LEARNING BEYOND THE GRADE
ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN THE ITALIAN CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present two case studies of two different college-level Italian language and culture courses in which an *ungrading* approach was implemented. The paper analyzes its impact on students through a qualitative study based on student reflections and feedback. We hope that by reporting students' own experiences with the *ungrading* approach, the language professional can capture how even small changes to assessment practices can reshape classroom culture, reduce foreign language classroom anxiety, and foster student motivation enhancing language learning.

1.   INTRODUCTION

A number of influential studies have challenged traditional assessment methods based on letter grades and have shaped the *ungrading* movement across K–12 and higher education. Researchers like Alfie Kohn, Jesse Stommel, Susan D. Blum, and Joshua Eyler have been leading voices in calling for student-centered approaches that prioritize learning over evaluation. Indeed, Alfie Kohn (2006) challenges teachers to reflect on the actual purpose of evaluation: "Is it to rank students, to bribe them to work harder, or to provide meaningful feedback that supports growth?" (14).

The sections that follow outline the main themes that dominate the literature in favor of alternative grading approaches. We begin by reviewing leading work on the negative effects of traditional grading on student learning, and foreign language classroom anxiety linked to grading practices. We then examine alternative approaches to grading, paying special attention to mastery-based grading and Specifications Grading (Nilson 2015). Next, we present two case studies from Italian language and culture classrooms that implemented an *ungrading* approach. Finally, we discuss student reflections and feedback, which indicate positive outcomes resulting from this pedagogical shift.

1.1 The Impacts of Grades

Drawing on research in educational psychology, studies argue that grades undermine intrinsic motivation by shifting students' focus from engagement with content to a narrow focus on achievement metrics, and on competition with peers. An important study by Butler and Nisan (1986) found that stu-

dents who received only task-related feedback performed much better and reported more interest in the material than students who received grades or no feedback at all. The researchers concluded that traditional grades "may encourage an emphasis on quantitative aspects of learning, depress creativity, foster fear of failure, and undermine interest" (215). Therefore, when grades become the dominant indicator of success, students often prioritize performance over learning itself.

Eyler (2024) observes that grades can push students into a "vicious loop" (14) in which they pursue increasingly better grades while losing sight of what they should actually be learning. To complicate things further, while student attention is centered on grades or performance indicators, grading systems tend to reward students for meeting teacher expectations rather than for demonstrating authentic understanding or creativity. Stommel (2020, p. 28) notes that grades "incentivize the wrong stuff: the product over the process, what the teacher thinks over what the student thinks." This leads students to prioritize rule-following and task completion over intellectual exploration and risk-taking. In this way, grades often reflect how well a student follows instructions rather than how much they have learned. Stommel also notes that the very essence of grades as a means of ranking students promotes competition over collaboration and can render classroom relationships adversarial. This fosters, on the one hand, a competitive culture and, on the other, a fear of making mistakes, both of which are barriers to authentic learning and negatively impact the classroom environment.

Blackwelder (2020, p. 45) further argues that grading reduces teachers to "gatekeepers" who spend time justifying the grades they have decided to give rather than crafting meaningful feedback. Conversations with students shift from what they have learned or can do to questions like, "What do I need to do to get an A?" Moreover, grades often fail to consistently or accurately reflect student learning. As Blum (2020, 11) highlights, grading practices can be subjective and unreliable and she cites a foundational study by Starch and Elliott (1912). This study revealed significant variation in grades assigned to the same paper in History and English, and even more variation in grades assigned to a geometry paper in a later iteration of the study. Recent studies continue to confirm similar findings. Yet unreliability is not the only issue. Sackstein (2015, 7) makes a related point: "average scores say little about learning: any number of students earn a B for different combined reasons. A gifted student who completes little work often receives the same grade as a struggling student who improved steadily throughout the course or a student who started strongly but performed poorly in the last quarter." So, at the end of the day, what does that grade of B actually mean? She goes on to say (19)

that grades can also negatively impact how students see themselves. Because they are categorized by external performance metrics, their sense of growth and progress can be harmed. This brings to another recurring theme within the literature which is the link between traditional grading methods and cheating. Research shows a consistent connection between extrinsic goal orientation and academic dishonesty. Anderman and Koenka (2017), for example, demonstrate that students who are motivated by grades, or who see their classroom as being primarily grade-focused, are more likely to engage in cheating behaviors. In short, when grades become the primary goal, students can often focus on achieving their desired grade by any means, rather than learning the material and mastering the skills those grades are intended to measure.

While this research is broadly compelling, what is even more significant for the language teacher specifically, is the large body of research in Second Language Acquisition that shows that affective variables such as motivation, personality, and favorable attitudes play an important role in successful language learning. Anxiety, and personality traits such as introversion and lack of self-esteem, can, on the contrary, impede language learning (Krashen 1981; Gardner 1985, Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993, MacIntyre, 2017). Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986) argue that the foreign language classroom can trigger a form of anxiety unique to this classroom setting where student communicative abilities are still developing. This specific type of anxiety is referred to as Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA). They note that students who experience FLCA may not suffer from anxiety in other contexts or situations, but in a foreign language classroom they often struggle with improvisation, such as in role-play activities, or with experimenting beyond their comfort zones, especially when it comes to unfamiliar grammatical structures or personal topics. FLCA also frequently manifests in testing situations, where the pressure to perform can intensify their anxiety and further hinder language performance. Wu & Na (2014) identify several causes of this type of anxiety, many of which are closely tied to traditional assessment practices. According to them, learners' personality traits, such as low self-esteem, introversion, or perfectionism, can heighten anxiety, especially in classroom environments that emphasize performance and correctness. Students who feel they must produce flawless language often struggle with the unpredictability of language learning and may be reluctant to take the necessary risks that foster growth. At the same time, external factors such as teacher attitudes, classroom competitiveness, and high-stakes assessments can intensify students' fear of making mistakes or being judged, leading to inhibited language learning.

1.2 What Changes Can Educators Make?

In the past two decades, the term *ungrading* has become an umbrella term to cover a wide range of assessment practices that minimize or eliminate the use of traditional grading systems and instead emphasize detailed feedback, opportunities for resubmission, reflection, and student growth. As mentioned above, leading voices in this movement have been scholars from diverse disciplines such as Susan D. Blum (2020), Alfie Kohn (1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2011), Linda Nilson (2015), Jesse Stommel (2023), Joshua Eyler (2024). These experts emphasize the need to decenter traditional grading structures in favor of assessment models that prioritize reflection and revision. By shifting the focus away from summative scores, these approaches can foster intrinsic motivation, promote deeper engagement, as well as reduce anxiety in students.

Eyler (2024) argues that more effective methods shift towards deeper learning, decentralizing grades "by prioritizing feedback, reflection, and multiple attempts at meeting learning goals" (4). He highlights the importance of feedback, not as a way to justify a grade but as a way to help students learn and make improvements. Stommel (2020) too supports this view by advocating for the student agency that comes with practices like qualitative feedback, peer review, and self-reflection. Blum (2020) in her edited volume *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* suggests that "mastery rather than arbitrary deadlines and compliance" should be the objective of our classrooms (1). Students should be given the freedom to explore avenues that allow them to show proficiency in a skill or mastery of a subject. Fundamentally, techniques that encourage a dialogue between instructor and students such as descriptive evaluations, one-to-one meetings as well as assignments that encourage self-reflection and self-assessment are seen as positive alternatives to traditional grading schemes. Furthermore, a common thread that runs through many of these studies is the emphasis on the importance of creating a positive and supportive classroom that sees collaboration among students and between teacher and students as essential to a productive classroom.

Among the various approaches and suggestions, what stood out to us as the most fitting frameworks for our classrooms were mastery-based grading and Specifications Grading. In language classes in which students are required to master a variety of skills that build upon one another to eventually develop proficiency, classroom practices should provide space for students to cultivate these skills through trial and error, repetition, and revision. Students should not be expected to achieve mastery on the first try but should instead

be given unlimited attempts, accompanied by detailed formative feedback from the instructor, until they demonstrate competence. In Eyler (2024), each successful demonstration of progress results in a satisfactory mark for the targeted standard or skill.He describes it as an approach in which "the standards that serve as the foundation… are derived by individual instructors or teams of teachers and are tied directly to what students should know and be able to do in a particular course" (113). He also refers to related grading models, what he calls the "cousins," such as competency-based grading, and proficiency grading. What drives these approaches is the belief that all students can produce excellent work with sufficient time, effort, and support. This aligns well with the view that language learning is a process that requires continuous practice and that mistakes are essential to internalizing new knowledge.

As for Specifications Grading, this is an approach developed by Nilson (2015), and it is a system of grading in which student work is evaluated solely on whether it meets clearly defined pre-established criteria, called specifications (hence Specifications Grading or Specs Grading). In this system, traditional grading is replaced with a binary pass/fail system, no partial credit is given. According to Nilson, Specifications aligned with course learning outcomes promote rigor and transparency. Faculty must provide precise and unambiguous directions; thus, student stress is reduced because they know exactly what is expected to succeed. Instructors often allow revisions of failed work, permit drops of a limited number of assignments and use tokens (or free passes) that students can trade for extra time, retakes, or forgiveness of absences. According to Nilson, this encourages self-regulation and time management. Since there's no point deduction, feedback becomes purely formative, and she argues that students are more likely to engage constructively with it. In order to translate specifications-graded (pass/fail) student work into final letter grades in accordance with institutional requirements, Nilson provides a system called Bundling. In this system, Bundles are collections of pass/fail assignments tied to specific final grades. Students choose which bundle to complete based on the grade they aim for (e.g., C-level, B-level, A-level). Each bundle reflects increasing mastery and depth aligned with learning outcomes. According to Nilson, this system encourages student agency, simplifies grading, and increases transparency.

In the following two case studies, we outline how we integrated different aspects of these *ungrading* approaches and describe our main goals. In the first case study we present a mixed approach in a beginners' level course that followed mastery-based principles for certain assessments but still maintained

aspects of a traditional grading system in the course as a whole. In the second we outline a more streamlined implementation of Specs Grading where the primary goal was to incentivize autonomous use of the language in intermediate learners.

It is important to note that, while there is a plethora of publications, blogs, and discussions about *ungrading* across disciplines, the same is not true for language instruction. The most comprehensive resource in this field is the website for the 2024 virtual conference *Grading Less – Learning More: Ungrading in the World, Languages, and Cultures*, organized by the Center for Languages and Cultures at the University of Southern California. This site provides video recordings of panel discussions and presentations specifically focused on *ungrading* practices in language classrooms.

With regard to Italian specifically, a panel titled *Ungrading: The Key to Student Retention in the University Italian Classroom?* was organized at the 2025 AATI Conference at Princeton. Previous to that, at the 2023 AATI Conference in Catania, Di Pietro and Giorgini-Althoen presented an insightful paper titled *Ungrading: nessuno ci può giudicare* on approaches to *ungrading* in their Italian courses at Wayne State University and Emory University.[1] To the best of our knowledge, however, this paper is the first of its kind to describe the implementation of *ungrading* in the Italian language classroom and to evaluate its impact on students.

2. CASE STUDY 1: IMPLEMENTING UNGRADING IN A FIRST-SEMESTER ITALIAN LANGUAGE COURSE

This case study explores the implementation of *ungrading* principles in Intensive Basic Italian: Giro d'Italia, a six-credit introductory language course for first-year students in the College of Arts and Sciences at Georgetown University. The course is part of a series of seminars designed to build core academic skills and foster community within a small student cohort. The course meets four times a week for one hour, with an additional asynchronous component on Fridays. It is intended for students with no prior knowledge of Italian and focuses on building foundational skills in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Cultural learning in the course is enhanced through guest lectures, and students engage in experiential learning activities such as a private tour of the Italian Embassy and visits to cultural institutions in Washington, D.C. such as the Italian American Museum. In the Fall of 2023, there were eleven students enrolled in the course.

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[1] Special thanks to Antonietta Di Pietro and Silvia Giorgini-Althoen for their willingness to share their experiences and insights on how they applied *ungrading* principles in their Italian courses.
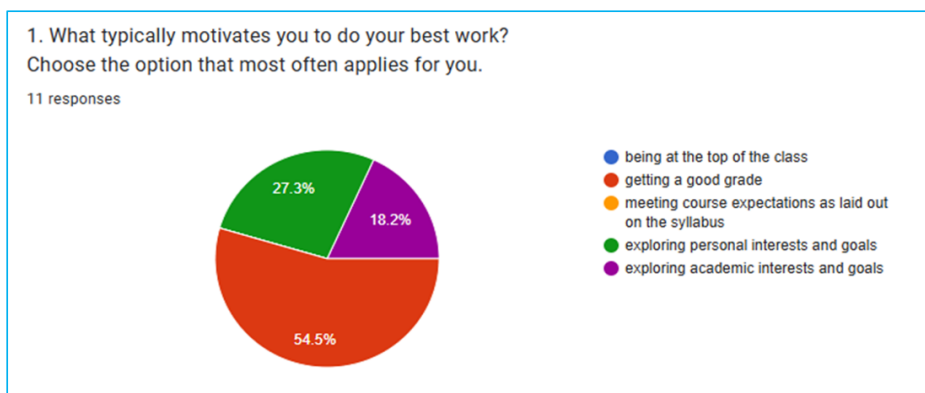
2.1 Background: Shifting Toward Alternative Grading Practices

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the language program at the Department of Italian at Georgetown has taken deliberate steps to reduce student stress and anxiety while trying to enhance motivation and engagement. This was in response to calls by the university administration to support students with more flexibility, while at the same time still maintaining academic rigor. Recognizing the pressure created by traditional, high-stakes assessment models, faculty began to explore alternative approaches to testing. Previously, courses relied heavily on exams: two 60-minute tests during the semester, a two-hour cumulative final, and four quizzes, which together accounted for 55% of the final grade. During and after COVID, these exams were replaced with low-stakes, end-of-module quizzes (worth 25%), and a digital portfolio replaced the final exam. The digital portfolio became central to this new alternative assessment strategy. More than just a collection of completed assignments, it serves as a metacognitive space where students reflect on their goals, progress, challenges, and learning strategies. Artifacts include writing samples, video recordings, blog posts, and collaborative projects, allowing students to track their development throughout the semester. These were positive, incremental changes to the program. However, while the types of assignments had shifted, the actual grading system had not. In Fall 2023, in this standalone seminar course, a mastery-based grading approach was adopted for the majority of assignments in the course.

2.2 Shifting the Role of Grades

The primary goal of this new approach was to encourage students to treat assignments as opportunities to learn as opposed to checkboxes for earning points. It was an attempt to move away from grades as the product of each assignment, giving them instead a lateral role in the learning process. Final grades had still to be assigned at the end of the semester due to institutional requirements, but the new approach attempted to divert students' focus, and to allow room for making mistakes and revising as part of the learning process. It is not an easy task to change the mindset towards grades at a prestigious school where for most students just getting through the gates has meant a sharp focus on being the very best in class. Proof of this attitude is clearly reflected in an anonymous survey that students took at the beginning of the semester, the results of which are shown in Fig. 1 below:

Fig. 1 Attitudes towards grades

1. What typically motivates you to do your best work?
Choose the option that most often applies for you.

11 responses

- being at the top of the class
- getting a good grade
- meeting course expectations as laid out on the syllabus
- exploring personal interests and goals
- exploring academic interests and goals

27.3%   18.2%   54.5%

In preparation for a discussion on assessment in the course, students completed the one-question survey in Fig. 1 which sought to discover what for them was the primary motivating factor for doing their best work. As can be seen in the pie chart, 55% of the students noted that getting a good grade was their primary motivation, whilst of the remaining students, 27% stated that exploring personal interest and goals was their primary motivating factor, and 18% instead were motivated by academic interests and goals.

In the comments that students were invited to add, the majority reported that grades were a primary source of academic motivation, often tied to a desire for validation, a sense of achievement, or future academic goals (such as going to law school). However, some responses revealed a conflict: students felt that though grades drove them to complete assigned work, at the same time they distracted from genuine learning or deeper engagement with course material. A few students noted that they produced their best work when personally invested in the topic or when they had a strong relationship with the instructor. Others expressed appreciation for a classroom environment where mistakes were welcomed, and growth was prioritized over perfection.

2.3 Creating A Collaborative Student-Centered Space

In this redesigned framework, it was essential to create a classroom environment centered on collaboration, skill-building, and language proficiency rather than on chasing grades. There had to be, as Michelle D. Miller puts it, a "shift away from points and toward purpose." (Miller, 2024, p.29.) On the first day of class, rather than reviewing the breakdown of the grade on the syllabus and listing course objectives, students were asked to reflect on their personal learning goals for the course: "What would success in this course look like for you? What do you want to be able to do in Italian?"

Obviously, there were a variety of answers to this question ranging from being able to order food at an Italian restaurant, to being able to serve as tour guide for relatives visiting family in Italy, to being able to read the Divine Comedy in Italian. Of course, expectations had to be tempered, but these open conversations helped shift the class dynamic to a focus on students' learning and their motivations. A point was made of explaining the purpose behind different types of assignments that would be encountered during the semester, why they mattered, what they assessed, and how they contributed to language learning. A pact was made that there would be no busywork[2], but tasks and assignments that were meaningful steps on the journey towards proficiency. To allow for flexibility and personalization, the assessment structure also borrowed from the token economy of the Specifications grading framework. Students were given three virtual tokens that could be used during the semester, when they pleased, to cover an absence or to request extensions on assignments. This is the grading policy for the course as it appears on the syllabus:

> You will be regularly assessed through in-class participation, homework activities, tasks, and quizzes that test ability in the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking during the semester to make sure you are on track to reach the learning objectives of the course. You will complete 3 compositions, and there will be 5 short quizzes that test grammar and vocabulary during the semester. These quizzes will generally take place after every two chapters. There will be two mini projects (IPA tasks) and two oral tests (one towards the middle and one at the end of the semester). You will also reflect on your language-learning progress through the creation of a digital portfolio which will be due during the exam period.
>
> This semester, you will receive a letter grade for your quizzes and oral tests, but all other assignments will be assessed as Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. The specifications for Satisfactory work will be detailed at the beginning of each assignment but the bar is high, truly satisfactory work is excellent and it shows proficiency in the skill or ability being assessed by each assignment. If you receive an Unsatisfactory grade on your first submission this simply implies that you need to make a few adjustments and improvements. You can re-do all homework assignments this semester (i.e., recordings, tasks, temi, written paragraphs). The focus of these assignments is to help you LEARN the language and internalize the structures, and this can only come with practice. If you take the feedback you have been given on board, and show improvement,

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[2] Stommel defines *ungrading* not just as removing grades, but as restructuring pedagogy to eliminate activities that don't contribute to deep learning. See his sample syllabus statement in the chapter titled "How to ungrade" in Susan Blum's *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning* (29).

you will receive a Satisfactory grade. You will only be able to resubmit work that was submitted by the original deadline and showed effort and attention to detail.

There is no final exam in this course.

A final note: If you stay engaged, take your homework seriously, and consistently put in your best effort, you will do well in this course. That said, doing well doesn't automatically mean earning an A. Missing assignments, skipping class, or receiving Unsatisfactory marks without revising your work will affect your final grade. There is, however, some flexibility built in: You have 3 TOKENS this semester: You can use ONE for an absence and the other TWO for extensions of 48-hours on submitted assignments.

2.4 Grading: Structure And Philosophy

The adopted alternate grading model focused on mastery or skill-building. Again, this was not a full *ungrading* overhaul of the entire course. Students still received letter grades for five short grammar and vocabulary quizzes and two oral exams. However, all other assignments, written compositions, recordings, and Integrated Performance Assessments (IPAs), were assessed on a binary scale: Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. This type of grading was chosen because it can encourage students to do their best work. Students either complete the task and show they have mastered the skill, or they need to redo the assignment. As Linda Nilson states, "for students, it's all or nothing. No skipping the directions and no sliding by on partial credit for sloppy, last-minute work" (Nilson, 2016).

The skills to be mastered in this first-semester course were the foundational linguistic competencies necessary for basic communication. These included both oral and written proficiency, developed through tasks such as introducing oneself, writing about a daily routine, describing a family photo, narrating past events, creating dialogues, and producing creative IPA projects (e.g., city brochures, cooking videos). Each assignment targeted specific skill sets, such as using stock expressions for social interaction, practicing memorized chunks and phrases, conjugating verbs in the present and past tenses, practicing and applying vocabulary related to family and daily life, hobbies, studies, in short, all of those thematic areas related to high frequency topics as outlined by ACTFL for the novice and intermediate language learner. The bar for achieving a Satisfactory mark was set intentionally high. To receive this mark, student work had to demonstrate clear proficiency in the target skill, which would normally correspond to an A or A–. Work that didn't quite hit the mark was returned with detailed feedback and the opportunity to revise.

To provide an example, the first assignment that students completed during the semester was the following:

> Chi sono? How much can you say about yourself?
> Make a VIDEO recording in which you say as much as you can say about yourself in Italian. Include the following: name, how you spell your second name, city, nationality, if you work (where?), what you study, where you live (downtown or suburbs). Make a recording of at least one minute and do not read.

This task is aligned with ACTFL Can-Do Statements for novice learners (e.g., "I can introduce myself and give basic personal information"). Its goals were to build speaking confidence, practice present tense structures, and provide the opportunity to work on fundamental principles of pronunciation. Though students prepared extensively in class for this first assignment of the semester, most were nervous to complete it (for many of them it was their first college assignment), and the fear of failure caused them to approach it without keeping the agreed-upon principles of the class top of mind. Instead of using the assignment as a way to practice structures that had been learned in class, some students wrote scripts in advance and simply read them without paying attention to pronunciation, others used Google Translate to create complex language structures instead of focusing on the language functions learned. This became an important teachable moment as most students in the class were asked to re-do this first assignment. Assignment objectives were reviewed and clarified, and strategies for improvement were discussed as a group. For many of the students it was the first unsatisfactory grade they had ever received, and for this it was impactful, and served to get them on track. In the past, under a traditional letter grading system, students who submitted work that was not truly satisfactory would have received partial credit, and the learning process would have ended there. Teachers can be hesitant to assign low grades out of concern that doing so might demotivate students. However, this approach often signaled to students that their work was complete, even if their understanding was still developing, and left little incentive to revise or deepen their learning. Instead, with this new all or nothing system, students revisited the task, corrected mistakes, made improvements, and resubmitted, no harm done. It is useful to note here that studies have shown that students do not read feedback when it is accompanied by a letter grade, and therefore using this satisfactory/unsatisfactory approach to grading ensures that students pay

attention to feedback and make improvements on each submission of their work.[3]

As the semester went on, students had to re-do assignments less often because they took the time to read directions carefully, to come to office hours, to ask questions in class and to be generally more active and engaged in their learning. In short, the adoption of this binary system of grading was a simple change to make and yet it had an impact not only on student performance, but it fostered an atmosphere of collaboration in class, and enhanced rapport among students and between students and instructor.

3. CASE STUDY 2: INTERMEDIATE ITALIAN

This second case study presents the implementation of *ungrading* in "Intermediate Italian I" offered at Connecticut College, a liberal arts college in New England, during Fall 2023. This course represents the first semester of the intermediate Italian language and culture sequence, offered each fall and taught on a rotation basis. Students typically include sophomores who have completed the elementary Italian sequence and have chosen to continue their study of the language, as well as first-year students who place into the intermediate level and use the course to fulfill the one-year language require-ment. In the semester discussed here, the class included nine students (three first-year students and six sophomores) and met three times per week for 50 minutes in a traditional classroom setting.

3.1 MOTIVATION FOR UNGRADING THE COURSE

I have long been skeptical of performance-based grading in language instruction, as I view language learning as an inherently dynamic process that demands experimentation, trial and error, reflection, and an open mind. Traditional evaluative tools, such as grades, exams, and other summative assessments, fail to capture the complexity of this process, as they prioritize final outcomes over the learning journey itself. For these reasons, I chose to fully adopt an *ungrading* approach in this course, with the aim of examining its impact on classroom atmosphere, student motivation, and learning.

Moreover, as the sole instructor for the course in Fall 2023, I had the autonomy to design the syllabus and select assessment methods that would best support this pedagogical shift. I implemented Specifications Grading (Nilson 2015) because it offered a principled framework for converting final grades, still required by my institution, while remaining flexible enough to
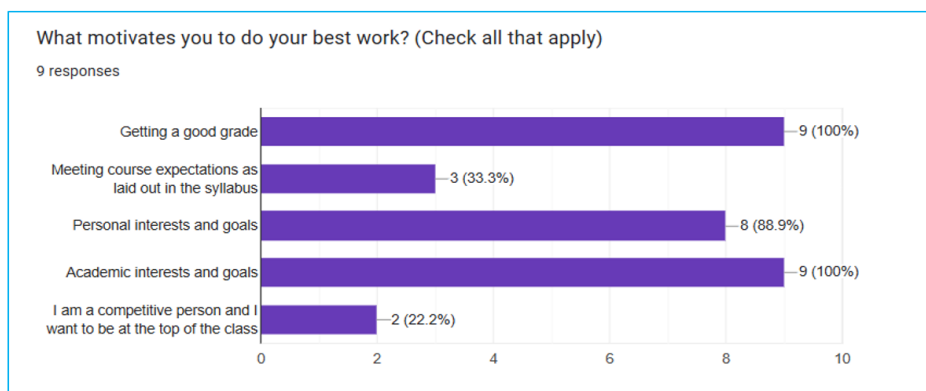
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[3] See Blum's reference to the foundational research on this topic completed in the 1980s by Ruth Butler, Professor of Educational Psychology at Hebrew University *Why Ungrade? Why grade Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning* (13).

align with my instructional goals. Additionally, I was interested in fostering the responsible use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT, particularly for language-level revision activities to promote accuracy. Specifications Grading provided an effective structure within which this objective could be pursued.

3.2 Student Attitudes Towards Grades And Previous Use of Ai-Tools

In order to assess students' attitudes toward grades and what motivates them, I administered an initial anonymous survey at the very beginning of class before the explanation of the *ungrading* system adopted in the course. The survey consisted of only two questions. The first asked students what motivated them to do their best work, and the second focused on their previous experiences with AI tools.

Figure 2 below shows a screenshot of the responses collected. As indicated, students were allowed to select more than one option. All students selected "Getting a good grade" and "Academic interests and goals," and all but one also selected "Personal interests and goals." This question aimed to determine whether students were studying Italian solely for personal fulfillment. The responses suggest that students in this class were motivated by both intrinsic factors (personal and academic interests and goals) and extrinsic ones (grades), indicating that grades were not the sole driver of their engagement in the course.

What motivates you to do your best work? (Check all that apply)

9 responses

Option	Responses
Getting a good grade	9 (100%)
Meeting course expectations as laid out in the syllabus	3 (33.3%)
Personal interests and goals	8 (88.9%)
Academic interests and goals	9 (100%)
I am a competitive person and I want to be at the top of the class	2 (22.2%)

Regarding the second question about prior experience with AI tools, most students reported using Google Translate. None of the students was familiar with how to use ChatGPT to support their language learning.[4]

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[4] Feedback to this feature is not reported in the paper, but it is interesting to note that most students praised it in their final reflections, reporting deeper engagement with the language-level revision process.

3.3 COURSE DESCRIPTION

The primary goal of this course is to move students beyond elementary Italian toward a more confident and autonomous use of the language. Emphasis is placed on reviewing and expanding grammatical structures and vocabulary, as well as engaging with authentic cultural materials to enhance fluency across all four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The course is taught on a rotation basis, and the instructor has the flexibility to design the syllabus according to their approach to language teaching and the specific needs of the student cohort. During Fall 2023, the semester in which I chose to implement the *ungrading* approach, the syllabus was organized around various open-access course materials and a range of authentic materials, including journalistic articles, literary excerpts, film clips, and TV/radio news reports. All course content was made available via the college's learning management system, Moodle. Students also acquired the virtual textbook *10 Lezioni d'Italiano B1* by Alma Edizioni on BlinkLearning, and some material was drawn from this text and integrated into the course, along with interactive grammar exercises created on Moodle. Beyond the course material, students had some opportunities for experiential learning outside of class as well. These included a "carbonara" lunch prepared by the students and a two-hour hands on workshop on Commedia dell'Arte led by Chiara Durazzini from Boston-based Pazzi Lazzi Troupe.

Course assignments were varied and addressed all four language skills. There were no traditional in-class exams, midterms, or a final exam. Students engaged in frequent self-reflections. The course assignments consisted in:

Preparatory work: Students were assigned written or audio materials to review before class, often accompanied by comprehension questions and vocabulary or grammar exercises on various cultural topics (e.g., fitness and image, aging, superstitions). In class, they worked in small groups to complete guided questionnaires, review vocabulary and grammar, and participate in full-class discussions.

Follow-up reflections/essays: Written reflections or compositions were assigned at the end of each topic to consolidate learning and develop writing skills. These assignments required language-level revisions, and students were asked to resubmit their work as part of the learning process. Some were completed in class, while others were assigned as homework.

Interactive grammar exercises: Traditional grammar activities were assigned on Moodle or Blink Learning to reinforce key grammatical points. Students had multiple attempts and retries without penalty.

Personal final project: This project invited students to connect Italian topics with their academic or artistic interests. Students delivered a final oral presentation, revised through instructor feedback on early drafts and individual consultations.

AI-assisted revisions: For reflections and compositions, students were instructed to use AI tools to identify and correct grammatical, lexical, or syntactic errors. They submitted both the original and a revised version based on AI suggestions or explanation of inaccuracies, along with a written reflection (in English) on what they learned through the revision process. These reflections were designed to promote metacognitive awareness and deepen language acquisition.

3.4 Implementation of Specs Grading

Following the principles of Specifications Grading (Nilson, 2015), student written work was evaluated as either *Satisfactory* or *Unsatisfactory*. A *Satisfactory* evaluation indicated that the work met expectations in terms of task completion. For language accuracy, students were asked to complete a round of language-level revisions using AI tools and resubmit with a self-reflection addressing them. An *Unsatisfactory* evaluation indicated that the task didn't meet expectations and more substantial revisions were needed. This required a full resubmission. If either *Satisfactory* or *Unsatisfactory* work was revised and resubmitted with clear improvement and thoughtful engagement, the assignment received a "+", indicating progress from the original submission.

Since students were aware that AI use was expected during the revision process, and that a "+" could only be earned through a second submission that included language-level revisions, there was no evidence that they resorted to using AI tools for their initial work. While perfection was not required, a *Satisfactory+* submission was expected to show evidence of learning and meaningful engagement with the revision process in order to build their language skills. The addition of the *Satisfactory+* category served to explicitly incorporate AI-assisted language corrections into the grading system. By explicitly including this revision step, I wanted to promote responsible use of ChatGPT as well as creating an equitable environment where everyone had access to the same tool. Students appreciated this exercise, as it increased their awareness of their mistakes and helped them understand what they needed to improve.

The course also maintained flexibility by accommodating occasional absences, incomplete in-class work, or lapses in preparation. In line with the Specs Grading framework, this flexibility was supported by a *Token* system, which allowed students to "buy favors." Each student received four tokens

to use throughout the semester. Most students used the tokens for absences beyond the two permitted without penalty or an occasional missed revision.

Although numerical grades were not used during the semester, a final letter grade was required by university policy. To meet this requirement, final grades were bundled under the label of *Status*, which included multiple categories of performance assessment: attendance, participation and preparedness, home-work completion, revisions, and the final project and presentation. The final project invited students to connect their passions and interests with Italian language and culture, like, for example, incorporating Italian elements into studio art projects, or relating their science coursework to Italian contexts.

Final grade expectations were clearly outlined in the syllabus at the beginning of the semester. This allowed students to understand in advance what was required for each letter grade and to make informed decisions about their goals. For each assessment item, specifications for earning a *Satisfactory* evaluation were provided, in accordance with Specs Grading principles.

The tables below illustrate how Specifications Grading was implemented in this course. Fig. 3 outlines the grade conversion, while Fig 4 details the specifications for a *Satisfactory* evaluation for each graded component. Both tables were included in the course syllabus.

Fig 3 - Grade conversion

	A Grade Status	B Grade Status	C Grade Status	D Grade Status
Attendance	Max 2 absences	Max 6 absences	Max 9 absences	More than 9 absences
Participation and preparedness	Satisfactory – for majority of classes (at least 95%)	Satisfactory – for most classes (at least 80%)	Satisfactory – mostly inconsistent and partially prepared	Unsatisfactory – Mostly unprepared
Homework on Blinklearning/ Moodle	95% of assigned homework completed on time	At least 75% of assigned homework completed on time (late work accepted)	At least 50% of assigned homework completed on time (late work allowed)	Less than 50% of assigned homework completed (Includes late homework)

Revisions, corrections and reflections These include use of AI as per course policy.	At least 95% revisions and reflections completed and marked as "satisfactory+" in a timely manner within one or two weeks of first due	At least 75% revisions and reflections completed and marked as "satisfactory+" within two weeks of first due	At least 50% revisions and reflections completed and marked as "satisfactory+" within two weeks of first due	Limited revisions
Final Presentation with slides	Satisfactory+	Satisfactory+	No drafts submitted	No drafts submitted/No presentation

Fig. 4 Specifications – This table explains what students have to do to receive a "satisfactory" evaluation.

Grade Item	Specifications
Attendance	- A maximum of 2 absences is allowed. - You can use a token to cancel an absence.
Participation and preparedness	- You have completed the homework as specified in your schedule (readings, listenings, grammar etc). - You have mastered new vocabulary so that you can use it in class discussions (you are allowed to look at your notes during class discussions). - You can summarize the assigned reading/listening or other material - You are able to comment on the assigned reading/listening or other material
Homework on Blinklearning/ Moodle	- You complete the homework for correctness. You have multiple trials to get the right answer. - The homework is submitted on time.

Revisions and reflections	- In order to get a "satisfactory+", you need to revise your writings, including reflections and compositions, either done in class or at home. - Use AI to identify language level corrections. - Incorporate them into a revised version. - Resubmit original and revised version. - Include a reflection in English explaining what you have learned.
Final project and presentation	- Prepare slides for your presentation as explained in project guidelines. - Submit them one week before the presentation for review. - Revise your presentation based on feedback. - Practice your presentation before presenting to the class. - The presentation must be delivered and not read.

These tables were reviewed on the first day of class, so students clearly understood what was required to earn each letter grade and what qualified as "satisfactory" for each type of assignment. This system promoted transparency and encouraged students to take ownership of their learning and final grade.

4. COMBINED STUDENT RESPONSES

At the end of the semester, students in both courses were invited to reflect on their experience and provide feedback[5]. Georgetown students did this by completing a targeted survey on assessment and grading practices in the course, whilst students at Connecticut College provided general feedback on their experience of the course as a whole. Upon reviewing the feedback collectively, several key themes emerged, as outlined in the table below. This summary of feedback is based on the responses provided by seven of the eleven students enrolled in the Georgetown course and all nine of the students enrolled in the Connecticut College course, for a total of sixteen responses. The responses revealed the themes listed in Fig. 5 below, along with the number of times each theme was mentioned. We have also included sample student responses in separate charts in the Appendix.

Fig. 5 Themes in student responses

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[5] IRB approvals were obtained.

Theme	Number of mentions
1. Reduced stress and anxiety	19
2. Focus on learning and improvement	16
3. Positive learning experience	10
4. Ability to revise and resubmit	9
5. Increased motivation and effort	9

The themes in the chart above and student responses in the Appendix show that the *ungrading* approaches used in the courses received overwhelmingly positive feedback from students. Overall, they felt that these assessment methods significantly enhanced their experience, reduced anxiety, deepened their engagement with the language, and created a more positive classroom experience.

Students felt less anxious about performance and appreciated not having to constantly worry about grades, as happened with other courses they were taking, and this resulted in a more relaxed and collaborative classroom experience. Because there was room for mistakes and there wasn't the need t*o be perfect all the time*, students were able to concentrate more specifically on learning and could focus their energy on doing good work as opposed to worrying about the negative repercussions of making mistakes, as normally would occur. Others appreciated being able to revise assignments and learn from their errors without penalty, which they found especially important in the context of language acquisition where making mistakes and growing from them is an essential part of the process.

This "friendly" approach to grading encouraged good work. Many students mentioned the ability to resubmit or redo assignments as a vital tool for deepening their learning. It taught them to pay attention to feedback and to review corrections as they endeavored to receive a satisfactory mark. Others found that the opportunity to revise made the process feel constructive and meaningful, allowing them to expand and internalize their learning with each submission. This trial-and-error approach also meant that they had more contact with the language, the material, the professor, and though resubmitting assignments took work and effort, they appreciated having a second chance and valued seeing the improvements they were making over time. They also felt that their efforts to improve were recognized

by their instructor. Additionally, students remarked that the grading system encouraged them to consistently put in a strong effort in their work. Knowing they had the opportunity to revise, they were motivated to do their best from the start and found it gratifying when they were able to be successful on their first try. The structure also gave them the confidence to take risks and use the language more freely; they could be more courageous knowing that they would always have the option to attempt the task again. At the same time, the possibility to improve work created a sense of safety and autonomy, allowing them to have more agency and to take ownership of their learning more directly. Ultimately, students found the grading style to be a welcome change that created a more positive, low-pressure learning environment that helped them to better absorb the material they were studying.

Taken together, these reflections highlight the potential of alternative grading approaches to transform not only individual classroom experiences but also students' broader orientation to learning. In an environment where mistakes were treated as opportunities and progress was prioritized over performance, students reported deeper engagement, greater confidence, and renewed enthusiasm for language study. While challenges remain, these findings underscore the potential of *ungrading* to support deeper learning, increase motivation, and reduce anxiety in the language classroom.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, while these were small-scale studies completed over just one semester, the findings are nonetheless very encouraging. Student responses suggest that placing less emphasis on grades can indeed reduce affective barriers and foster a more positive and meaningful relationship with the learning process. Our findings align with a systematic study conducted by Hasinoff et al. (2024), which reported that students generally perceive *ungrading* practices as beneficial: they improve the student–instructor relationship; enhance engagement, agency, enjoyment, and interest; foster intrinsic motivation and a focus on learning; and support creativity. However, the same study also notes that these benefits are not universal. For some students, the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of *ungrading* increased stress. To address this, the authors recommend complete transparency about the motivations behind the new grading approach. We echo this recommendation, as we believe that when students understand the pedagogical reasoning, they are more receptive to the shift away from grades as we observed in our courses.

Another factor to keep in mind when adopting *ungrading* is the institutional requirement for final grades. For this reason, courses must include clear conversion metrics or procedures from the outset so that students know

exactly what the parameters are for earning a final letter grade. In our case, by introducing specifications grading and clearly explaining standards at the beginning of the semester, students gained agency over their final grade and reported little to no stress throughout the course.

Moreover, personalized, frequent, and formative feedback is fundamental to the effectiveness of *ungrading* practices. As Sackstein (2015) emphasizes, "...communicating learning will become a conversation instead of a mono-logue. By giving narrative feedback and soliciting student input, we will significantly impact student learning" (16). However, from the instructor's perspective, this approach is generally more time-consuming than assigning numerical grades. Many scholars acknowledge that providing individualized feedback is far more feasible in small to medium-sized classes than in large courses. Instructors must therefore be mindful of the time they can realistically devote to constructive feedback. We believe our experience with *ungrading* was effective in large part because we implemented it in relatively small classes.

Finally, as Sackstein (2020) notes, "Getting rid of grades is a big and challenging step to make, but it *can* be done" (74). Scholars in the field widely recommend starting small and following an incremental approach. This makes the shift toward alternative grading practices more sustainable and adaptable to specific classroom contexts.

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APPENDIX

1. **Reduced stress and anxiety**

Sample citations	Number of mentions
• *I never felt a big need to worry or stress about grades, and was more concerned about my own knowledge of the language and how I was able to express it.* • *I think it was beneficial for me personally because it took much of the stress of learning a language at a rapid college pace away and let me focus on one lesson at a time instead of cramming for quizzes or exams.* • *Participation in class created a fun dynamic between peers and was not stressful like in other classes.* • *I'm overpointing this semester, and I constantly have a lot of stress because of deadlines and all of the work I have going on, so having a forgiving grading scale was unbelievably helpful.* • *As someone who has a history of obsessing over my grades it was highly enjoyable to have a no-grade policy, and it fostered a great learning environment.* • *It helped take the pressure off of memorizing things, such as vocab words, and allowed us to actually get familiar with the structure and flow of the Italian language.* • *It was something different that I was not used to but it helped me feel less stressed about getting work done for the class which was very nice to have. It was nice to have one class during my first semester of college that was a much more low stress environment.* • *It was also comforting to know that there was room for mistakes.* • *In how this course was assessed, I felt like I was able to immerse myself in the class without having to worry about always being perfect.*	19

2. **Focus on learning and improvement**

Sample citations	Number of mentions
• *I liked having the opportunity to correct the mistakes I made in all of my writing. I feel getting feedback, and understanding where I went wrong*	16

truly allowed for me to internalize my mistakes and grow from them! ● *I think the lack of a letter grade and the ability to resubmit made learning the language a much more important factor for me. For one, when resubmitting I would get an extra interaction with the content and actually input my corrections rather than just receiving them.* ● *I found that being able to correct my mistakes on my own was very beneficial to my understanding of what I did wrong and most importantly why it was wrong. It was much easier to learn from my mistakes.* ● *I think how we were assessed was friendly to us in a way that also encouraged good work no less than if we were assessed as is typical.* ● *Not having to worry about being penalized for wrong answers made it a lot easier to relearn the verb conjugations.* ● *I didn't have to worry about the consequences of making mistakes, instead, I could focus on fixing and learning from them.* ● *This was definitely something different but I think more classes should do grading like this. It helps students understand material better and makes assignments more than just a number or letter at the top of the page.*	

3. Positive learning experience

Sample citations	Number of mentions
● *The grading style was great. Very different to what I've had before but I felt it fostered a positive environment for learning and making mistakes without all the pressure and stress.* ● *It made the classroom environment more welcoming as well, especially since we had a small class* ● *I wasn't extremely anxious for the class and was instead able to fully absorb what we were learning*	10

4. Ability to revise and resubmit

Sample citations	Number of mentions
● *The cost of additional work is low when compared to the value of being able*	9

to see your mistakes, correct them, and be rewarded for that.
● *Redoing assignments meant that it got better each time*
● *I thought it was great for a beginner class because it forced me to carefully read corrections and make the necessary changes.*
● *I think encouraged me to do my best work because my work had to reach a satisfactory level.*
● *I liked how we could redo assignments, because i knew if i didnt turn in my best work, i could try again and do better.*
● *Being able to re-record assignments was very useful in allowing me to learn proper syntax and perfect the pronunciation of what I was saying. Additionally, in being able to resubmit my assignments, I was encouraged to go to office hours so I could understand my mistakes.*
● *At no point did I feel like the system was unfair. In fact it likely appears more fair than most grading systems given the ability to have a second chance.*
● *I think I learned more being able to resubmit my work*

5. Increased motivation and effort

Sample citations	Number of mentions
● *I was able to really focus on the effort which I find to be really important when learning a new language* ● *Every time I completed an assignment, my main goal was to only have to submit it once. Thus, when completing the homework I put forth my best effort* ● *I feel I put forth a strong effort and my grades reflected that.* ● *The grading system encouraged me to take risks and use the language. I would try to push to never have to redo an assignment, which obviously rarely happened. But when it did, it was very gratifying.* ● *While I still tried my best and gave effort into my assignments, it was comforting to know that… there was always room for improvement.* ● *I also thought the grading system was very helpful. It allows students to take initiative over their learning and earn the grade they deserve.*	9