Impact of rubrics on students' self-assessment and overall performance in an EAP writing course

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of rubric use on students' self-assessment and overall performance in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing course. Recognizing the complexity of academic writing, which requires substantial guidance and effort, the research examines how rubrics can help align students' self-assessments with instructor's and / or program expectations. The study involved six students from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds who participated in multiple rounds of rubric-related assessments and following reflective activities. The findings suggest that consistent use of rubrics can significantly enhance students' understanding of writing criteria, improve the correlation between student and instructor evaluations, and consequently lead to better writing outcomes. However, certain challenges such as lower proficiency levels, time constraints, or lack of interest / motivation may limit students' ability to fully comprehend and utilize rubrics effectively while performing a writing task. The research highlights the need for clear and measurable rubric descriptors to support students' comprehension, additionally to providing multiple writing samples for reference and allowing adequate practice time. These insights contribute to the ongoing discussion on rubric effectiveness in General English Language Teaching (General ELT) and EAP settings, offering practical suggestions how to improve academic writing instruction and bridge the gap between students' performance and instructor's and/ or program expectations.

Keywords: Academic writing, English for academic purposes, Rubrics, Self-Assessment, Writing instruction, Writing performance.

Contents

Contribution of this paper to the literature
This study investigates the correlation between the use of rubrics and students' self-assessment in an EAP writing course. It provides new insights into how consistent rubric application impacts students' self-evaluation and performance, offering practical solutions for enhancing academic writing instruction through self-regulation and rubric clarity.

1. Introduction

The role of writing cannot be underestimated since it has become one of the main means of communication in the academic world due to an uninterrupted exchange of written texts of various genres (Alexander, Argent, & Spencer, 2019; Charles & Pecorari, 2016; Jordan, 2012). Academic writing skills are viewed as "the currency" (Alexander et al., 2019) needed for transition from one level to another and demonstrating personal accomplishments in a particular field. Being a high-stakes skill, academic writing is quite difficult to develop both by first and second language learners since it requires considerable time and effort and adequate feedback from instructors or audiences (Alexander et al., 2019; Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Jordan, 2012). One of the ways to support students' writing is via using rubrics. They are usually defined as "the instructions which indicate to the student what he or she has to do to complete a task or activity" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). So, it seems that rubrics are bound to communicate expectations, provide feedback on both writing in progress and final products (Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008; Barney, Khurum, Petersen, Unterkalmsteiner, & Jabangwe, 2011; Sundeen, 2014). This raises the question if rubrics can positively impact learners' self-assessment and, consequently, improve their overall performance. According to Andrade et al. (2008) rubrics might promote learning and, thus, improve the quality of writing; however, this statement has very limited empirical evidence to support it and, consequently, needs more research. To answer the above-mentioned question, this paper will discuss the existing research on rubrics, explore the importance of students' engagement into assessment and self-assessment, and analyze the impact of rubrics on self-assessment and overall performance in an EAP writing class.

2. Literature Review

Research on rubrics is voluminous and covers various areas such as writing and language learning (Andrade, 2001; Andrade et al., 2008; Saddler & Andrade, 2004; Sundeen, 2014; Treve, 2021; White, 2015) examinations (McDonald & Boud, 2003) and sciences (Barney et al., 2011; Stallings & Tascione, 1996). Being multifaceted, rubric studies have both supporters and critics (Panadero & Jonsson, 2020). The major problems raised by the opponents refer to standardization of the assessment since rubrics provide "simple lists of criteria for complex skills and creating a tendency [...] to guide [...] actions toward those criteria" (Panadero & Jonsson, 2020) as well as instrumentalism and criteria compliance when students tend to focus on meeting the standards with minimum effort instead of taking risks and developing their skills beyond the aspects specified by rubrics (Kohn, 2006; Panadero & Jonsson, 2020; Wolf & Stevens, 2007). Then, there is need for a deeper analysis and understanding of rubrics because both instructors and learners require extensive practice in using them (Andrade, 2005; Sadler, 2014). Last but not least, the assessment criteria are usually limited and do not account for all possible situations because not all aspects can be clearly articulated (Kohn, 2006; Panadero & Jonsson, 2020; Sadler, 2009).

Whereas these concerns are valid, the rubric supporters claim that the advantages still outweigh the disadvantages. One of the major conclusions is that rubrics, used for grading students' work and providing more reliable feedback (Sundeen, 2014) can also serve another meaningful purpose – they can become a part of instruction (Andrade et al., 2008; Torrance, 2007; Treve, 2021) and promote students' learning and growth. "An important goal in writing instruction is to help students develop the self-regulation skills needed to successfully manage the intricacies of the writing process" (Saddler & Andrade, 2004). Rubrics are expected to communicate clear criteria to guide students on whether they are meeting the expectations or what is needed for further improvement (Barney et al., 2011; Saddler & Andrade, 2004; White, 2015). When explained in detail and practiced regularly, the rubrics also perform the function of closing the gap between the teacher's view on the quality of writing and the students' self-assessment (Andrade, 2007; Barney et al., 2011; Panadero et al., 2022) by turning students into "responsible partners" (Stiggins, 2001) and helping them to adequately evaluate their work. So, what is self-assessment and why is it so important in the learning process?

"Self-assessment is a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on the quality of their work, judge the degree to which it reflects explicitly stated goals or criteria, and revise accordingly" (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). Advocates of self-assessment believe that rubrics may empower learners by allowing them to control and enhance their learning, keep them motivated, and achieve their goals (Andrade, 2007; Andrade, 2001, 2006; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Glazer, 2014; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Even though it is important to explain the rubric (Andrade, 2001) obviously, it is not enough since students can only then become "a useful source of feedback via self-assessment" (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009) when they are actively involved and given a chance to keep practicing self-assessment on multiple drafts (Andrade, 2006). Thus, the main goal lies in involving students into doing their own assessment to make them realize where they stand and what needs to be done to further improve their work, thus, self-assessment turns into learning (James, 2002, cited in (Torrance, 2007; White, 2015)). This study will analyze the impact of rubrics on students' self-assessment and overall performance. To achieve this, it is necessary to better understand the teaching context and the profile of the students participating in the study.

3. Research

3.1. Program Overview and Student Profile

The English program under consideration offers six levels, the highest three are EAP. The course being reviewed is Grammar and Writing Level Five which comprises four outcomes (Compose a Text to Describe Data Presented in a Visual Form, Compose a Summary of Academic Text, Produce a Literature Review Text, and Compose a Persuasive Essay) and runs seven hours a week for four months. Each of the outcomes has its own formal formative and summative exams. To pass the course, the students need to score at least 60% overall.

The students taking the course come from different cultural and academic backgrounds and are between pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. Some of the learners are enrolled in the course to improve their English skills and are financed by the government, whereas others are self-paying and aim at entering a degree-level program. The group of students who initially agreed to participate in the study consisted of 15 people; however, only 6 completed all required steps of the research.

3.2. Research Procedures

The study involved both qualitative and quantitative methods and consisted of five stages with students' and researcher's active involvement. The focus of Stage 1 was to collect information about students' experience with and their attitudes towards using rubrics in a writing class. The pool comprised six learners who consented to participate in the study. The participants answered questions regarding the frequency and consistency of using rubrics while preparing for the exam and whether they agreed that understanding rubrics could increase their score in the summative exam. During Stage 2, I, the researcher, presented the rubric used by the department and applied it to assessing a writing sample. The students were encouraged to ask rubric-related questions and contribute to the explanations. Then, in Stage 3, study participants were given a graph description sample to assess its every aspect by using the above-mentioned rubric. After the submission of the grades, the students were offered to review teacher's comments to check if their assessments matched that of the instructor. At this point, students could ask additional questions they had. So, Stages 2 and 3 aimed at closing the gap between the teacher's view on the quality of writing and students' self-assessment (Andrade, 2007; Barney et al., 2011; Panadero et al., 2022). In Stage 4, participants assessed their own piece of writing applying the same rubric. Thus, Stages 2 to 4 were performed according to Andrade (2001) and Stiggins (2001) recommendations on how to familiarize students with the rubrics and provide them with additional ongoing practice to better understand the criteria and learn how to apply those.

The final stage, Stage 5, was dedicated to students' reflections. The learners were encouraged to complete a post-study questionnaire and express their opinions if assessing samples of writing clarified the instructors' expectations of the quality of writing. Then, the participants were asked to explain which piece of writing was easier to assess (someone else's or their own), what section(s) was (were) the easiest and the most difficult to assess, and what questions they still had. After active students' involvement was completed, I calculated the correlation coefficient between the researcher's and students' assessments after Stage 3 (assessing a sample of writing) and Stage 4 (assessing one's own writing) to see the dynamics and if there was a positive increase which would suggest that the participants better understood the rubric and could apply it more efficiently while analyzing their own writing. Afterwards, the students' formative and summative grades were analyzed to check if the consistent rubric application could be one of the factors contributing to the grade increase.

3.3. Research Results

As expected, the pre-study survey revealed the overall positive attitude towards rubrics since all participants stated that understanding rubrics could help to score higher on the summative exam.

3. Do you agree with the statement that understanding rubric can help you get a higher score on the summative exam?
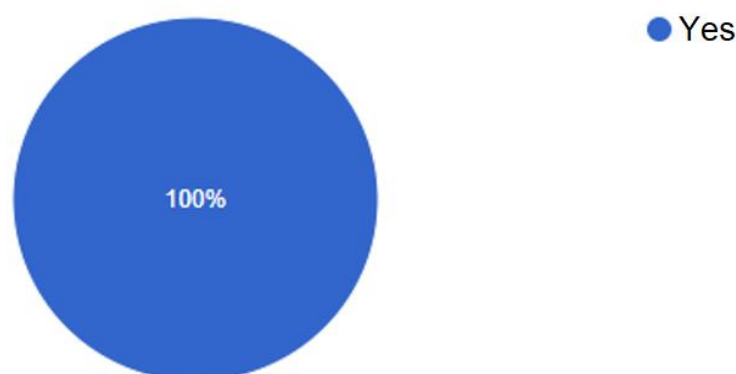
6 responses

● Yes

100%

Figure 1. Students' attitudes towards using rubrics in a writing class: questions and responses.

Figure 1 illustrates that all participants agreed with the statement that understanding rubrics could help increase their score on the summative exam. This can be explained by the fact that the students have been attending the program for several terms and have learned the importance of rubrics in previous courses. Additionally, five out of six study participants stated that they used rubrics to prepare for the exam and asked teachers for clarifications. Some of the comments referred to the fact that rubrics could help with understanding requirements, analyzing problematic areas, and increasing the final score, e.g. "what is needed to score a higher mark", "…clarifies the expectations to be followed for a good result", how to "improve […] writing skills", "I was able to understand how to write better in summative exam". Surprisingly, one student claimed never to check the rubric or ask for clarifications.

Even though the first individual attempt to assess a piece of writing happened after explaining the aspects of the rubric and, thus, was not a completely new experience, the results demonstrated a discrepancy between each student's individual assessment and that of the teacher.

Table 1. Assessing a sample of writing. comparison of students' and teacher's grades and correlation coefficient.

Area	Instructor's grade	Student one	Student two	Student three	Student four	Student five	Student six
Organization	3.5	3	3	4	3	3	3
Cohesion	3.5	3	3	3	3	3	5
Style	4.5	4	2	2	3	2	5
Content	4.5	8	6	5	6	6	10
Grammar and vocabulary	6.5	6	6	4	6	6	5
Mechanical accuracy	3	3	2	3	3	3	3
Correlation coefficient		0.63	0.73	0.26	0.77	0.67	0.33

Table 1 compares the students' and teacher's assessments and shows their correlation coefficient. Interestingly, the lowest correlation coefficient ranged from 0.26 to 0.33 (two students), whereas the highest one was between 0.63 to 0.77 (four learners). The most challenging areas seemed to be style, content, and grammar and vocabulary.

The next attempt to assess writing, this time the students' own piece, was more successful.

Table 2. Differences in correlation coefficients of students' and teacher's grades after the first and second assessments.

Student	Correlation coefficient of 1st assessment (Of another Person's writing)	Correlation coefficient of the 2nd assessment (Of students' own writing)
One	0.63	0.89
Two	0.73	0.95
Three	0.26	0.96
Four	0.77	0.96
Five	0.67	0.97
Six	0.33	0.95

Table 2 analyzes correlation coefficients after the first and second assessment attempts. This time, the correlation coefficient varied between 0.89 and 0.97 with five out of six students scoring over 0.95 which demonstrated a significant improvement. This could imply that students better understood how to apply each of the rubric aspects to assessing a piece of writing and what features of writing were required for a particular grade range.

Table 3. Students' formative vs summative grade (Teacher-performed assessment).

Student	Formative assessment	Summative assessment
One	69	73
Two	82	77
Three	75	90
Four	82.5	88
Five	80	80
Six	73	78
Mean	77	81

Table 3 compares students formative and summative assessment grades. The data demonstrate that students were able to improve some aspects of their writing to increase the overall grade because the mean rose from 77 for the formative assessment to 81 for the summative one. The student with the lower score was the one who had claimed to never check rubrics or ask for clarifications and experienced difficulties with the correctness of describing graph details (content) and grammar / vocabulary. Bukhari, Jamal, Ismail, and Shamsuddin (2021) suggest that students who do not refer to rubrics are more likely to rely on their own assessment strategies than external feedback.

The post-study survey revealed that students' experience with using rubrics during the research was positive because 83.3% of students stated that assessing samples of writing clarified the expectations and helped improve their own writing. Interestingly, the same percentage stated that it was easier to assess their own writing than somebody else's. The easiest sections were organization, style, and mechanical accuracy scoring 83.3%, 66.7%, and 50% respectively, whereas the most challenging ones were cohesion (66.7%) and grammar and accuracy (66.7%). Some of the comments were very general, e.g. "not clear how to give a mark sometimes" or "I do not have enough knowledge". This might be the case since the assessment scale provides a range of possible scores for all levels which are "fails to meet expectations", "below expectations", "meets expectations", and "exceeds expectations". Whereas it might not affect the grade for such categories as mechanical accuracy, organization, cohesion, or style, it could be hard to decide on the scores for content and grammar and vocabulary where the range for assessment lies between 2 and 5, 6 and 7, and 8 and 10 points. Thus, the research participants suggested extending the rubric with possible examples for every section to provide better comprehension of what score to give in what situation.

Additionally, some students were more specific and explained that the difficulties were caused by the lack of grammar and vocabulary knowledge or because it was hard to organize "ideas, contents, and styles". So, they questioned "how to tackle the grammar mistakes", especially if students' proficiency level was not adequately high.

4. Limitations and Further Research

First, the study involved only six students, so the student pool was not very wide. It would be beneficial to work with a more varied student body with different types and degrees of motivation, for example, not only those aiming at pursuing further academic degrees, but also those taking a course to enhance their proficiency level. This should help to ensure that the results are more reliable and there are no extremes.

Second, the research did not involve a control group of students who completed the tasks without using the rubric or without being taught how to use a rubric. However, according to Panadero et al. (2022) this created more realistic conditions since there is always feedback in the academic context.

Third, only one type of text (graph description) was assessed, and students practiced the process of assessment twice which might be insufficient for considerable quality changes in self-assessment and writing. It is advisable to either analyze the progression of learners' self-assessment skills while working on multiple pieces of one type of the text or different types of text throughout the whole course. Doing so will provide students with adequate time to understand rubric requirements and learn to better apply them to their own writing.

5. Conclusions

The study involved the questions if using rubrics positively impacts students' self-assessment and if it can improve their overall performance. The current research including highly motivated students suggests that rubrics should be used, explained, and applied in a writing course because they raise students' awareness of expectations and make them take responsibility for their own learning (Andrade et al., 2008; Saddler & Andrade, 2004; Torrance, 2007; Treve, 2021). The thorough analysis and regular application of rubrics can improve some aspects of students' writing such as "organization", "mechanical accuracy", possibly "style" and "cohesion" and potentially increase the final grade. This happens because learners approach the writing process more seriously and try to re-read and edit their pieces of writing, thus, becoming active participants of the learning process (Stiggins, 2001; Torrance, 2007). This conclusion also supports Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) that students will only then try to revise their work when they understand that the efforts will lead to improvements and a potential grade increase and if they are motivated to continue growing.

Despite the mentioned benefits, there are certain difficulties to consider. The first block relates to students. The major ones are those of time constraints and practicality. Usually, the duration of the courses in many settings does not allow sufficient time for adequate analysis and practice how to use rubrics for each of the outcomes. Sometimes, students seem to walk in the dark because they lack understanding of how to assess different categories. Often they approach them superficially only giving points randomly without trying to learn and improve (Kohn, 2006; Panadero & Jonsson, 2020; Torrance, 2007). Additionally, the process of using rubrics is a new and challenging experience, so not all are prepared to invest adequate time and effort into learning how to use the rubric and then consistently analyze their own writing. Evidence of this might be the fact that at the beginning of the study all 15 people agreed to participate; however, only 6 students completed the required steps. Another difficulty is associated with students' proficiency levels. The application of rubrics is likely to be more challenging for lower-level learners who usually find it difficult to notice and correct their own vocabulary, style, and grammar mistakes even if they understand what they are expected to complete.

The second block of suggestions is related to the rubric design and samples. It is recommended to change the marking criteria grid and avoid using a wide range of points for each category, especially when working with lower proficiency levels. The descriptors should be clear and measurable to avoid misinterpretation and confusion (Sadler, 2013; Wolf & Stevens, 2007). So, instead of allocating "0-1", "2-5", "6-7", and "8-10" for content and grammar and vocabulary, it would be more transparent to give "1", "2", "3", "4", and "5" instead. Finally, there should be multiple writing samples accompanied by the assessments to provide students with more information. When available, they will allow students to make frequent references to the existing samples, compare them to their own writing, and draw conclusions which will enhance their learning (Andrade et al., 2008).

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