

Effects of Rubrics in ESL (speaking and writing) Assessment: A Case Study

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Abstract: The instructional value of rubrics for promoting student learning and aiding teacher feedback to student performance has been studied extensively. This paper investigates the effects of rubrics in the ESL context; specially speaking and writing task assessment. Forty eight students attending an English Language undergraduate program at BAU, Mymensingh grouped into two as controlled group and experimental group participated in this study. Students' performance at pre-test was compared with that of the post-test (with prior knowledge of rubrics only for experimental group). Statistical analysis paired sample t-test was used to compare the performance of the students on the use of rubrics at their posttest. Results showed that the rubric was perceived as useful for fostering the students' speaking and writing development by guiding them through the stages of goal-setting, planning, self-monitoring and self-reflection. The paper also reports a significant impact of the rubrics use on students' self-assessment.

Keywords: Scoring rubrics, writing and speaking, assessment, ESL setting.

INTRODUCTION

The expectations are lost in translation between teacher and student due to two different minds. Students are planning to highlight some aspects in their performance while teachers have something different in their minds. Rubrics communicate between student and teacher, bridge expectations and highlight learning objectives for the assignment.

By using rubrics, teachers are able to bridge a gap with students what their expectations are and how they will be graded. Rubrics are typically the specific form of scoring instrument, a coherent set of criteria for students' work that includes descriptions of levels of performance quality on the criteria, used when evaluating students' performances or products resulting from a performance task [1]. Rubrics are explicitly set standard to be used for assessing a particular type of work or performance and provide more details than a single grade or mark for a defined population. The importance of rubrics in enhancing students' ability to communicate their ideas effectively, especially in writing, is stressed by Jaidev [2] and according to Jaidev, 'knowledge of rubrics also helps students become more accountable for their own writing, and it allows them to gain a greater sense of ownership of what they have written' (p.1). When given a rubric to students, they know exactly what is expected and how things are scored. It is important for a teacher to let their students know how they will be graded so students can set expectations for themselves as they are doing assignments or projects or composing an essay.

However, as 'rubrics are not self-explanatory' teachers need to explain those to students [3]. Students' understanding of rubrics is stressed again in a study by

Andrade, Du and Wang [4] which tested the effects of a scoring rubric on self-assessment of students' writing. Dochy, Gijbels, & Segers, [5] addressed a shift from traditional testing practices towards more authentic assessment of students' learning in educational institutions.

Andrade described rubrics are easy and useful tools of teaching, assessment and save time spent on instructing and evaluating student work. Students become more thoughtful judges of the quality of their work as well as their peers. Value of instructional rubrics in teaching, learning and assessment is stressed by Andrade [6], who shows that if carefully designed, rubrics help students to understand the goal of an assignment and support teachers in unbiased grading, giving feedback and assigning more challenging work to students.

Rubric is a useful tool for keeping consistency between the scoring of the same assignments among different students at the time of assessing students work. One could say that scoring with a rubric is more reliable than scoring without one [7]. Thus, it works as regulatory device for scoring and brings consistency.

The importance of students' understanding of rubrics is stressed again in a study by Andrade, Du and Wang [4] which tested the effects of a scoring rubric on self-assessment of students' writing. The study found that the quality of students' writing was positively related to their use of a rubric for self-assessment. It stressed the value of involvement of students in generating criteria for assessment using model papers.

If students are made aware of the rubrics, the expected level of performance will be known and become more motivated to learn and reach those standards. Rubrics can make the targets of instruction clear, especially for problem solving, group process skills, and writing [8].

Using rubrics provide the opportunity for self-assessment and peer-assessment as well. After the completion of students' projects or assignments, the teacher has a scope disbursing the assignment to different students to compare the assignment to the rubric. It is advantageous for students who learn how to give and receive feedback [9]. With specific guidelines right in front of them, students can grade other students with less bias. Teachers can allow students to grade other students since there are specific guidelines and instructions for how to score the assignments. Thus, rubrics help closing the gap between student-assessment and teacher-assessment. Students are more likely to be true with their assessment on themselves than they would be on peer students.

As Andrade, Du and Wang [4] point out, there is a dearth of studies done in the area of rubrics and hence there is 'limited empirical evidence' to support the claim that rubrics can promote learning and achievement. The number of empirical studies that can be found is limited to three [10, 11, 3] and these studies are also limited to the skill of writing. The literature on rubrics states that the detailed feedbacks provided by these are useful for guiding the improvement of Second Language (SL) at an aggregate as well as at an individual student level [12, 13].

Objectives & Justification

Good rubrics help teachers avoiding confusion with the task or activity with the learning goal and help be focused on criteria, not tasks. To students, rubrics clarify the qualities their work should have. Thus, rubrics help teachers teach, they help coordinate instruction and assessment, and they help students learn.

The present study carried out

- To determine the effects of rubrics on ESL students' performance in speaking and writing tasks at a tertiary level in ESL setting.

- To measure students' speaking and writing accuracy before and after participating in the study.
- To justify students' self-assessment on the use of rubrics.

It is strongly believed that rubrics help students in developing speaking and writing skills and is the most objective way of evaluating and measuring students' language proficiency i.e. speaking and writing. Limited research or studies have been conducted separately on the effects of rubrics on writing skills and very rare to find focusing on the speech performance using rubrics. Empirical research on the effects of rubrics on speaking performance must be addressed and stressed to minimize the gap how rubrics effect the self-assessment of the students at the tertiary level in ESL setting. Therefore, this study is worth investigating mainly to find the rubrics effects on students speaking and writing development as well as self-assessment.

METHODOLOGY

A. Design

This study employs the pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design. Two groups (controlled 23 and experimental 25) were assigned selected from Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh. A pre-test was conducted which tested students' speech and writing performance prior to find out their initial levels in the dependent variables (speaking and writing accuracy) to their exposure to six-hour instruction. During the experiment, the experimental group was exposed to six-hour theoretical instruction on the use of rubrics. In case of controlled group, they just received a theoretical instruction without rubrics. At the end of the instruction, both the groups were post tested.

B. Participants

Forty eight undergraduate students of B. Sc. Agri. Econ (Hons.) level -1 Semester-1 (January-June/2016) participated in this study. They were divided into two groups (controlled and experimental) depending on their scores in the pretests of speaking and writing accuracy.

C. Instrument

To accomplish the objectives of the study, scoring rubrics having five parts of 5 point ordinal scale (see Appendix A & B for speech and writing rubrics) were designed both for speaking and writing task. The first tests included two questions involved students speaking and writing at pretest section, a session of two hours, for writing an essay within one hour and rest of the time for speaking. In second test, students required to deliver a speech and a writing task in a two-hour session. The test was administered within a two-week interval between the two tests. Same tasks (see Appendix C for tasks) were assigned to both the groups

in pre and posttests (students were unaware of giving same questions) and were evaluated by the same teacher using the rubrics and the students self-assessed their work. One of my colleagues ranked Assistant Professor performed the task as evaluators and was briefed about the study.

A questionnaire of five-point (Likert) scale having five statements was also developed and administered for students' opinion regarding the use of rubrics (See appendix D).

Research Questions

Table-1: Paired samples t-test for the difference in the mean scores of the controlled & experimental group on the pre and posttest of writing accuracy

Writing	N	Mean	SD	D	t-value	Sig.	
Controlled group	23	Pre	18.84	2.9935	22	2.558	0.132
		Post	21.24	2.5304			
Experimental group	25	Pre	21.60	2.96	24	23.252	0.000*
		Post	36.62	2.19			

As shown in Table 1, the paired samples t-test revealed insignificant difference ($t = 2.558, p > 0.05$) of the study in the controlled group mean scores and accepted that there is and was no statistically significant difference in the control group mean score on the pre and posttest of writing. Though there was a difference between the mean scores of the pre and post test in favor of the post test, yet, this difference is insignificant. This result may be due to the fact that

What impact does the exposure of rubrics have on ESL students' speech and writing performance? Does their understanding of rubrics have an impact on their self-assessment? Does the use of rubrics promote learning and/or improve instruction?

FINDINGS

Performance scores of the two groups in pre and posttests were compared using statistical t-test. The questionnaire and experimental group's performance score prior to the post-test were also analysed for evidence of knowledge of rubrics.

with the absence of rubric the control group was prevented from knowing and as a result their writing accuracy was not improved.

The study in the experimental group mean scores on the pre and the posttest of writing accuracy in paired samples t- test which revealed a significant difference ($t = 23.252, p < 0.05$), in favor of the posttest as depicted in table 1.

Table-2: Independent samples t-test for the difference in the mean gain scores of the control and experimental groups on the pre and posttest of writing accuracy

Writing	N	Mean Gain Score	t-value	Sig.
Controlled Group	23	0.913	22.73	0.000*
Experimental Group	25	16.840		

In an attempt to determine whether any change in writing accuracy from pre to posttest was greater for one group rather than the other, the independent samples t-test was used between the two groups, employing a gain score in writing accuracy for each of the participants in the study.

As shown in Table 2, a statistically significant difference existed between the mean gain score of the controlled group and that of the experimental group in writing performance ($t = 22.73, p < 0.05$) in favor of the experimental group. This result could be attributed to the beneficial effects of rubrics.

Table-3: Paired samples t-test for the difference in the mean scores of the controlled & experimental group on the pre and posttest of speaking accuracy

Speaking	N	Mean	SD	D	t-value	Sig.	
Controlled Group	23	pre	16.62	2.7713	20	2.336	0.112
		post	19.02	2.3304			
Experimental Group	25	pre	19.40	2.74	22	23.231	0.000*
		post	34.40	2.09			

In the table above, the paired samples t-test of controlled group reveals insignificant difference ($t = 2.336, p > 0.05$). Though a difference is visible between the mean scores of the pre and post test in favor of the post test, yet, this difference is insignificant. Whereas,

experimental group reveals a significant difference ($t = 23.231, p < 0.05$), in favor of the posttest as shown in the above table. The above table shows positive effects of rubrics on student's performance in achieving speaking accuracy.

Table- 4: Independent samples t-test for the difference in the mean gain scores of the control and experimental groups on the pre and posttest of speaking accuracy

Speaking	N	Mean Gain Score	t-value	Sig.
Controlled Group	23	0.903	21.51	0.000*
Experimental Group	25	14.621		

To determine whether any change in speaking accuracy from pre to posttest was greater for one group rather than the other, independent samples t-test between the two groups, were used employing a gain score in speaking accuracy for each of the participants in the study.

Statistically significant difference existed between the mean gain score of the control group and that of the experimental group in speaking performance ($t = 21.51, p < 0.05$) in favor of the experimental group and it is believed that rubric provided a greater impact on the speaking accuracy of the experimental group.

Students’ self-assessment

To the open-ended question ‘what do you think your teacher consider while marking your tasks? Most of the students in experimental group who were given instruction on the rubrics, mentioned most of the criteria in the rubrics (table 5 & 6) while the other group which received only theoretical instruction had only a few students talked about the contents of the rubrics. More than 90% students gave positive response and appreciated the criteria of the rubrics as well as the guidance they received from the rubrics. The respondents from controlled group contributed saying if they had given instruction on rubrics, they would have done well in the test.

Table-5: Response to Contents of the Rubric at Post-Test – Speaking (shown in %)

Criterion	Experimental Group	Controlled Group
Content and Relevance	90	32
Structure	70	21
Audibility	68	15
Gestures	55	16
Eye Contact	60	12
Confidence	78	32

Table-6: Response to Contents of the Rubric at the Post-Test – Writing (shown in %)

Criterion	Experimental Group	Controlled Group
Relevance and Content	95	22
Organisation	90	17
Vocabulary	95	15
Grammar	87	22
Spelling	68	6
Mechanics	78	6
Presentation-Handwriting	60	3
Presentation-Neatness	60	3
Writing Style	72	0

Regarding the use of rubrics (questionnaire appendix D), around 75% participants expressed their strong agreement that rubrics helped them perform better. It is also noted that when they were asked about whether rubrics helped them to determine teacher’s expectation; about 80% respondents strongly agreed which was followed by 15% people who simply agreed. In addition, there was almost similar percentage of participants –80% -who strongly agreed that rubrics made them autonomous and creative. Therefore, it could be said that a significant percentage of the students agreed with most of the points–proving true the

hypothesis of this research that rubrics do have remarkable impacts on the self-assessment of students.

DISCUSSION

The data analysis given above showed that the group which received rubrics performed significantly better than the group without rubrics. The experimental group showed a high positive effect of rubrics on speaking and writing performance at post-test.

Another important finding of the study was that students’ self-assessment which was far different from teachers’ assessment of their work at the pre-test,

changed considerably in the experimental group at the post-test. The self-assessed scores of this group which received detailed explanation of the rubrics showed a high correlation with the scores of the teacher at the post-test.

The experimental group's written products and speech had evidence of their attempts to use the rubrics given and the group became more motivated and more focused than did the members of controlled group in their activities in both the tasks. According to the evaluator, students of experimental group showed high interest in using the rubrics and they seemed to be aiming to achieve the highest level in the rubrics.

Pedagogic Implication

The findings reveal that care is needed in designing rubrics with thorough explanation. It is also necessary to provide constant guidance and training to the users of rubrics if they are to bring positive outcomes in teaching, learning and assessment. Again, additional explanation or detailed rubrics might be

related to the threatening atmosphere of rubrics to students or very few students are capable of writing at a high level. In fact, overemphasis may lead students to perform tasks in a stressed condition. Care must be taken in developing rubrics, since universal rubrics are not available or there are no standardized set rules which vary from evaluator or institution. In addition, rubrics require a high level of training in their usage by the evaluator in order to apply what the rubrics say to the essays/ writing or speech performance being evaluated.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the rubrics have the potential clearly indicate achievement criteria across all the components of any kind of student work, from written to oral promoting learning and/or improving instruction, at least as perceived by the teachers and students are using them. Rubrics support learning and make instruction explicit to achieve better outcomes from users and thus facilitate feedback and students' self-assessment.

Appendix A: Rubrics for Assessing Speech

	5	4	3	2	1
Content and Relevance Support Focus	Fully satisfies the requirements of the task. Understands the audience. Supports the points with enough examples. Clear focus is maintained throughout the speech.	Mostly covers all the requirements of the task. Understands the audience. Supports most of the points with examples. Clear focus.	Addresses some of the requirements of the task. Some points are supported with examples. Some digression from the topic.	Attempts to address the requirements but few relevant information. Digresses often from the topic. Structure not clear.	Does not attempt the task/Insufficient and irrelevant information
Structure	Clear structure starting with an attention getter, introduction to the topic, body which supports the topic and a conclusion which summarises the main points.	Uses an introduction, body with some supporting examples, and conclusion but there may not be an interesting attention getter.	Attempts to structure with an introduction but fails to maintain structure.	Attempts an introduction. No clear structure.	No structure
Approach/ Delivery Eye contact Audibility Pace Gestures	Maintains good eye contact. Speaks with appropriate volume and pace. Uses appropriate gestures.	Maintains eye contact. Audible. Uses appropriate gestures.	Audible but there may be little eye contact.	May have considerable strain on the listener. Lot of pausing and hesitation.	Speech incomprehensible
Phrase/ Word Choice	Word choice appropriate to the audience.	There may be occasional inappropriacies in word choice.	Some inappropriacies and inaccuracies in word choice.	Inappropriate and inaccurate word choice.	Totally inappropriate.
Rediness and confidence	Appeared well prepared, confident and comfortable.	Seemed fairly comfortable and confident but needs a bit more practice.	Seems somewhat prepared but needs more practice to build confidence	Inadequate preparation. Needs practice to build confidence.	Not prepared

Appendix B: Rubrics for Assessing Writing

	5	4	3	2	1
Relevance and Content	Fully satisfies the requirements of the given task. Includes all relevant information.	Mostly covers the requirements of the given task. Includes most of the relevant information.	Addresses some of the requirements. Includes some relevant information but not clearly focused.	Attempts to address the topic but few relevant information. Digresses often from the topic.	Does not attempt the task/the answer is completely irrelevant.
Organisation	Includes an inviting introduction and a satisfactory conclusion. Skillfully manages paragraphing. Logical arrangement of ideas. Manages all aspects of cohesion well.	Includes an introduction, body and conclusion. Uses paragraphing successfully. Uses a range of cohesive devices but may look mechanical.	Attempts to include an introduction, body and conclusion. Main idea is not clearly supported with details. Less attention given to organization. Rare use of transitions.	Begins abruptly. No paragraphing or inappropriate paragraphing. No attempt to maintain logical arrangement of ideas.	No clear message is communicated.
Vocabulary and Word Choice	Uses a sophisticated range of vocabulary which is appropriate for the purpose and audience. May use figurative language.	Uses accurate vocabulary which suits the audience and purpose with a mixture of precise and general words. Occasional errors in word choice.	Uses a fair range of vocabulary to express ideas. May be inappropriate for the audience and purpose at some occasions.	Uses a limited range of vocabulary. Mostly inaccurate for the purpose and audience.	Inappropriate and inaccurate vocabulary.
Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation	Uses a variety of grammatically correct sophisticated sentence structures. Perfect spelling and accurate punctuation.	Uses mostly correct sentence structures with 1-2 mistakes. Correct spelling and appropriate punctuation with occasional errors.	Uses basic sentence structures with some errors. Uses spelling and punctuation with some errors.	Uses mostly sentence fragments with frequent errors. Frequent errors in spelling and punctuation.	Writing incomprehensible.
Presentation	Neat, easy to read, error free	Mostly readable, neat, minimum errors	Fairly readable. Some strain on the reader.	Not clear. Considerable strain on the reader.	Illegible.

Appendix C: Tasks –Post-test

Writing Task

You should spend about 50 minutes on this task.

Write an essay on the following topic:

More and more people are moving away from an agricultural background to relocate to cities in order to look for work. What will be the consequences of this? What solutions can you offer/ suggest? You should write at least 250 words.

Speaking Task

Give a speech on Perilous Plastic Bags

Your speech should be 5 minutes long and it should include

- A description of the problem
- Steps that can be taken in prevention and control
- Role of the student community in prevention and control of this hazard.

Appendix D: Students' Opinion on the Rubrics use (only for experimental group)

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Rubrics determines what teacher wants from the task.					
Rubrics help to perform better.					
Rubrics help to assess ourselves.					
Rubrics encourage learner autonomy and self-reflective.					

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