



IMPROVING PROFICIENCY:

Challenges and Solutions Along the Pathway to Proficiency

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Over the last 20 years, many world language teachers, schools, and districts have begun to turn to proficiency-based teaching as a solution to lackluster language classes that focus on grammar-based instruction rather than emphasizing communication. Currently, the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (2015), the *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements* (2017) and the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2012) collectively serve as a road map for schools that want to make this move.

However, refocusing the nation on communication and proficiency, rather than isolated grammar study and rote memorization, is no easy task. It requires a true commitment to change at all levels of instruction, including assessment and grade reporting. In a society that is focused on grade point average for scholarships and higher education, moving to a system that emphasizes student growth in proficiency creates dissonance for all stakeholders.

Nevertheless, districts such as ours which undertook this herculean effort saw rewards as students began producing more language and progressing along the levels of proficiency, as described by the NCSSFL-ACTFL *Can-Do Statements* (2017).

Given the strong push for proficiency within the language community in the U.S., the goal of this article is to outline the process of moving to proficiency-based teaching, assessment, and grading, while also addressing some of the challenges that have arisen as a result of this shift, and to share how we have sought to improve, in the hope that our journey can also help others.

Lexington School District One

A medium-sized suburban school district in the southeastern U.S., Lexington School District One has 31 schools and about 150 world language teachers (K–12). From 2010 to 2013, we transitioned the entire secondary world languages program to proficiency-based teaching, assessment, and grading. This required a major shift in both theory and practice, particularly in the areas of assessment and grading, and has also required an ongoing commitment to review and refine the process over the years.

"The shift to proficiency-based teaching began around 2010 as part of a vision our superintendent at the time had for all of our students to become multilingual enough to be able to survive in another language," recalls Dawn Samples, who was coordinator of world languages at the time. She recommended that the entire structure of teaching and learning in world languages be changed to standards-based grading and rating with a focus on teaching for proficiency (Crouse, 2015). Samples and the superintendent created a five-year strategic plan which was recalibrated each year based on initial whole scale standardized proficiency testing. This was later changed to a benchmarking process that is still being used.

The Shift to Proficiency

Educating teachers on proficiency was a huge part of the recalibration process and was implemented in steps. One of the many challenges for teachers was the move away from an emphasis on grammatical accuracy toward overall proficiency.

First, the district coordinator for world languages trained a leadership team of teachers to bring this work back to their schools. This included the creation of a district rubric, which was based on the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2012). Next, she offered training to all teachers, and from that group a pilot group of teachers began the work of standards-based rating and grading and teaching for proficiency. Finally, once data from standardized language testing had been collected to support the work, all teachers were required to make the transition.

A big part of the process was moving to meaningful, performance-based assessment (Montgomery & Samples, 2016). From a teacher's perspective, we first had to go through training in proficiency by using the district rubric and *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2012) and by practicing inter-rater reliability in triads. In the triad exercise, three teachers rated the same pieces of student work separately and then came together to discuss what they saw and why they gave it the rating they did. Then they would compare it to an official rating. This was first done within a school, and then between middle and high schools, and finally across the district.

We collected samples from our students' work to rate in our triads, and then we built a database of exemplars. We followed a protocol when we were rating: "I see the student can..." and then we were required to pull evidence from the proficiency rubric based on what we saw to justify our rating. This practice helped move teachers away from the traditional focus on deficiencies in student work, toward highlighting what students can do.

Teachers worked to rewire their brains to focus on the district rubric, which is based on the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2012) and consists of a 1-20 rating rather than the 100% averaging scale that they were all used to. In our current system, students receive ratings for their performances in the three modes of communication. These ratings are then used to determine a composite rating to determine the learner's overall improvement for the course.

We stopped giving quizzes and tests, and only allowed teachers to assign performance-based assessments, with an attached rating, rather than a traditional 100-point grade. For example, instead of getting an 85, a student might receive a rating that corresponds to Novice Mid. We focused on student growth, rather than on grades, and while we still have to report a percentage grade at the end of the course, this is done through a conversion chart in which each rating corresponds to a numerical grade.

We then had to align the curriculum to support standards-based grading. This challenged teachers to find authentic resources rather than rely on textbooks. Our curriculum teams continue to work each summer to find authentic resources to ease the burden on teachers. This all-encompassing approach to proficiency-based teaching and assessment revolutionized our language program, but also created some challenges that we have had to work through to continue improving since we began pursuing this vision of proficiency, such as educating all stakeholders.

CHALLENGES

Students, Parents, and Counselors

Once the teachers were trained in rating as well as in teaching for proficiency, we then had to work on student buy-in. We

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began to educate students with the rubrics so that they would have a vision of what they were expected to be able to accomplish, as well as with student-friendly versions of the rubrics in simplified language. We also began to teach students how to rate themselves and their peers to try to help them truly understand the rating process and aid them in setting their own goals.

Rather than focusing on GPA, students were challenged to think about what they can do with language and how they could grow their proficiency throughout the remainder of the course. Initially, when we began reporting proficiency, some students missed the perception of consequence and reward that they associated with numerical grades. For some students this led to decreased motivation, while for others it simply meant confusion because they wanted to know what grade they were making in the class but were only receiving an indication of how their language performance corresponded to the characteristics of a specific proficiency sublevel (e.g., Novice High).

Novice Mid did not hold the same weight as an A, B, or C in students' minds. To address this concern, students set goals for language learning based on their understanding of the proficiency levels targeted for each course. Rather than focusing on a grade, we instead encouraged students to focus on improving their proficiency and gave regular feedback on how to do that. Eventually students, along with their parents, began to understand that achieving goal levels of proficiency would convert to a higher grade at the end of the course. However, the delayed gratification of not receiving immediate grades on the 100-point scale required a real change in mindset.

For parents to better understand that process, we had to explain that proficiency-based grading focuses on growth over time, rather than an average of all grades throughout the year or semester. Therefore, we weigh more heavily the proficiency-based evaluations nearer to the end of the rating period because that is more likely to show their growth. Meetings were held with parents and video talks about proficiency were shared with all major stakeholders.

For parents, we found that communication through the syllabus with information about our rating scale and conversion chart was helpful at the start of the course, but that communication had to continue throughout the semester. We created a grading guide for parents that was accessible from our website, and we also provided examples of what a mid-term progress report would look like and how it would be different from the progress

reports they were receiving from other classes. For example, they would not receive a numerical grade; rather the teacher would explain what a Novice Mid meant in terms of goals for the course.

While ideally we would not have to convert a proficiency-based rating of student performance to a percentage, we are still mandated by the state to report a final percentage. To avoid the focus on the percentage, we do not report a percentage until the very end of the course. Instead, we focus on proficiency goals and targets and growth over time, while encouraging students to do the same. Throughout the course, the conversion chart is not used, meaning students are never told that they have a 50% in terms of the target goal. Rather, the teacher provides progress reports in terms of our proficiency-based ratings and informs students and parents of the proficiency goal and where the student should have progressed to by that time and sequence in the course. This method of feedback has proven to be much more encouraging, with students focusing on challenging themselves to improve performance based on the rubric rather than feeling defeated with their beginning-of-the-year capabilities.

Another challenge we initially faced was how to identify the targeted proficiency level for each course. Target proficiencies were set based on second language research showing where a student should be able to perform in the language based on the amount of exposure to the language. More specifically, we triangulated the data from our state department's targets, longitudinal data from our outside assessment, and national student proficiency data by course and grade level.

We also had to train counselors because they did not understand the 1-20 rating and how it would affect the students' GPAs. Counselors struggled with mid-year progress reporting. Since students were given a proficiency-based rating rather than a numerical grade, we had to be intentional about communicating whether the student was on track for the end of year goal.

To better educate our school counselors on the system, we held regular meetings with the entire counseling team as well as with individual schools to better explain and model the process. We also published the conversion charts where they could be easily accessed by counselors and parents. We remained readily available to answer any questions about transcripts as they arose, and we had a teacher leader at each school who was able to answer questions to help counselors stay informed about our process.



Lessons on Inter-Rater Reliability

Since we moved away from tests and quizzes which are traditionally viewed as less subjective forms of grading than rubric-based grading, our teachers had to re-learn how to grade and prove that we had strong inter-rater reliability across the district.

Since ratings do eventually turn into grades at the end of the course, there was pressure to prove that an evaluation of a student's performance as reflecting the characteristics of Intermediate Mid is the same at every school so that parents could trust this new method of grading. Initially, in our efforts to norm our rating of student work we used the triad protocol. While this was an excellent first step to calibrate ratings across the district, it was difficult to manage, organize, and maintain regular cross-site collaboration because of the hectic schedules of many different schools and teachers. It was also challenging for leadership to continue providing professionally-rated language samples without the help of an outside organization since training in inter-rater reliability must be ongoing as new teachers enter the district, and because veteran teachers also need to continue to refresh their adherence to the rubrics.

The introduction of inter-rater reliability training has revolutionized our district training. We use modules purchased from the company doing our testing that move through each level of proficiency from Novice to Intermediate to Advanced and Superior. The modules include a detailed overview of each proficiency level, as well as a breakdown of the rating process. Teachers are then given samples to study and rate, and are provided with immediate feedback on why the sample is given that specific rating so that teachers can better understand the proficiency levels as well as the rationale behind specific ratings.

This training is also presented to teachers individually online, which allows them to train at their own pace rather than having to commit to more face-to-face meetings at prescribed dates and locations. Since we began this training, teachers have more confidence in their rating and they are no longer rating based on student deficit, but rather by looking for what students can do. This has greatly benefited students.

Data

We have collected standardized proficiency data from our students throughout the process, and continue to do so. This helps us compare our teacher ratings to a standardized test and gives us overall data on how students across the district are performing.

At the end of each year, teachers fill out a form on which they break down their student ratings into the three modes and compare them to the standardized world language assessment. This helps calibrate their rating as well as track student growth. Naturally, the outside assessment typically generates slightly lower ratings than their ratings based on class performance.

Explaining to students and parents the difference between performance and proficiency helps to alleviate any concerns

that are raised regarding potential score discrepancies. Through classroom conversations with students and letters sent home to parents, we have been able to help all stakeholders understand the difference between proficiency and performance. From this data, we created studies to track longitudinal growth over time.

Another sign of growth came about with our state's implementation of the Seal of Biliteracy in Fall 2018. We have been able to track our Seal recipients each year to determine if the number of students earning the Seal of Biliteracy is growing or holding steady. We also analyze the data of those who test but don't earn the Seal to determine where we need to improve our teaching.

Having a state recognition dependent on proficiency-based assessment and learning reconfirms the legitimacy of the program and empowers students to stay enrolled in languages longer so as to be recognized for their proficiency in the language, and has created more interest in world languages on the part of parents and administrators.

GROWTH

Improvements and Adjustments

While our base of teachers has adapted to proficiency-based teaching, we are continuously receiving new teachers who need coaching at the district level, as well as by our World Language Leadership Team at a school level. Each school has a department chair who serves on the World Language Leadership Team. These individuals are trained in best practices and are responsible for helping new teachers learn how to teach for proficiency and become adept at using the rubric for rating student performance.

We also have a World Languages Teacher Support Specialist who initiates coaching cycles with new teachers to help them on this journey. Coaching teachers on how to improve student proficiency involves a continuous process of developing interrater-reliability, creating lessons, and designing assessment that promotes proficiency. We help teachers with issues such as addressing missing assignments and the importance of communicating with both the student and parents on student progress in the course. We also publish our own blog that highlights best

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practices and teacher voices to help encourage teachers in the pursuit of excellence in proficiency-based teaching.

Other improvements include data-dives with teachers to determine how we need to adjust our teaching. For example, at one of our high schools we noticed that interpretive listening scores were lower than other modes. From that data, we coached teachers to match classroom practice with assessment, meaning they needed to be offering more opportunities for students to practice listening in class than they had been previously doing.

We also reflected on our own teacher bias to determine which modes we were assessing more often than others. Having the standardized language assessment has helped us reflect on our teacher bias towards assessing the variety of modes and ensures that we are offering a full range of activities and assessments to help students grow in their proficiency in all modes.

Future Steps for Proficiency

While we have already implemented the proficiency-based model at the secondary level, our elementary immersion programs have yet to become fully trained in teaching for proficiency, as their grades also reflect math and science content rather than just language. Our model for language teaching in immersion is an integration of language and literacy skills through content.

Currently, teachers are encouraged to pair a content standard with a language standard in all of their content teaching. However, since they do not receive a formal grade for language, teachers have struggled to assess student language skill alongside content. This led to the development of content-based Integrated Performance Assessments (IPAs).

An IPA is a contextualized language assessment that requires students to complete a task in each language mode (Interpersonal, Interpretive, Presentational). Within the Interpersonal mode there is both speaking and writing, and it involves the exchange of ideas back and forth between two or more people. Within the Interpretive mode, there is interpretive listening and interpretive reading and it involves the student's ability to correctly interpret information being presented to him or her. Finally, in the Presentational mode, the student is the one presenting either written or spoken language to an audience of some sort. Within an IPA, each task builds on the next and includes an authentic context that requires students to use language to accomplish the task.

With the introduction of true language assessment through IPAs, we are now training elementary immersion teachers on

how to use kid-friendly rubrics to determine the students' language levels. Even though they do not receive a grade on their report card for language, they will receive regular progress reports on their growth in language proficiency. This move includes training teachers on the rubrics and providing ways to help students power up to the next proficiency level.

We are following a similar model in our secondary program by starting with a pilot group of teachers who have implemented the IPAs, and we are training a core team of teacher leaders who will then help facilitate the training for the other teachers on the use of content-based IPAs and language instruction while teaching math and science content.

CONCLUSION

In an educational system that focuses on grades rather than growth, it is very challenging for districts to make space for proficiency-based teaching and assessment. Our journey to improve our world languages program has been both challenging and rewarding as we are constantly learning, growing, reflecting, and adapting.

Continuing to educate new teachers and new students in our system has grown easier over time, but we still have to be very intentional in areas such as inter-rater reliability and communication to parents, students, and school counselors to make this a successful venture for all learners.

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