

## ***MAKING EFL CONVERSATION CLASS PARTICIPATION GRADES TRANSPARENT***

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Native English speaking instructors of large EFL classes at universities often assign a grade to a somewhat vague item labeled "participation." Philosophizing that "grades are arbitrary, anyway," some teachers admit openly that this part of their grade, which I have known to be as much as forty percent, is subjective. While grades may be arbitrary on a theoretical level, students consider grades in a more concrete fashion. And though I am sure that most teachers have some basis for determining how many points to give for this "arbitrary" and "subjective" gray area, they also need to remember to make these points known to learners throughout the semester. When students complete a test, paper, or assignment, they can see their grade; but most teachers I have known only calculate the participation grade at the very end of the semester. To address such a situation, I apply a two-step remedy to the situation: clarifying what constitutes "participation" and sending regular, personalized participation grade reports to each student, with the help of a spreadsheet and e-mail merge software.

### **Letting Students Know Precise Grading Criteria**

Of course, most teachers let students know what they expect for participation in their class. Unfortunately, this "orientation" might come in the form of a speech during the first class (which many students may not understand), or as just a few lines on a syllabus (which many students may never read). However, if we do not provide students with a thorough description of our expectations in document form, we cannot expect them to understand the degree of importance we place on that item or what kind of performance we consider successful. Any description of our participation grade needs to include not only the amount of the grade, but also precisely what kind of behavior will secure that score.

There is nothing wrong with a "plus, check, or minus" system of grading participation. However, teachers need to consider how those marks will translate into the final grade before they begin using such a system. Does each day add up cumulatively? Or is there a set threshold that must be met? Is it an all-or-nothing grade? Or are points assigned directly for each plus, check, or minus? Let's face it: we have to determine how the grade pans out at some point before turning our final grades in to the administration, so why not get that out of the way at the beginning of the semester? This allows the added benefit of making the participation grade transparent to students.

Whatever grading scheme you wish to use, the next step is to write descriptors for each step on the scale. These descriptors may serve the purpose of justifying a grade, but, more importantly, they offer guidelines according to which students can adjust their participatory behavior. In the Appendix, I have included a set of descriptors that I recently developed for an advanced class, which was discussion-oriented and small in size. These clearly cannot be applied to large classes in which little discussion occurs, but they offer a model by which teachers can compile descriptors appropriate to their own classroom situations.

Though the bulk of this article is devoted to a method of publishing participation scores to students on a regular basis, the foundation of such a practice is clear descriptions of what constitutes the participation grade. I refer to this as "transparency" in the same sense that large, publicly held companies are urged to be transparent about their business practices. It is the students' right to know what is going on in our curriculum. Not only does the software solution I propose here inform students of their grades; it also urges them to become responsible for their own grades. As can be seen in the Appendix, my point scale is accompanied by calls for students to reflect on their scores, and to adjust their own participation as necessary. To constantly keep students aware of their role in shaping their own grade, I suggest including the descriptors and a message encouraging self-regulation, such as appears in the Appendix, inside each participation grade e-mail.

### **Preparing to Publish Participation Grades**

The second step in making participation grades transparent is to publish the grades to students during the course of the semester. If a mob of students has ever gravitated around you (and your grade book) after class, you know how interested students are in monitoring their grades, and you should quickly recognize the upside of using a mass e-mailing program to eliminate that situation. The benefit using a mass mailing program to send e-mail is that each person who receives the mail sees only their address and name in the "To" e-mail header, and a reply will send it only to the e-mail address listed in the "From" header. The added benefit of e-mail merge software is that distinct information can be sent to each member of a mailing list, and you only have to compose one message. If you have ever made mailing labels from an address book file, then you have an idea of how merging works. Believe it or not, for our purposes, I find using the e-mail merge software even more simple and user-friendly than making labels, and the possible applications of e-mail merge software is only limited by one's own creativity.

It is not my intent to promote a particular software title, and readers should know that there are several alternative software solutions available, but because of my familiarity with a program called WorldMerge, its ease of use, and the fact that a fully functional free version is available for download, I will discuss how to prepare and send an individualized mass e-mailing to students with this software. (WorldMerge can be downloaded for free from this page: <http://www.coloradosoft.com/download.htm>. Alternatively, you can find similar software from such download depots as Tucows.com or Download.com.)

Before you can send a mass e-mail, you will need a database. With WorldMerge, you can use various formats, including "generic" formats such as tab-delimited text. I recommend using a spreadsheet application (WorldMerge uses Lotus 1-2-3 or Microsoft Excel) because it can serve both as the file for the mass e-mail and as a continually updated grade file. After all, using software is all about making tasks easier - more automated - so it makes little sense to use tab-delimited files, which do not include the data manipulation features of a spreadsheet.

When preparing your database, be absolutely sure to include descriptive column headings. You will need to select from these headings later in the WorldMerge program. Also, be sure not to use the topmost line of the spreadsheet for data entry, because the WorldMerge program will read those entries as column headings, and that student will not receive an e-mail. If you use the

headings, the problem is solved both ways. The minimum information your database must contain is the e-mail addresses of your students. If you have a file with only e-mail addresses, you can prepare and send a mass e-mail to everyone on the list. This is great for making announcements, for example. Since we are planning to publish grades, we will also have columns for each grade, and each column will need a distinct heading. I have provided the information from an Excel file in table form below to show what such a spreadsheet might look like.

Student Name	Student e-mail	Score 1	Score 2	Score 3	Score 4	Total
Thien Lee	tlee@here.com	4	5	4	5	18
Vivian Su	vsu@here.com	4	5	4	4	17
Jin-Hee Kim	jhk@here.com	5	5	5	5	20

### Starting a New Mail Project

Let's use the Sample\_data.xls file ([download from here](#), or refer to the table above) to go through the steps of using WorldMerge to send personalized grade reports to each student. To follow along on your own computer, you will need to download and install WorldMerge before beginning. Otherwise, you can still read along and see whether this solution will meet your needs, and download the software later.

First, with the spreadsheet file closed, launch the WorldMerge program.

1. You will be presented with a "splash" screen from which you can select "Use the Free Version" to continue without purchasing or registering the software.
2. Next, you will be prompted to "Open an Existing Mail Merge Project" or "Create a new Mail Merge Project." ([See image](#)) We want to do the latter. Click on the radio button to select a new project then click "OK."
3. Next, you will be presented with the option of composing your message in "Plain Text" or "HTML." ([See image](#)) For this trial run, let's stick with plain text. Click the radio button, and "Next."
4. The next screen has two options. ([See image](#)) First, you will need to select your database file type from the drop down menu. ([See image](#)) Our sample file is in Microsoft Excel format, so select that. Then click on the "Browse" button to locate your database file. After selecting the proper file, click "Next."

5. If your database file has more than one worksheet, you will be presented with a dialogue box to select the sheet with the necessary data. ([See image](#)) In our case, it is the first sheet, "Data." (When making your own files, you can simply delete all other worksheets, which will let you bypass this step.)

6. Next, you will be prompted to "Select the field in your database which contains the email address." ([See image](#)) This is the first time that those column headings become helpful. Without them, you wouldn't know what to choose. Click "Next." You will see one more screen, but all you need to do is click "Finish."

### **Composing and Sending the Mail Message**

You should now be looking at the main WorldMerge window. Within the program you will see three tabs along the top: "Message," where you can edit and view your message; "Mailing List," where you can view, select, and unselect recipients of the message; and "Sent Items," which displays a log of the files you have sent. For the most part, your work will be done within the "Message" window, which is the default view. ([See image](#)) The "Message" interface reflects a common e-mail client. In the main text area, right-clicking the mouse allows you to input a field. (I currently use WorldMerge version 4.0. ColoradoSoft, the maker of WorldMerge, lists the ability to input fields in the "Subject" line of the e-mail as a new feature in version 4.2 on its website: <http://www.coloradosoft.com/worldmrg/index.htm>) The following is a description of basic steps used to create a message:

- When you right-click your mouse, you will be presented with a menu consisting of your column headers (in this case, Student Name, Student e-mail, Score 1, Score 2, etc.). ([See image](#))
- When you select one of these headers, it is entered as a field. You will recognize this because of the [[ ]] which set it off from the rest of the text. You can place a field anywhere in the e-mail.
- Let's begin writing our e-mail by typing a salutation, such as "Dear", pressing the space bar once (just to enter a blank space before the data from the spreadsheet), then right-clicking the mouse.
- Select "Student Name" from the fields and click "OK."
- You will need to click your mouse once in the window again to relocate the mouse at the end of the line. Then type a comma and press <Enter>. What this will do is create an individualized salutation for each member of the mailing list.
- Now you are ready to write the body text. If you type a sentence like "Your participation score for this week is," press the space bar once, then right-click and select "Score 1," each student will receive a personalized score.

That's all there is to it. Now, the added functionality of a spreadsheet means that you can report running totals easily. All you have to do is type another line like this: "Your total participation grade for the semester is," space, right-click, select "Total." If you enter new grades throughout the semester, and have a running total entered in your spreadsheet, the updated totals will also appear in the e-mails. Any teacher who is using spreadsheet software to keep track of grades

should consider how simple it would be to publish that existing information by using an e-mail merge program.

Alternatively, you could make an entry for each week's points, followed by a total; you could make an entry for only the most recent week, with or without a running total; or you could just enter the running total, and not the weekly points. Frankly, since the goal of this software solution is transparency, it only makes sense to send out all available data, i.e.: every weekly score and a running total. However, you may want to put the total at top, followed by the most recent scores, in descending order. There are countless variations on how such a tool can be used to automate the reporting of grades.

Once you are ready to send the message, you can use the built-in spell-checker and preview function to make sure the format and information are correct. If you are making a text mail, the preview will not differ much from the composing area. However, if you use HTML to format your message, the HTML preview is invaluable.

Before sending a message out to students, you may want to test a few on yourself. This can easily be done by replacing the bogus e-mail addresses in the Sample\_data.xls file with your own e-mail address. In fact, I recommend this step just so you can see - and trust - that each student will get only their own personalized data, and never be able to see anyone else's. You may even want to add your own name and e-mail address at the bottom of your actual database just so that you get an e-mail to confirm each mailing you send out.

When you are ready to send, go to the "Send" menu and select "Send Message." You will see a dialogue box reminding you that you are using an evaluation version. Click "OK," and you are finished! To check on the status of your mail, you can go to the "Mailing List" tab. If the mail has not yet been sent, you will see a white envelope to the left of each list member. If the mail has been sent successfully, the envelope will have a green check mark on it. And if the mail failed to go out, there will be a red X on the envelope.

One last note about mailing: you can mail as frequently as you want: weekly, monthly, or daily. It's up to you to find a balance that serves your needs - and serves your students.

### **Formatting Tips**

It won't take long to become comfortable with the software discussed in this article. When you feel like moving forward, I would suggest using HTML tables (and colors) to enhance the presentation of your mail. Even if you don't know how to write HTML, you can simply use a WYSIWYG (What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get) HTML editor, such as CuteHTML, Macromedia Dreamweaver, Netscape Composer, or Frontpage Express. In fact, WorldMerge's recently released version 4.2 also boasts a visual WYSIWYG HTML editor plug-in. These editors allow you to create HTML documents the same way that you create formatted documents in word processors. You can use them to create a mail format, including a blank table with enough columns or rows to support the data you wish to report, then copy the source (you may need to select View > source to see the actual HTML), and paste it into WorldMerge (you will need to select HTML when starting WorldMerge). When cutting and pasting in WorldMerge, you cannot

use the right-click menu, as the right-click opens the field options. Instead, use the drop down menus at the top of the window, or use the standard <Ctrl>+C to copy and <Ctrl>+V to paste. Once you have pasted your HTML formatted document into WorldMerge, you can place the mouse where you want data to appear, right-click, and select the field for that spot.

If you are not familiar with HTML, viewing the source code may be a little intimidating, and you may not know just where to insert your fields. A solution to that is to type "place markers" in the HTML editor (before copying and pasting). For example, say you design a table into which you want to insert the running total. In the WYSIWYG editor, type something like "TOTAL" (using all capital letters will make it easier to find later). In fact, it is a great idea to enter the actual column headers, as you will not be confused about which one belongs where when you replace them with fields. You can then replace these place markers with the actual fields by going through the source code in the WorldMerge Message window, double-clicking to select the place marker, then right-clicking to replace it with a field.

If all of this HTML talk sounds a little above your head, let me give you a tip for formatting a text e-mail. If you want to send out a series of scores, for example, I would suggest putting each score on a new line, aligned to the left. This should make a fairly even column of scores. If you are only sending out a few numbers, putting them right into a sentence shouldn't cause any difficulty in reading for the recipient. As mentioned above, until you are confident in using the software, send a test mail to yourself first to make sure it comes out the way you intended.

Since many ESL teachers work with students whose names use non-alphabetic characters, you should be aware that WorldMerge does not seem to support other character systems. However, this can be overcome in a few ways. The first, and simplest, is to Romanize the spelling of students' names. This solution bypasses the issue altogether. The second is only available if you are using HTML mail, and if your students will be reading the mail on a computer which also supports the foreign character system. My own case is that I teach in Korean, and essentially every computer in the country can read Hangul, the Korean character system. When I want to send an HTML e-mail with Hangul, I go to the <head> section of the code and make sure that the character set is a Korean one. When using a WYSIWYG editor on a computer with a Korean operating system, this occurs automatically, so I don't need to do anything. Still, I always check, because if the character set is western, the foreign characters will come out as gibberish.

Finally, WorldMerge inserts a short message at the end of every e-mail to announce that the user is using evaluation software. While I cannot disclose the exact "remedy" (for fear of liability), I will say that there is a simple way to reduce the visibility of this message when using text e-mail, and a simple way to completely hide the message when using HTML mail.

### **Final Thoughts**

The combination of e-mail merge software and spreadsheet programs offers various options for simplifying and organizing broadcasting tasks. Aside from distributing grades, I have used the software described in this article to conduct surveys, schedule appointments with students, and to publish personalized class news, and I am currently using it to coordinate participants in a research project. Using software to publish participation grades is an effective method of

informing students of their grades, and allowing them to take responsibility for their grades, when such an approach is coupled with a published description of the criteria for participation. Since participation is key to a conversation class, and since it is graded that way in many schools, it is not only proper but necessary to find ways of making the participation grade transparent to students.

## **Appendix**

### **In-Class Participation Point Scale Used in an Advanced Discussion Class**

I have developed a list of criteria to describe the points you will receive for in-class participation. Additionally, I will be e-mailing each student a weekly update of their in-class participation grade. When you receive these e-mails, be sure to compare your points with the scale below. If you feel you are not getting high enough scores, you can see from the scale how much you have been participating, and adjust your in-class behavior.

Each day, you can receive 0 to 4 points for participation in class. These points are based on frequency and quality participation.

0 - No participation at all. (Simply saying “yes” after someone else makes a statement is not participation.)

1 - Makes a few comments; does not initiate or direct the discussion; presence does not influence the discussion significantly

2 - Makes intermittent comments; comments may echo the sentiments of others, but do not contribute significantly to the discussion

3 - Regular participation; adds opinions, makes suggestions, comments on major points; contributes valuable input to the discussion

4 - Constant contributions to the discussion; contributes significant material which helps to direct the discussion; without this person, the discussion would be completely different

These criteria are intended to help you gauge your performance in class. If necessary, we can revise their wordings to clarify them or make them more descriptive. The main point is that you are aware of your daily grades so that you have the chance to modify your participation if you would like a higher grade. The responsibility of the grade should lie with the students, and this is a step in that direction.