

Grading: by What Criteria?

There has been a lot of discussion about the change this year in junior high schools from relative or norm-referenced grading (*sotai hyoka*) to absolute or criterion-referenced grading (*zettai hyoka*). While much effort has been put into complying with this shift, many teachers are still not sure what it really means and what they should be doing.

Under the old norm-referenced system, students were 'graded on the curve': they were lined up from high score to low and grades apportioned as follows: 5 (top 7%), 4 (24%), 3 (38%), 2 (24%), and 1 (bottom 7%). With the change last April to the new course of study (see the articles in last spring's *ETJ Journal*), students are now to be graded against set criteria or objectives. Under this new system, there is no rationing of grades so a given student's grade should not be affected by her classmates' ability. I think most people would agree that the new system is, on its face at least, the fairer of the two. But it is not without problems.

One point that has attracted a lot of attention--and rightfully so--is that if you're going to grade students against objectives, then you need a list of objectives. Good objectives include a statement of what the students will be able to do (e.g., students will be able to recall the main meaning of the vocabulary studied), the conditions under which they will be able to do it (e.g., within 5 seconds when presented with the word in either a written form, or when spoken in isolation), and the level at which they will be able to do so (e.g., with at least 80% accuracy). Furthermore, they are challenging but realistic. There's no point setting the bar so high that nobody tries to jump.

Unfortunately, the Course of Study established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), contains no such objectives. Basically, we're told, "You know your students and your situation best, so you decide." While

the idea of matching the objectives to the students is laudable, it is a very difficult task, both practically and politically speaking.

It would be very useful for teachers if the MEXT were to gather a panel of experts (no, not politicians, businessmen, and so called *tarento*) and established a large pool of objectives (e.g., the Ontario Ministry of Education's objectives for French as a second language). To allow for different objectives for different situations, local decision makers could then adopt or adapt these as they see fit. This would be far more helpful than the present situation.

Minimally, the MEXT could set up a central clearinghouse for gathering and sharing objectives created by teachers. In the absence of such leadership from the MEXT, I would call on teachers' organizations such as ETJ or JALT to step in and fill this gap. Unfortunately, for the time being, we teachers are pretty much on our own. So, what are we to do?

Is it worth it?

While some teachers and schools have gone to great lengths to set objectives, in many other instances the goal is simply, 'answer questions correctly'. From my experience, many junior high school level test setters don't have a clear idea of what they are testing or what a pass or fail might mean. At the school where I teach, the only explicit guidance is to "aim for an average of XX%." Beyond that, the grammatical syllabus of the textbook largely dictates the contents of most tests.

Although gung-ho objective setters may be on theoretically sound ground, a more intuitive approach does have a number of things going for it. First, as I mentioned before, setting good, clear objectives is an extremely challenging task that requires both extensive knowledge of language and language teaching theory and many hours of writing, piloting, and rewriting. And it can easily

get out of control. You may find yourself with so many objectives that checking each student on every one would take up all your waking hours; not to mention that the process of condensing all this carefully collected data into a single digit can be rather upsetting. Besides, all this specificity in objective setting can lead to a rather atomistic view of English. Many teachers would argue that they have a pretty good idea of their students' ability and that all this codification notwithstanding, many of us will simply go on teaching as we always have: relying far more on instinct than on some abstract eye-glazing list of objectives.

Fair enough! But objective setting has a lot of advantages too. For one thing, the very act of sitting down with your colleagues and hashing this stuff out can be a tremendous learning experience, regardless of the end product. Secondly, if you do get some objectives worked out and can find ways to assess students on them, it can lead to very explicit insight into what's going well and where more attention is needed. Objectives also simplify the task of writing tests, a job that most teachers approach with some trepidation. Finally, objectives can be useful if a program or teacher comes under attack. They give us a baseline from which to defend against unwarranted accusations and provide evidence of diligence and professionalism.

There are also benefits for the students. If you have established objectives, then it makes sense to share them with the students early on. Most learners find it comforting and motivating to have specific short- and long-term objectives to aim for, provided that they are realistic and that the level of detail is appropriate for the age of students. Having these clear objectives helps them to organize their study and devote attention to areas where it is most needed. The transparency also makes grading fairer. It's hard to argue against a score of 45 when you don't

know how it was arrived at, but much easier to challenge a claim that “Toru does not display the ability to answer simple yes/no questions that have been practiced in class.” Finally, having clear objectives is likely to lead to more valid and reliable assessment outcomes.

So, what are we to do?

Rather than aim for full-blown *zettai hyoka* immediately, most teachers will need some compromises based on the practical realities of our situations. We can then build in more and more criterion-referenced assessment with each subsequent grading period.

In doing so, it is helpful to consult established objectives such as those on the previously mentioned Ontario Ministry of Education web site. Another excellent starting place is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In particular, I have found the Swiss language portfolio based on the CEFR very helpful and have translated it into Japanese. This can be downloaded from the ETJ homepage. Even better, a newer version designed specifically for ages 11 to 15 is in preparation. Other organizations such as ACTFL also have level descriptors that can be helpful in objective setting.

When you look at these objectives, be aware that many of them are designed to be used all the way up to native-speaker level. This is clearly inappropriate for Japanese jr. high school students, so keep your expectations realistic. Also, remember that they are designed with non-Japanese cultural and educational assumptions. If the English goals are totally out of step with those of the other departments in your school, there will be confusion. For example, expecting students to write English compositions will be frustrating for everyone if the *kokugo* (Japanese) department has no such goals.

Finally, keep in mind the MEXT’s general goals: students should gain linguistic and cultural knowledge and understanding, should gain some ability to express themselves and to understand others in English, and should

feel interested in and enthusiastic towards communicating in English.

Beyond the objectives, we need examples of student output or response to particular materials. These should be selected to illustrate varying degrees of success with respect to particular objectives. Again, you can find some sample exemplars (though none for foreign language study) on the Ontario Ministry of Education’s website.

As you start collecting your objectives, be sure to keep the number manageable. Depending on the size of the class, four main categories with

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about five specific objectives each is a reasonable balance between specificity and practicality. If you print up a table with students on one axis and goals on the other, you can check them off on a regular basis in class. This helps reduce the end of term crunch. The students can do this too. Give them the objectives at the beginning of the year and allow some time every few weeks for them to check off new accomplishments and set new personal targets. Also, although the official grade report allows for only 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5, there’s no reason to stop there¹. Give the students a detailed breakdown of which goals they have met and which they need more work on. This can even be updated more frequently than the once-a-term grading reports, giving students a better idea of where they are and where they need to go.

If you are an ALT, inform yourself about how students are graded. If you work at a number of different schools, you may be in a position to facilitate sharing of objectives. Either way, when you are teaching lessons planned by another teacher, try to find out what the objectives are. When you plan your own lessons, keep the objectives in mind. Also, consider offering to help with ongoing assessment.

In conclusion, change takes time, and nobody is going to benefit from *zettai hyoka* based on ill-conceived criteria. Perhaps the best advice is to follow our own advice: set some realistic objectives and work towards them. And even if you don’t deserve a 5 for your outcomes, at least you can give yourself an A for effort.

Further Reading In English

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s curriculum for grades 4-8.

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/elemcurric.html>

The European Common Framework of Reference for Languages site: http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Cooperation/education/Languages/Language_Policy/Common_Framework_of_Reference/default.asp

The Swiss version of the European Language Portfolio http://www.language-portfolio.ch/esp_e/esp11bis15/index.htm

One of thousands of web sites dedicated to Bloom’s taxonomy <http://faculty.washington.edu/krumme/guides/bloom.html>

In Japanese

The *tokusbu on zettai hyoka* in *Sanseido’s magazine Teaching English Now* (Vol. 1, Spring 2003)

Taishukan’s *Eigo Kyoiku* magazine also has some relevant articles (Vol. 51, No. 100, 2002)

One junior high school teacher’s efforts at setting objectives: <http://www.tcp-ip.or.jp/~ainuzuka/zettaihyouka2.htm>

1 Actually, five grades are given: an overall grade of 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 as well as a grade of A, B, or C on “linguistic and cultural knowledge / understanding”, “expression ability”, “comprehension ability”, and “interest, enthusiasm, and attitude regarding communication”. Typically it is the number grade that gets the most attention.