

Ungrading: Impact on Learner Psychology and Learning Motivation

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Abstract:

Ungrading, a pedagogical approach that de-emphasizes traditional grading systems, is gaining popularity for its potential impact on learner psychology and learning motivation. As learners differ in their learning styles, the traditional grading system plays a crucial role, without which reluctance and disinterestedness develop among learners in learning and gaining knowledge due to the lack of meaningful achievement in the long run. Contrariwise, by adopting an Outcome-Based curriculum, Bangladesh has moved from a traditional norm-referenced scoring system to a non-traditional criterion-referenced scoring system, an integral part of continuous assessment, where learners' final performance does not determine their actual result, rather their whole education journey is their final result. Consequently, by shifting the emphasis from grades to feedback, ungrading affects learners' learning motivation both positively and negatively, i.e. fosters learner engagement by encouraging them to take ownership of their educational journey, or leaves them idle to simply rely on others for easy solutions. Hence, this qualitative discourse analysis study examines how ungrading influences learners' motivation, self-efficacy, and overall approach to learning by employing the method of teacher-learner interviews. The systematic analysis of the relevant data provides the general understanding that the ungrading system has a negative impact on learners' psychology and motivation in the context of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Ungrading, Learner Psychology, Learning Motivation, Learning Styles, Feedback-Centered Approach

Introduction:

This study establishes a relationship between learner psychology and the grading system. While there is a grading system that perfectly concludes an academic year of a learner reflecting their final achievement, the learner is more likely to achieve those learning to enhance his or her final result

(Hughes, 2003, p. 4). Whereas, continuous assessment gives the feeling of a monotonous journey and never ending process summing up a whole academic year and the learner cannot always remain in the process of (conscious) learning depending on his or her learning style, they may simply want to grasp ideas required to achieve success in the exam (Wallace, 1991, pp. 20-23). However, it can also help them to realize real life situations through learning, thus rather than simply memorizing texts they can come to the realization of how to apply their learning as per the arising needs, which, in previous curriculum and traditional gardening system, has been known as practical sessions, but in the continuous assessment every subjects are addressed through their practical aspects of application (Brown, 2010, pp. 251-255). Now, the present paper shows how this new gradeless assessment system affects different learners differently and distinctively by influencing both of their learning psychology and motivation at the secondary level of Bangladesh, as the psychological pressure of acquiring knowledge can greatly impact the learning goal and outcome in a particular setting.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective:

The general objective of the study is to find out the major impacts and the present scenario of ungrading on learner psychology and learning motivation at the secondary level education system of Bangladesh.

Specific Objectives:

The specific objectives of the study are-

Objective 1: Assessing the impact of ungrading on learners' motivation and anxiety management: It is to evaluate how shifting from a traditional grading system to an ungrading one influences learners' intrinsic motivation and increases or decreases their anxiety level.

Objective 2: Exploring the impact of ungrading on the learners' psychological state of wellbeing: It is to understand how ungrading system affects learners psychologically using PERMA theory of wellbeing.

Research Questions:

R.Q. 1: How does ungrading influence learners' motivation and anxiety level? This question aims to uncover whether ungrading has a positive or negative impact on learners' motivation and anxiety.

R.Q. 2: What are the effects of ungrading on the learners' psychology of wellbeing? This question focuses on the implications of ungrading on learner

engagement, their accomplishment, meaningful learning, and relationship with peers and teachers.

Ungrading and Learning Psychology:

Ungrading:

Ungrading is a criterion-referenced assessment system that tries to clearly mention learners' exact learning achievements instead of norm-referenced assessment systems of marking and providing letter grades according to those acquired marks. As this is a criterion-referenced assessment system, here learners' achievements are their final result i.e. whether they have learnt the whole topic or part of it is precisely mentioned in the final result, which is provided by giving feedback to individual learner in every subject. This ungrading system not only adheres to criterion-referenced assessment but also continuous assessment instead of final assessment, where learners are constantly being evaluated based on their classroom behaviors, participations, and performances. In this system, in the context of Bangladesh, learners need to do most of their tasks in a group, where their group performance indicates their individual performance, which is problematic, as not every participant has the same capability to perform like their peers e.g. some participants can draw well but do not have the bookish knowledge, others may know books well instead of those decorative tasks. Thus, in an ungrading system a year long rigorous classroom tasks and performances sum up learners' gradual learning and progression from one level to the another level without any final examination and traditional gradings. Hence, successful achievements in the class performances is the indicator of successful accomplishment of a particular class level in an ungrading system. It is a performance-based assessment system that is minimal in its grading, as the good assessment indicates the acquisition of learning rather than the acquisition of grades. In such a system usually self-assessment, peer-assessment, teacher-assessment, peer-review, formative feedback, self and teacher reflection on the progression of achieving individual learning goals and course learning goals are employed to have an overall scenario of how learning is being achieved. This system qualifies learning rather than quantifying learning and so this system may not be a good measuring indicator of learning (Brown, 2019, pp. 1-24, 312-329, Hughes, 2003, pp. 11-22).

Different Learning Styles

Learners' differences are determined by the differences in their learning psychology i.e. what type of learners they are can indicate their psychology to learn. Learners differ depending on their learning styles. Wallace has

defined various learning styles depending on the differences of the learners thus their learning psychology and here in a table those different parameters of different learning styles are shown-

Dependent/ Passive/ Surface	Independent/ Active/ Deep
Syllabus-bound	Syllabus-free
Cue-deaf ↔ Cue-conscious ↔ Cue-seekers	
Surface	Deep
↓	PROCESSING ↓
Passive	Active
Serialist	Holist

(1991, p. 22)

Henceforth, it can be said the different learning styles are the indicator of different learning psychology.

Affective Factors

All these different types of learners may have distinct affective factors working behind their learning motivation and anxiety influencing their learning accomplishment depending on their unique learning styles.

In second language learning theory, several affective factors are taken into account, researched, and worked on in detail to see how they impact language learners' learning and eventually acquisition of a particular language. These factors not only impact language learning but also any kind of learning associated with the education sector. Anxiety and motivation are two of such affective factors that are closely associated with learners' learning psychology.

Anxiety is the feeling of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry that may increase or decrease an individual learner's learning. Anxiety can be of two types- **debilitative** anxiety and **facilitative** anxiety (Alpert and

Haber 1960, Scovel 1978, as cited in Brown, 2000, pp.150-152) or, **harmful** anxiety and **helpful** anxiety (Oxford 1999, as cited in Brown 2000, pp.150-152).

- 1. **Debilitative or Harmful Anxiety:** This type of anxiety is injurious to the level that it may lead learners to extreme measures e.g. suicidal attempts for not being able to learn well and do good in the final examination.
- 2. **Facilitative or Helpful Anxiety:** It works as a positive factor by providing learners with facilitative tension that keeps them poised, alert, and little unbalanced to the point that they cannot relax entirely. It is the nervousness that grows competitiveness among the learners.

The current gradeless continuous assessment system promotes a humanistic approach to learning by releasing anxiety among learners and encourages a non-defensive posture where learners feel that they are not in competition. Depending on various types of learners it may make them wishy-washy and lax in their learning, or it may provide facilitative anxiety to read and learn relevant ideas and skills outside the syllabus. Thus, not too much debilitation or facilitation, but rather a balanced anxiety is conducive to learning.

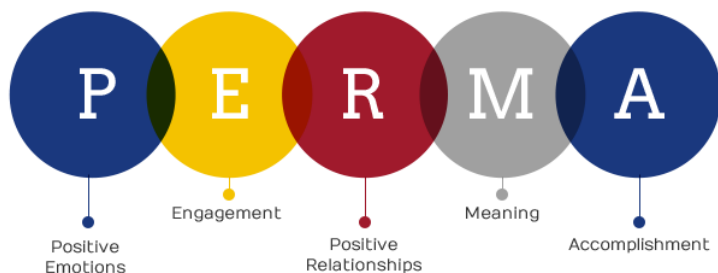
Another affective factor, motivation refers to positive reinforcement of the habit of learning to achieve some personal or worldly goal. Kathleen Bailey has identified dichotomous nature of motivation and defined them as shown in the following table-

	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
Integrative	L2 learner wishes to integrate with the L2 culture (e.g., for immigration or marriage)	Someone else wishes the L2 learner to know the L2 for integrative reasons (e.g., Japanese parents send kids to Japanese- language school)
Instrumental	L2 learner wishes to achieve goals utilizing L2 (e.g. for a career)	External power wants L2 learner to learn L2 (e.g., corporation sends Japanese businessman to U.S. for language training)

(1986, p.166)

PERMA Theory of Wellbeing

Learners' psychology of wellbeing is closely associated with their habit of learning. As they spend their earlier part of life accumulating new ideas and thoughts through learning, a good learning habit may result in strong psychological development among learners. How learning and assessment system impact learners can be examined by using Seligman's PERMA theory of wellbeing, where -



P= Positive Emotion

It is hedonic. Increasing positive emotions is limited to one's capacity to do so i.e. within a limited range an individual's emotions tend to fluctuate. It can be achieved by being grateful and forgiving about the past, enjoying the present, and being hopeful about the future. It is relevant to the learner's willingness to learn, as the more they enjoy learning, the more they will be willing to learn.

E= Engagement

It is an experience, where learners use all their skills, strengths, and attention to take charge for a challenging learning task. It is an experience that learners enjoy having for its own sake. It is known as flow, where learners' full energy is deployed and absorbed without any conscious awareness of the surrounding world. It is experienced when a learner's skill is sufficient to carry out the task following feedback on progress toward the goal.

R= Relationship

It is a feeling of connection with teachers and fellow learners. As a social being humans want to connect with and help each other for their own survival, and developing strong relationships is central to adapt and being

able to be part of a community. Hence, developing relationships with teachers and peers is crucial for learners and their wellbeing.

M= Meaning

A sense of meaning can be derived from belonging and serving something bigger than the self. It creates an existence beyond self by working betterment for a community and when learners work together in a group, they get the chance to have that experience and feeling.

A= Accomplishment

Accomplishment works for its own sake by targeting a goal. It is a sense of achievement, competence, success, and mastery, which are earned when learners are able to accomplish a task successfully and move toward the loop of feedback.

Monitoring learners' learning from the point of view of PERMA theory may help in exploring psychological changes among learners in a particular context of learning and it may help in delving deep into the impact of ungrading system from the present context.

Literature Review:

Review of the Previous Studies:

Dobson and Fudiyartanto have found out that motivation, assessment, and learners are in a tripartite relationship, where assessment can enhance motivation or do the opposite (2023). However, they have mentioned that students' group performance does not stand for their individual performance. Lyboldt et al. have stated that satisfactory/unsatisfactory grading; which is known as ungrading, has ameliorated learners stress by reducing competitiveness among them and has positively impacted their motivation to learn, academic performance, and wellbeing (2022). His study has shown that due to using ungrading system, learners have spent less amount of time in learning than the letter grading system and spent more time on self-care, though the amount of their achieved learning remains the same. This study conferred that ungrading fosters wellbeing and learning experience advantages among the learners without reducing the motivation to learn and academic performance. Kpum et al. have explored that No-Zero Grading Policy must be an integral part of classroom formative assessment practice, as it can improve learners' achievement in Physics and increase their self-efficacy and attitude towards Physics at secondary school in Benue State,

Nigeria (2023). Hence, they have suggested that No-Zero Grading Policy should be implemented to improve academic achievements of the learners. Seligman et al. have focused their qualitative study of ungrading and wellbeing on the medical students and explored that without any core clerkship grades students have no need to impress others with grades which has increased their intrinsic motivation in caring for patients and sense of agency over learning (2020). The study mainly emphasizes students' perception of ungrading being a game changer for improving their learning experience along with the scope to maintain their regular life and supports their engagement and wellbeing in learning, though some students have expressed their concerns for securing residencies at good institutions in future without any differential grades. Bailey et al. have investigated the effects of competitiveness on motivation and evaluation anxiety and explored that South Korean students who have high instrumental motivation, feel more anxious to perform in foreign language in a remote learning environment (2023). But when academic competitiveness is added to that setting their anxiety vanishes and they are positively motivated to outcompete their peers. However, the study also states that foreign language anxiety may negatively influence high competitiveness resulting in negatively perceived learning outcomes. Sriram has found out that by using the Growth Mindset Grading System; an alternative method of grading in academic performances can increase understanding and motivation, though it has no correlation with stress (2022). The study has been conducted on the mathematics learners of Ohio High School. He has also stated that the standard weighted grading system negatively impacts understanding and motivation. Hasinoff et al.s' findings indicate that ungrading practices improve teacher-learner relationship; enhance learner engagement, agency, enjoyment, and interest; foster learners' intrinsic motivation; and focus on learning facilitates learner creativity (2024). Their survey study reports that while many students have reported the reduction of stress among themselves, others have reported increasing stress due to this practice's unfamiliarity and uncertainty. They have suggested that gaining a better understanding from learners' reactions can help teachers to improve their practices. Beth has expressed the idea that the goal of assessment should be to encourage learning to drive student engagement and success rather than grading their works to foster intrinsic motivation (2024). With this focus he has implemented ungrading practices e.g. feedback, reflections/ self-assessment/ surveys/ peer review in his classroom. He has set some course learning goals and also instructed learners to set their own individual learning goals and at the end he has compared his grades with his learners self-assessment grades and found no differences in the grades. He has reported that learners have progressed towards personal and course learning goals. Also, students' feedback have helped him to refine his future course. Eventually, the study has found out that this new ungrading system has increased learners'

engagement, released stress, relaxed the learners by enhancing learners' overall experience and attitudes towards learning in a collaborative and equitable environment. Ferns et al. have emphasized that grades are not effective tools for promoting and measuring learning (2021). They have also emphasized that ungrading along with formative feedback e.g. individual feedback, peer review, self-assessment promises increased learner motivation, reduction of stress, and enhanced learner independence, improved teacher-learner relationship. Hence, their study has concluded that ungrading has the possibility to support diverse learner needs through suggesting effective strategies for learning in an alternative method. Williams similarly suggests that grading is not an effective tool of learning, as it reduces motivation and gets in the way of learning, an alternative ungrading approach should be implemented to positively impact learner engagement, performance, and workload and the study also strategizes some effective implementation tools (2020). Burns et al. have investigated the impact of ungrading on Library Science majors and they have conducted pre and post-hoc tests to support their claim that ungrading can enhance learning in an online asynchronous, higher education course environment (2023). Dilinika has conducted an extensive research on the best practices of academia from assessing to what is being assessed and whether the existing methods are best suitable solutions to possible learnings or is there any other alternative ways to best describe learning and achieve it within the given conditions of learning (2023). And the study tries to show that the full potential of the assessment of student learning outcomes needs more attention and research to come up with the best suitable solution to address the existing challenges in learning. This research mainly tries to identify alternative methods of learning other than the existing traditional one.

Review Summary:

1. Un/Grading System and Motivation

Student assessment can enhance their sense of self-esteem and motivation, or it can do the opposite. The tripartite relationship between motivation and learning, self (conscious, unconscious and affective forces), and social practices of student assessment can influence student learning significantly. It can affect student participation depending on the type of task they are aiming to perform e.g. individual works, or group works and their motivation to do the task.

2. Un/Grading and Anxiety

In a normative grading system, students' facilitative tension can be increased leading them to be competitive to achieve certain learning goals and do well

in their overall performance, which can be absent in an ungrading system with no anxiety to learn. However, the opposite is also seen when lesser anxiety can increase self-esteem to learn well for one's own sake.

3. Un/Grading System and Wellbeing

At higher levels of tertiary education system grading has a significant impact on learners' wellbeing and it may negatively impact them. But by using a gradeless system students' mental wellbeing can be restored and their level of learning willingness can be increased.

Research Gap:

All the previous studies are mostly concentrated on the tertiary level learners by exploring their psychology, motivation, and anxiety to learn. Those studies are mostly done on the learners of other disciplines than the language learning discipline. But this study focuses on both language (English) discipline and also other disciplines at the secondary level education system of Bangladesh. The present study mainly focuses on grade six and grade seven learners of Bangladesh as its target participants considering their English and other courses as subject matter of observation and discussion by evaluating overall wellbeing of the learners, their motivation and anxiety to learn. The study finds out the impact of a gradeless continuous assessment system on the participant learners.

Research Methodology:

It is a discursive qualitative study to explore how learner psychology is impacted by the gradeless criterion-referenced assessment system. In this study, interview questionnaire is used to collect data from both teachers and learners of class six and seven, as they are the ones' whose curriculum has been changed first in the last year into this new continuous assessment system, and so they have more experience on the existing system than the ones' whose curriculum have just changed this year. The researchers have taken interviews of 80 individuals including 30 teachers and 50 learners via phone calls, in-person conversations as per the availability of the concerned persons from the various institutions of different districts of Bangladesh e.g. Dhaka, Chittagang, Rangpur, Shariatpur, Rangamati, Feni, Chandpur, Sirajganj by using convenience sampling technique. Though all these districts' are not the summation of Bangladesh, they can provide a comprehensive overview of the present scenario of teaching-learning and the impact of that teaching-learning in the concerned area, as those districts not only represent the current status of teaching-learning situations in the city but also outside the city including the hilly-tracts of Rangamati, where the teachers and the learners all are concerned about the current tradition of

education, its goals, and its probable outcomes. Interviews are taken from both teachers and learners, as their combined information all together can provide a deeper look into the current system. In this study two affective factors; motivation and anxiety along with classroom engagement, teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships, meaning (sense of belonging to a particular group), and accomplishment from PERMA theory (that comprehensively draws on the psychological aspects of the learners giving the philosophical standing to the existence of learners in the process of learning) are taken into account to conduct the exploration study in the desired area. Interview questionnaires are prepared in the discussion areas of- learner motivation, anxiety, engagement, (positive) relationship, meaning, and accomplishment and responses are noted down for analysis, which are then presented in two tables entitled “Teacher Interview” and “Learner Interview” in the findings and discussion section, where each column represents each areas of discussion along with their appropriate reasons where necessary and each of these columns have their separate positive and negative rows of responses. The open-ended interview questionnaires are prepared by the researchers of the study following the basic inquiries and concerns mostly found in the news channels and newspapers regarding the ungrading system that every stakeholder of the teaching-learning system has pondered upon in the context of Bangladesh.

Findings and Discussion:

The findings of the interview questionnaires are shown in separate tables here drawing the summary of those interviews.

Teacher Interview:

	Motivation	Anxiety	Engagement	Relationship	Meaning	Accomplishment
No	No intrinsic or extrinsic motivation as no written exam	Zero anxiety No need to learn, will eventually get a triangle Unethicality by using unfair means (copying from internet, making home-tutors to do those tasks)	If one does good in a group, everyone will do so	T-L worsen (Manipulation e.g. controlling classroom behavior by using marks) L-L worsen (Conflict regarding the group work)	School is not a place to learn everyday chores, (then what is the role of family?)	Everyone is doing same, no distinction (Teachers are pressured to give triangle to every learners, as they are paying high tuition fees)

Yes	Intrinsic (learn for own-self) Extrinsic (have good result)	Facilitative Urging the need to do good	Everyone is invested to complete the task	T-L improve L-L improve (Collaborative, cooperative, mutual)	Leadership	Sole-achievement No tuition especially right before the exam
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Learner Interview:

	Motivation	Anxiety	Engagement	Relationship	Meaning	Accomplishment
No	Nothing to learn here (Mark is in hands of teachers, will read private to them and get triangle)	Do not need to worry about examination	Detached from reading books will get triangle by simple pretension (Addiction to digital devices)	T-L worsen (It may create some exchange value that can be instigated by the both parties concerned) L-L (envy each other for being expert in particular areas)	Only one person is doing the whole group work alone, because others are not helping or s/he believes others will downgrade her/him	Without contributing anything to the group work, will get the equal marks as others
Yes	Intrinsic (Learn for myself, good result will eventually follow)	Facilitative Need to learn peers' expertise to become successful	Will genuinely engage to learn more new reference works to increase knowledge	T-L improve (really evaluate learners' worth) L-L improve (Collaboration in group work)	Dividing the group according to individual learners' expertises	Individuals will develop their own expertise instead of working in their own area of lackings

From the findings and discussion of the data, it can be said that ungrading has both positive and negative impacts on learners. It can or cannot motivate learners to read, learn, and gain new knowledge. But it does not create any anxiety among learners, it does not facilitate competitiveness among

learners, rather it gives them a sense of belonging resulting in some facilitative tension to represent their individual groups well. It can or cannot enhance learner engagement, relationship, meaning, and accomplishment depending on the characteristics of the learner concerned. However, in the context of Bangladesh it has negatively impacted most of the learners at the secondary level, who are hardly interested in learning than the learners who have positively embraced this new method and realized the necessity of learning for their own sake. Thus, the negative impact of ungrading system is more severe than the positive impact of ungrading system in the area of the study.

Conclusion:

Depending on the characteristics of the learners, ungrading has both positive and negative impacts on learner psychology and learning motivation. In the existing traditional grading system of Bangladesh, learners have extrinsic motivation and facilitative anxiety to do well in the examination, and if there is no formal examination, then they will not have any facilitative anxiety and motivation to read, learn and do better in the examination. Hence, a gradeless continuous assessment system has a more negative impact on the learner's psychology and motivation. So, formal examination should not be completely excluded, but can be alternatively adapted to extrinsically motivate learners and provide for facilitative anxiety among them to do well in the examination.

Recommendations:

It is necessary to keep in mind the reality of a classroom and its limitations. Hence, continuous assessment should include formal final examination comprising written, practical and classroom performance evaluation activities. Practical examination may include real life situations, where learners are required to take action promptly and spontaneously by using their acquired learning from classroom activities. Classroom activities may mean daily classroom chores e.g. attending classes, learners' spontaneous participation in the classroom lessons and practices, participating in classroom activities, following proper classroom conducts and behaviors, as every class has a very limited time span to conduct extra activities other than the actual classroom learning. Teachers should have scope to add their ideas and thoughts as extra reference materials along with the provided materials in the assigned Teacher's Guide (TG).

Limitations of the study:

The findings of the study are context-specific to the secondary level education system of Bangladesh, limiting the scope of generalizability to the other levels of education. This interview based qualitative research has limitation in being a self-reported data that may contain item-bias or response bias, as self-reported proficiency may hide inferiority complex of the participants that may contribute to the core research questions. This study is not a yes/no hypothesis driven study, but an exploration study that explores and comprehends the impact of ungrading system. Due to the time limitations, the researchers have to use both in-person and phone-call interviews depending on the availability and the base areas of participants concerned. This study does not sum up the whole scenario of ungrading in Bangladesh, rather it tries to assemble various views and experiences from some limited number of participants, who have been influenced (positively or negatively) by the recent continuous assessment system.

Suggestions for further study:

This study has focused on various areas of ungrading concerning learner psychology and motivation in an integrative manner. So this integration is important highlighting different aspects of concern, whereas, it can be more focused by concentrating the study only on a particular aspect of concern and shade light on it more thoroughly, e.g. discussing the impact of ungrading on anxiety, or motivation, or any of the one aspect of PERMA theory. Hence, it is expected that the future researchers should be more focused and thorough going in their choice of research question by choosing only one of the required aspect of psychology and examine impact of ungrading system on it in details.

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Appendices:

Appendix (A): Interview Questions for Teachers

1. What is your opinion on this new gradeless continuous assessment system?
2. What changes have you observed in student engagement and participation since implementing ungrading?
3. In what ways has ungrading influenced the student-teacher relationship in your classroom?
4. How do you perceive the impact of ungrading on learner motivation and anxiety?
5. What challenges, if any, have you faced in adopting an ungrading approach in your classroom?
6. How do you provide feedback to students under the ungrading system, and how do students respond to this feedback?
7. What impact do you think ungrading has on learners' learning styles and adaptability to the new curriculum?

8. How do you measure student learning and progress in the absence of traditional grades?

Appendix (B): Interview Questions for Learners:

1. How has ungrading changed your approach to learning?
2. What impact has ungrading had on your motivation and anxiety level in the subject matter you are learning?
3. How do you perceive the feedback you receive under the ungrading system, and how does it influence your learning?
4. Have you noticed any differences in your relationships with teachers since the introduction of ungrading? If so, what are they?
5. How has ungrading affected your self-confidence, self-effacing and sense of belonging in your academic work?
6. What challenges and benefits, if any, have you found while adapting to the ungrading system?
7. In what ways has ungrading impacted your interaction and collaboration with peers in the classroom?
8. How has ungrading influenced your classroom engagement and participation?