percentage grade} = \frac{P}{T - 25V - 32S} \times 100$$

where P is the total possible points for the given day, T is the student's total points on that day, V is the number of vocabulary tests missed and S the number of short tests missed.

²For anyone interested in developing such a point system for their own courses, the author will be happy to provide a copy of the course syllabus described in this article. Please send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: Dr. Barbara Pflanz, Department of German, University of Redlands, Redlands, California 92373



CONFERENCE ON THE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

CONFERENCE THEME:

FUTURISM AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES: REACHING TOWARD TOMORROW

MEETING IN COOPERATION WITH
THE ILLINOIS FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

DATE: March 30-April 1, 1978 (As always, the weekend after Easter)

CITY: Chicago, Palmer House Hotel

KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

- Futurism

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS

- Thursday Workshop Sessions
- Banquet and Ethnic Dancing
- Special Interest and Language Sessions
- Special AAT Sessions

THURSDAY EVENING SPECIAL: An opportunity to meet textbook authors and a "Wine and Cheese Fete."

Companies or organizations wishing to exhibit, anyone seeking Advisory Council membership, and persons interested in receiving Conference Program Booklet containing registration and hotel reservation forms should write to: Maurice W. Conner, Department of Foreign Languages, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska 68101. (402) 554-2403