

Rubrics in the EFL Classroom : a Fresh Look

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1 . Introduction

Understanding a teacher's expectations can be problematic for students. Furthermore, from a student's perspective, the assessment rationale may not be appreciated, nor arguably, even understood. Rubrics can provide a mechanism for teachers to reappraise their course design, ascertain if certain skill sets need to be taught, improve assessment transparency, and be a catalyst for student collaboration to improve learner autonomy.

In my classes, I have found inviting students to develop their own evaluation structure improves their motivation, interest, and performance in a project. For teachers wanting to empower their students by getting them more involved in the learning and assessment procedure, rubrics can provide the ideal mechanism.

Almost any kind of output can be assessed using a rubric, including essays, stories, presentations, and dialog. Basically, we can use rubrics to mark a wide range of student output that can also serve as an effective feedback form. Students can directly relate their output to a rubric form, thereby improving grading transparency and arguably raising student motivation to autonomously prepare for the task.

Rubric development takes time, but presents an opportunity for the teacher to appraise the rationale of the output. We need to ask ourselves what our goal is in any particular situation. What skill set am I asking the student to demonstrate? Do I need to teach a particular skill or requirement that would be reflected in the rubric?

2. Language Learning in Japan

In Japan, although language learning at secondary school is invariably mediated through their first language (L1), at universities, it is often experienced through the target language (L2), particularly in the case of English. Burden (2004) argues that students can lose motivation when they feel that the directions for a task may be unclear, and inevitably resort to taking shortcuts in their L1 to interact. If teachers want to improve motivation without sacrificing the medium of instruction, they need to ensure that their students are adequately prepared for attempting, let alone completing, tasks. Furthermore, as learning takes place inside student's heads, the perceived threat of the L2 classroom needs to be alleviated if the student is to be an active participant in L2-based learning.

Curricula in Japan are often based on norm-referenced testing (Kelly, 2009; Muta, 2006). One problem with this approach is that the temptation to teach to the test, rather than the curriculum, drives the learning process (Harnisch, 2009). Teachers would be better served by becoming assessment literate (White, 2009a; 2009b) and using the power of assessment to shape the courses we teach – and maximize, rather than just measure, student learning (ibid, 2009b; 5). A shift in assessment methods could provide the incentive your students need to become active participants in your classroom.

3. Assessment

The assessment process impacts heavily on learning. It influences the relationship that the student has with their peers, their teacher, and, of course, the subject matter they are expected to learn (Brookhart, 2003). Even though the assessment framework has such a huge impact on students, far larger than on teachers, most assessment is implemented with relatively little input from the students (Stefani, 1998).

Concerned educators are always on the outlook for methods that will assist them in becoming better at their job. An Internet search easily turns up a long list of articles reflecting on the concern that school leavers fail to have the appropriate skills needed for jobs in the marketplace. Skills such as problem solving, decision making, critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, organization, management, and leadership. Educators are responsible for students developing life-long learning skills (Weatherley et al., 2003 ; Rademacher, 2000), and as Reid (2007) argues, this can be somewhat achieved by negotiating assessment rubrics with students. Just as businesses are constantly looking for ways to improve their product, involving students in the assessment process not only gives learners a measure of control over their work, but it enables them to learn how to improve (Harnisch, 2009). Assessment is one of the key areas in which educators can communicate effective learning methods with their students.

Although learner empowerment has been a topic of concern for a number of years since Ryan (1988) developed a framework for conceptualizing assessment and evaluation, it has increasingly moved to the center of the debate on assessment (Harnisch, 2009 ; Laverty & Gregory, 2007 ; Falchikov, 2004 ; Prestidge and

Glaser, 2000 ; Gipps, 1999). Ryan (1988) drew on Habermas's three paradigms to develop a framework for conceptualizing assessment and evaluation ;

The *empirical-analytic* (a technical rationalist, logical positivist orientation) relates to traditional standardized measurement-based approaches to assessment. The *interpretive* (an orientation that aims to understand things from the student's point of view) includes "alternative" methods of assessment such as portfolios and concept mapping. The *critical-theoretic* (an orientation based on eliminating oppression in human relationships) would include student self-evaluation and collaboratively developed assessment rubrics (Gipps, 1999 ; 371).

If assessment can be used to clarify understanding between teacher and learner, and collaboration empowers learners, it follows that educators would be keen to consider alternative forms of assessment that would facilitate such empowerment. Watts (1996) detailed various assessment methods of communicating student learning in four categories. In particular, Watts believed the use of rubrics and self-assessment techniques would be effective for teachers who would want to work in partnership with their students for improved learning.

4. Do you need a Rubric ?

If you are learning for the first time what a rubric is, it may help you if you were to consider your current situation. If, for example, you are experiencing some of the following problems, it is likely that you would benefit from utilizing rubrics in your class. Are you ;

◆ Overwhelmed by the backlog of essays or reports that need marking on your

desk,

- ◆ You want your students to reflect on their coursework, but you are unsure how to communicate it to them,
- ◆ You feel there is a disconnection between your syllabus and your assessment,
- ◆ You find yourself continuously repeating coursework instructions to your students,
- ◆ Your students repeatedly revert to speaking in Japanese about the English coursework, yet still look confused,
- ◆ Your students remain passive, despite your energetic efforts to motivate them,
- ◆ You begin to worry when you are finishing some marking, that the scores for the first set of assignments is different from the last,
- ◆ Your students don't take responsibility for their learning,
- ◆ Despite all your comments on their coursework, your students don't understand why their friend got a better grade,
- ◆ You don't have time to write constructive comments on coursework,
- ◆ Your students make the same mistakes, despite having been told of the error : they don't seem to learn from their mistakes,
- ◆ Your students are starting to think you are trying to trick them with some incomprehensible assignment,
- ◆ You are starting to think they are right !

5 . What is a Rubric ?

A rubric is a scoring guide used to evaluate the quality of output. It lays out the specific expectations for an assignment (Stevens and Levi, 2005 ; Mertler, 2001).

Table 1 : Template for Holistic Rubric (Source : Mertler, 2001)

Score	Description
5	Demonstrates complete understanding of the objective. All requirements of task are included in response.
4	Demonstrates considerable understanding of the objective. All requirements of task are included.
3	Demonstrates partial understanding of the objective. Most requirements of task are included.
2	Demonstrates little understanding of the objective. Many requirements of task are missing.
1	Demonstrates no understanding of the objective.
0	No response / task not attempted.

There are two types of rubrics ; holistic and analytic. A holistic rubric requires the assessor to place the output quality on a continuum ; scoring the overall process or product, without judging the component parts (see Figure 1).

Conversely, with an analytic rubric, the teacher scores separate, individual parts of the product or performance first, then sums the individual scores to obtain a total score (Mertler, 2001).

Although a holistic rubric can initially seem easier to use and prepare, it usually requires the teacher to describe degrees of success at a later stage. Consequently, a holistic rubric is used for output which is difficult to detail. Analytic rubrics divide an assignment into various parts, termed descriptors (see Table 2). These descriptors are given weighting for how significant they are in the overall assignment. Descriptors are usually further divided into scales that detail the degree of success, similar to that of a Likert scale – specific values can be described that may be either criterion-based or norm-based (Lam and Kolic, 2008). Clearly, some descriptors may have a different number of scales than others : this could be

Table 2: Template for Analytic Rubric

Title			
Task Description	Scale A	Scale B	Scale C
Descriptor 1			
Descriptor 2			
Descriptor 3			

due to the different weighting that some descriptors have, or it could be due to the varying need to specify scales. Although a rubrics' components can vary enormously, the basic format stays the same.

Rubrics can be used for almost any kind of output : research papers, book critiques, discussion participation, laboratory reports, portfolios, group work presentations (Stevens and Levi, 2005), and even haiku (Iida, 2008).

5.1 Steps in constructing a Rubric

The process of developing a rubric, either holistic or analytic can be described as the following :

Step 1 : Review the learning objectives (to be addressed by the task). Whenever possible match the scoring guide with the objectives and actual instruction. This is an opportunity to reconsider the course syllabus, and to determine if certain skill sets need to be taught.

Step 2 : Identify the attributes that you want (and don't want) to see your students achieve. Specify the wanted (and unwanted) characteristics, skills, and behaviors that you will be looking for.

Step 3 : Consider characteristics that describe each attribute ; including both positive and negative. Identify ways to describe performance for each attribute. Try to

make each description as easy to understand as possible.

Step 4 : For holistic rubrics, write thorough narrative descriptions for excellent work and poor work incorporating each attribute into the description. Describe the highest and lowest levels of performance combining the descriptors for all attributes. For analytic rubrics, write thorough narrative descriptions for excellent work and poor work for each individual attribute. Describe the highest and lowest levels of performance using the descriptors for each attribute separately.

Step 5 : For holistic rubrics, complete the rubric by describing other levels on the continuum that ranges from excellent to poor work for the collective attributes. Write descriptions for all intermediate levels of performance. For analytic rubrics, complete the rubric by describing other levels on the continuum that ranges from excellent to poor work for each attribute. Write descriptions for all intermediate levels of performance for each attribute separately.

Step 6 : Collect samples of student work that exemplify each level. These will help you score in the future by serving as benchmarks.

Revise the rubric, as necessary. Be prepared to reflect on the effectiveness of the rubric and revise it prior to its next implementation. Consider for example, if using an analytic rubric, the weighting for each attribute within the rubric (see Table 3). Clearly *Descriptor 2* is the most important descriptor (attribute), and is worth half of the total score. Of course, there are different ways in which we could weight descriptors, but this method gives a clear visual aid for enhancing understanding among students. It should also be remembered, that the scales are not necessarily an even continuum – norm-referenced. Rather, the teacher describes the benchmarks similar to criterion-referencing.

Table 3 : Template for an Analytic Rubric with different weightings

Title					
Descriptor 1	Scale 1	Scale 2			
Descriptor 2	Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5
Descriptor 3	Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3		

5.2 The value of constructing a Rubric

Although the basic grid format does not look particularly inspiring, and relatively simplistic, the utility of the process comes from a number of issues. Firstly, syllabus design will be tested. The teacher will need to justify the relationship between the assessment and the syllabus. If required skill sets are not part of the syllabus, the rubric design ensures that the teacher will need to reconcile the difference.

Secondly, grading criteria will be specified. There needs to be a balance between simplicity and explicit scales (Gajda and Koliba, 2007 ; Brindley, 2001 ; 1998). Although the student needs to be able to easily comprehend the objective, it would benefit the stakeholders if sufficiently explicit guidelines are detailed. After all, if there is any misconception, students would quickly lose trust in the process. Thirdly, the rubric represents a feedback form for the student and teacher to correspond with. Furthermore the student can discuss the same concern with their peer. Fourthly, students may be able to enter into a self-assessment process, improving motivation, and conceivably leading to learner autonomy. This becomes even more apparent when students are involved in peer-assessment (PA). Through assessing their peers, students become increasingly proficient at grading their own work, and consequently embark on the self-directed enquiry that defines learner autonomy. Fifthly, the expectation and evaluation process becomes clear,

empowering the student, and removing any doubt the ‘goalposts may be moved’. Sixthly, the rubric provides the opportunity for PA, thereby improving not only the work quality of peers, but also the quality of the rater’s work also. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, if the teacher involves the students in creating the rubric, the students will not only develop a wider range of skills, but will also evolve from the passivity of teacher-centered classes.

6. Student Involvement

Rubrics offer an opportunity for the teacher to include the student input. This is extremely important for two reasons. First, it transforms the role of the student from that of the testee to that of the tester (Stobart, 2006 ; Black et al., 2003). If students are able to negotiate the criteria for the rubric, students naturally internalize both the objectives and the desire to achieve them (Harnisch, 2009 ; Hovane, 2008 ; Reid, 2007 ; Leonhardt, 2005 ; Livingstone et al., 2004 ; Prestidge and Glaser, 2000 ; Rademacher, 2000 ; Beck, 2000). Mowl and Pain (1995) point out that as long as students are reassured about the value of the exercise, and adequately prepared, they can be conscientious and capable assessors – of both themselves, and each other.

Secondly, it transforms the nature of the assessment. There has been a tendency to define class-based assessment as low-stakes, to be contrasted with high stakes, typified by norm-referenced tests, in which the test-taker is measured against others, instead of themselves (Rea-Dickens & Gardner, 2000). One of the questions that researchers ask, is whether or not teacher-assessment is reliable. As already noted, teachers often arguably score differently, at different times, if scoring arbitrarily. This raises the issue of reliability. Perhaps the time spent on high-

stakes tests, Rea-Dickens (*ibid*) suggests, should be replicated with classroom-based assessment. Significantly, rubrics represent a fairly reliable assessment, as long, of course, as the time spent in developing the descriptors and scales has been well spent.

Leonhardt (2005) raises the issue of authentic assessment, the cornerstone of which, is involving the students in the assessment process. Leonhardt challenges educators to ask their students at the completion of the course (in which rubrics were used), what they thought of the whole experience. This ongoing reflection process, Leonhardt argues, mirrors the students experience, and provides a similar feedback experience for the teacher. All teachers have different classroom delivery styles, and they all need obviously, to find the method that best fits their own (*ibid*). Engaging students and themselves (the teacher) in such a reflective process, provides grounds for life-long learning, a skill that becomes more and more important the longer we live.

7. Peer Assessment (PA)

Peer assessment offers enormous potential for students to benefit from becoming active learners, and it is increasingly being applied in higher education (Stobart, 2006 ; James and Pedder, 2006 ; Race et al., 2005 ; Langan et al., 2005 ; Gibbs, 1999). Some argue that power relationships in the classroom may cause stress or discomfort (Wen and Tsai, 2006 ; Nigel and Pope, 2005), while others suggest that PA efficacy may be subsumed by culturally didactic views on schooling (Liu and Carless, 2006). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that the success of PA depends upon the element of scaffolding the teacher provides (White, 2009a ; 2009b ; Falchikov, 2004). In fact, Lavery and Gregory (2007) have found

students often become more rigorous at peer- and self-assessment as they become better at dialogical, inquiry-based learning. As they also point out, our students will become part of the next generation of practitioners, and their insights deserve to be considered (ibid).

In a traditional teacher-centered classroom, the assessment criteria for the rubrics have already been established, without student perspectives. Unsurprisingly, Hovane (2008) argues, students adopt a passive approach, because they are being assessed by only one person – their teacher. Hovane (ibid) argues that rubric reliability would improve if students were involved in its creation. Otoshi & Heffernan (2008) argue that teachers and students may have a dissonance in meta-cognition. That is, teachers and students conceptualization of the others' perspective often proves false when actually tested. Consequently, educators need to work with our students, or at the very least, consider them, in creating PA rubrics.

8. Example development of a Peer-Assessed Rubric

The step-by-step development of an example rubric is as follows (Spijkerbosch, forthcoming) :

Step 1 : The teacher introduces the goal of the activity to the students (in this case, 1-minute informal verbal presentations). The teacher should demonstrate an example of both an ideal presentation, and a poor presentation.

Step 2 : The teacher divides the class into several work groups of five or six students each, depending on class size. Students consider and brainstorm what features of the presentation they think are important. The concept of brainstorming may have to be explained.

Step 3: Group members tell the teacher and classmates their findings, group by group. Findings are immediately written up in a list, at the front of the classroom, for everyone to see.

Step 4: The teacher synthesizes the target descriptors. ‘Can hear’, ‘big voice’, ‘understand words’ and ‘can understand’, for example, may be synthesized into two features (‘volume’ and ‘enunciation’) with a common concept (‘clarity’) – see Figure Two. Each group discusses descriptor categorizations to ensure everybody is satisfied. The teacher may need to be quite involved at this stage to ensure that the target descriptors are evenly represented in the Rubric (depending on what is being assessed).

Step 5: The teacher introduces the Rubric concept. The teacher demonstrates how each scale can be divided into varying stages of success. Volume, for example, can have four stages, ranging from ‘poor’ to ‘excellent’. Scales may need further discussion, so that all class members understand the distinction between, say, ‘poor’ and ‘insufficient’. Groups can expand on this through discussion. It could be important here to emphasize that simplicity would be best, considering the limited time in thinking for the listeners.

Step 6: The teacher molds the categories into a preliminary rubric through exchanges with students.

Step 7: Classmates prepare and perform their presentations in a second lesson. This, of course, is dependent on class numbers. Students grade their classmates’ presentations. Topics (for the presentations) can be selected by either the teacher or the students. For example, titles may be given out 30 minutes before the first presentation. The 30 minutes allows enough time for students to consider structure and vocabulary, and even though some students present after others, they are busy assessing classmates’ presentations, so preparation time is equitable. Speech memorization is not important, as the rubric can be used to score appropriately.

Step 8: At the conclusion of the presentations, students discuss the efficacy of the Rubric that the class constructed. This can be done in groups, or as a class.

Conclusion

Assessment literacy is a fundamental requirement for the effective teacher. Assessment is an integral teaching tool that we should not merely delegate to scoring output. It can serve as an effective blueprint for ensuring integration of pedagogy with assessment. Furthermore, assessment can serve as a catalyst for ensuring students become active classroom participants, activity that comes from eschewing the kind of traditional teacher-centered class that all too often takes place in the EFL world in Japan. Educators need to provide an active-learning environment, and that only comes from empowering our students.

Tertiary education in Japan has traditionally entailed students reflecting on knowledge that they have hitherto attained. If that is the case, we need to transcend the kind of secondary school pedagogy that too often takes place at the tertiary level, and provide the kind of self-directed learning environment that develops the leaders of tomorrow. We should equip our students with the ability to be life-long learners, not just students in our classrooms.

Rubrics, although they have the potential to be an important pedagogical tool, are only as good as the time spent in developing them. The more time we invest in developing the elements of the rubric, the more likely our students will become active participants in our classrooms.

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