

# Rubric Design and Development for English Speaking Practice and Performance in the First-year University Classroom

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## Abstract

As part of an ongoing action research project researchers collaborated on the creation, administration, and evaluation of a formative speaking assessment tool. A primary element of this tool was an analytic rubric to help first- and second year university students across departments practice and improve their speaking skills.

The impetus of this research emerged from the results of previous speaking assessment studies involving second-year students. Though the previous learning outcomes appeared to have been achieved on average, the evaluation results of the second-year students tended to range around the high end of the grading rubric. This prompted researchers to have a closer look at the most recent rubric in use and improve its clarity, comprehensibility and transparency.

The assessment tool and rubric integrated clear learning objectives, independent practice, peer evaluation and transparent instructor evaluation enabling researchers to focus on supporting student learning and confidence. The research questions were: 1) How did editing and revising the rubric affect student results? 2) How did editing and revising the rubric increase student confidence?

This study took a mixed method approach where data from student grades and survey results were collected and analyzed. The data from the assessments showed that after introducing the newest version of the rubric student grades showed less extreme off shoots and were centered around the expected results. In addition, survey responses were positive regarding the rubric's efficacy in supporting students' English language speaking confidence.

## Literature review

The use of rubrics in educational assessments for specifying grading criteria and supporting students' self-assessing abilities through feedback has become widespread over the past few decades and as Cooper B. S. and Gargan A. (2009) have stated, "the term rubric has been used in English since the 1400s, making it as old as it is interesting". Although many tertiary institutions

have focused on the use of rubrics in assessing more traditional aspects of learning such as reading and writing comprehension, rubrics have also been used with success in targeting and supporting specific aspects of students' speaking abilities.

The benefits of using standardized rubrics at the tertiary level to effectively, impartially, and authentically instruct, practice, and assess students' performances in the study of English as a Foreign or Second Language are touted by scholars such as Ulker, Alaamer, Dunbar, et al., Stevens and Levi, Andrade, Mueller and Dochy, Gijbels, and Segers. Despite this, according to Alaamer (2021) quoting Egan (1999), universities have not given speaking assessments enough attention in Saudi Arabia and other countries around the globe. Such is the case at many academic institutions in Japan as well. Students who have experienced speaking assessments outside the classroom are highly represented within the group who have elected to take one of the nationally accredited proficiency tests such as Eiken and TOEIC offered by ETS. These tests employ the use of rubrics for grading and level assessment leading to non-test-takers' limited experience with rubrics. As explained by Ulker (2017) rubrics are indicators of the attainment of learning goals, and thus are important for the alignment of learning outcomes with assessment.

In-class, formative use of these rubrics remains an unfamiliar learning procedure for many students. This fact is supported by participants from the following classroom-based study of whom a large percentage were unfamiliar with even the term rubric or had a very vague concept of it. They all worried about how to use it, and how it might affect their grades in the upcoming course. Looking at rubric-use experience from the instructor's point of view Quinlan (2012) finds that there are "those who never use rubrics and prefer to 'grade with their gut' concerning subjective assessments and those new teachers who are just not sure what a rubric is and why it matters." However, many researchers agree that once instructors opt to use rubrics, they 'never go back.' The following advantages of introducing well-designed rubrics to speaking assessments in an ESL environment are distilled from Alaamer's table (2021), De Silva's (2021) and Ulker's listings (2017) as below.

1. Assists students in comparing between their self-, peer assessment and a grader's judgment
2. Helps students and instructors measure language proficiency development
3. Helps students and instructors identify learner strengths and weaknesses
4. Helps instructors assess consistently and impartially
5. Provides clear directions for performance that are within the control of the student

De Silva (2021) concluded in her recent study on the effect of rubrics on authentic task performances that “careful designing of rubrics and thorough explanation and constant scaffolding and guidance given to the users of rubrics are necessary if they are to bring positive outcomes in teaching, learning and assessment.” Girón-García and Llopis-Moreno (2015) stated in their study on tertiary-level Spanish oral proficiency evaluation “that educators should take into consideration (...) components such as fluency, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, coherence, and communicative ability.” In addition, Dunbar et al. (2006) posit that even though “language teachers tend to have the same evaluation criteria, (...) they may assess the same student differently.” Therefore, consistency through standardized rubrics is paramount.

Berger (2011) asserts that “there are four types of assessment rubrics, including analytic/descriptive rubrics, rating lists, holistic rubrics and, checklists”. Most commonly used for language oral task performance evaluation are: analytic/descriptive and holistic rubrics. The difference between the latter two lies in what is evaluated for each task. Analytic rubrics provide scales for a list of components and a description for each rating, whereas the holistic rubric assesses the task as a whole. This point cannot be restated enough; students must be trained in the use of rubrics for oral task evaluation. Instructor explanation and scaffolding must accompany the use of rubrics in and outside of the classroom. Moreover, modeling and practicing of how to employ the rubric in preparation of any assessment is critical for students’ improvement and success.

## **Introduction**

The current study on rubric design and development for use in and outside the classroom with first-year university English learners in Japan grew out of the implementation of a previous, formative speaking assessment tool. Rubrics are useful for formative (for learning) and summative assessment (of learning) purposes, (Ulker, 2017). The project provided valuable data in reference to the best practices required for the practical use of such a speaking test in a university classroom environment.

However, the scope of this project resulted in the project members becoming cognizant of the necessity to review and modify the rubric grading scale and vocabulary used to best facilitate students’ ongoing speaking developments. As a result, there was an intent to develop and create a more effective speaking evaluation rubric in a first-year English class.

In reference to the development of the original speaking assessment project over the period

of two years from one group of second-year pharmacy students to a cross section of first-year students from various departments, the rubric in use was reviewed and revised multiple times. Cooper and Gargan (2009) also suggest that “today’s rubrics involve creating a standard and a descriptive statement that illustrates how the standard is to be achieved”. The rubric’s revision and subsequent evaluation focused on its effectivity in better targeting students incoming skills and abilities as well as their development over one semester. In addition, the vocabulary used was modified to ensure students’ understanding of the incremental increase in values across the scale range of the rubric.

The original analytic rubric consisted of a 15-point scale that assisted in teaching and evaluating three separate oral performance tasks in interview format. The original rubric was negotiated by four instructors with different educational backgrounds and experiences and consisted mainly of holistic descriptions. Though the pre-study version had also evolved more towards the analytic aspect, it wasn’t until the initiation of the current study that the rubric obtained its currently fully analytic form. This shift was caused by the need for both students and instructors to be able to evaluate performances with less bias. In addition, students asked in follow-up surveys for more concise guidelines for practice and evaluation.

## **Background**

The original impetus for the speaking assessment project was a requirement of a language department in a Japanese university in 2019. There was a proposal to standardize some of the English language assessments for students across all departments at the university. As Alaamer (2021) states, “As the literature suggests, the focus of learners’ assessment has been on traditional written exams while oral assessment methods have received little attention due to a lack of standardized oral grading rubrics”. A group of four instructors was subsequently tasked with the intention of creating and implementing a speaking assessment which would begin by targeting second-year Pharmacy students. The initial guidelines allowed only two weeks for the project members to meet and establish the assessment requirements the testing methods and the supporting documentation including a rubric. The first draft of the project design included the scheduling of a mid-term and a final speaking assessment.

With the limited time available and with each member of the group coming from different educational backgrounds and experiences, mediation was key to the project’s design. A decision was made early in the process, based on the time constraints of proctoring and grading the speaking assessment, to focus on three standards that students would be asked to achieve on the

assessment which included *reading a text aloud*, *describing a picture*, and *giving an opinion*.

### **Assessment Design**

An interview format was put in place that allowed students to perform short, timed readings, and descriptive and opinion monologues. These tasks fit into the CEFR descriptor Scales for Oral Production as they require “Sustained monologue: giving information.” The B1 level overall production scales ask that students “reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within their field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points (Council of Europe, 2020).” Our assessment rubric evaluates students on their ability to describe what they see in sequence, and give their opinion on a topic in addition to reading a text.

In part 1, *Reading a text aloud*, students would be given a piece of text to read quietly for 45 seconds, then have 45 seconds to read the text aloud. Part 2 *Describe a picture* required students to view a photograph quietly for 30 seconds then describe specific features of the photograph using targeted vocabulary and grammar using their speaking voices. For Part 3 *Giving your opinion* students were tasked with reading and considering a written question for 15 seconds then were required to state their opinions, give up to two reasons for their opinions and provide up to two examples to further support their claims while using targeted vocabulary and grammar.

The original speaking assessment was designed to be used in a one-on-one face-to-face environment where students would meet with their instructors and all assessment materials would be presented in written laminated copies with both English and Japanese instructions to ensure a thorough understanding by all participants. To ensure testing objectivity students were assessed by a group member who was not the target subjects’ classroom teacher. Students were then required to respond directly to an unfamiliar instructor requiring an additional amount of speaking confidence. Due to the number of students in the study, two classroom periods and two lunch-break periods were needed to complete the assessment. In order to mitigate any sharing of information by students to classmates, six separate constructs of assessment materials were created. After every three students were assessed, a different set of testing materials were implemented.

In reference to the rubric, the challenge was to agree on a scale for each of the three assessment categories and then to concur on the most appropriate vocabulary for illustrating the values designated to each category on the scale. According to Ulker (2017), “in education rubrics are

often an integral part of a strong, objective and effective assessment tool, also because it is useful for formative (for learning) and summative assessment (of learning) purposes”.

Project members brought with them a variety of experiences ranging from coordinating a committee on the design and implementation of a university entrance exam used for placing all incoming students into skill-based leveled classrooms to familiarization with national language testing models such as the TOEIC tests and the CEFR framework. The subsequent employment of members’ experiences resulted in the decision to use a holistic approach for the design of the speaking rubric. Ulker (2017), states that a “holistic rubric – is the one that is used to assess a project or product as a whole. It describes the performance by applying all the criteria at the same time and making possible an overall judgment about the quality of the work”.

### **Rubric Project Phase 1: 2019 semester 2**

The first draft of the rubric to be implemented for use in the original speaking assessment project consisted of three categories including *reading a text aloud*, *describing a picture*, and *giving an opinion* with five grading bands for each category. See figure 1.

Students were given an English version of the rubric with a Japanese translation to ensure clarity of the assessment’s expectations in addition to providing concise information in the form of feedback. Although the vocabulary was simple and clear enough for students to understand, the rubric targeted only a limited degree of skills which the project’s group members ultimately envisioned assessing. For the *reading a text aloud* section of the rubric factors such as speaking in complete sentences, the use of Katakana, rhythm and mispronunciations were used as targets for students’ abilities. When *describing a picture*, students were assessed on their abilities to describe a maximum of five aspects of the photo using adjectives, verbs and prepositions while merely mentioning the location or the people without any grammar mistakes. The requirements for the *giving an opinion* section included being able to state their opinions clearly with possibly including up to three reasons and two examples while using some of the vocabulary which was covered in the course textbook.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Professor: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Course name/ number: \_\_\_\_\_ (Peer) Evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Student number: \_\_\_\_\_

SPEAKING TEST

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Reading Aloud</b>	Speaks in isolated words. Consistent mispronunciation makes reading incomprehensible.	Speaks in broken phrases. Katakana English impedes understanding.	Katakana English doesn't impede understanding. Mispronunciations are frequent. Student is mostly monotone.	Speaks at sentence-level. Maintains rhythm. Some hesitation between sentences.	Clear speech, rhythm is optimal. There is little if any hesitation.
<b>Describe a picture</b>	Describes unimportant details w/o logical order. 7+grammar /vocab. mistakes.	Describes 1-2 aspects in logical order. 5-6 grammar/ vocab. mistakes.	Describes 3 aspects in logical order. 3-4 grammar/vocab. mistakes.	Describes 4 aspects in logical order incl. adj./v./prep. Mentions locations, persons.	Describes 5+ aspects in logical order incl. adj./v./prep. Mentions locations, persons.
<b>Give your opinion</b>	Unable to give an opinion/opinion is irrelevant to the question/answer is incoherent.	Gives relevant, coherent opinion. Uses text vocabulary.	Gives opinion, 1 reason, no examples. Uses text vocabulary.	Gives opinion, 2 reasons or 1 example. Uses text vocabulary.	Gives opinion, 3 reasons, 1-2 examples. Uses text vocabulary.
<b>TOTAL</b>					/15

Figure 1. Rubric Semester 2, 2019

### **Rubric Project Phase 2: 2020 semester 1**

As the speaking assessment project moved forward, two members of the group resigned from their positions due to alternate academic commitments. The project goals remained the same, however, a decision was made by the remaining two members to continue the project during the 2020 onset of the Coronavirus. Test subject numbers were reduced to include only two groups of second-year pharmacy students. Moreover, as the Coronavirus impacted the instructional delivery method of classes one group was taught face-to-face and one was taught online. In addition, to minimize the number of classroom instructional hours required to implement the speaking assessment a determination was made to require all students to record their test responses on video. All testing materials and instructions were made available to students through the university's LMS, and students were given a one-day window within which they were required to record and submit their speaking performances.

A further revision of the rubric was deemed necessary to improve fairness in grading and provide an expanded range of grades possible for students with higher speaking knowledge and abilities. As most of the previous test subjects had scored in the middle to higher level bands on the original rubric the decision was made to provide more incremental values to the grading fields. The resulting rubric contained additional grading criteria in half-point values in the three-to-five-point range on the grading scale for each of the three assessment criteria. See figure 2.

### **Rubric Project Phase 3: 2021 semester 1**

The main purpose of rubrics is supporting students in the learning process, which is possible by guiding students' activities and also giving them a clearer understanding of their own learning process and progress (Ulker 2021). Prior to the implementation of the third phase of the speaking assessment project a determination was made to modify the grading scales and the vocabulary; the primary aim being to start a clarification process of the assessment rubric already introduced and developed over a 2-year period. The secondary aim was to ensure that both students and instructors had a clear and concise understanding of the rubric vocabulary. As Cooper and Gargan (2009) have stated, "rubrics can make the expectations and standard for the performance clear to students, parents, teachers, educators and other". The third aim was to *ensure* that all students receive constructive feedback throughout the learning process.

Considering the revised aims of the speaking assessment the decision was made to modify the rubric from a holistic model to a model which was more analytical in its design and implementation. Ulker (2021) suggests that "an analytic/descriptive rubric-works on each



criterion separately, provides scales for a list of components and a description for each rating. This type of rubric is used to assess important tasks where each component needs to be evaluated separately”. Through the addition of can-do statements and bullet points to target specific vocabulary, grammar and oral skills, the goal of the rubric was adjusted to target the assessment expectations while providing more direct feedback to students.

Can-do statements for the RTA and GYO sections of the rubric included, *students can meet the following* (criteria) and for the DP section the statement, *students can describe (5–9) of the following* was used. The clarity of the assessment expectations is important for students to maximize their performances, moreover, detailed feedback for each criterion of their performances would be critical in their ongoing skills development. In support of this aim, the RTA section included bullet points that focused on, *read without sounding monotone, read at the sentence level, divide sentences into sense groups, use pauses, stress content words, and read at a natural pace*. See figure 3.

Having revised the rubric, the researchers applied it to the assessment of semester 1 speaking practice and looked at the resulting grades and end-user experiences by students. This was the focus of phase 3 of the continuing research project.

The research questions employed included;

- How did editing and revising the rubric affect student results?
- How did editing and revising the rubric increase student confidence?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Course name/ number: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Student number: \_\_\_\_\_

SPEAKING TEST

Professor:  
(Peer) Evaluator:

	1	2	3	3.5	4	4.5	5	Score
<b>Reading Aloud</b>	Does not attempt task or speaks in isolated sentences or pronunciation makes utterances virtually incomprehensible.	Speaks in broken phrases (does not divide passage into sense groups). Pronunciation is mostly unintelligible.	Student's utterance is mostly monotone with limited division into sense groups. Limited control of phonological features makes incomprehensible at times.	Student's utterance is mostly monotone with limited division into sense groups. More control of phonological features even if incomprehensible at times.	Students reads mostly at sentence-level and divides passage into sense groups. Student is mostly intelligible despite limited control of phonological features (monotone at times, etc.)	Students reads mostly at sentence-level and divides passage into sense groups. Students is mostly intelligible despite greater control of phonological features (monotone at times, etc.)	Student mostly reads at a natural speed/sentence level with little to no hesitation. If errors in pronunciation occur, they are minimal and do not disrupt communication.	
<b>Describe a picture</b>	Student does not attempt task/unable to respond. Describes unimportant details w/o logical order.	Student clearly describes 1 aspect of the photo in a logical way, but does not include sufficient information/details. Serious errors in vocabulary, grammar/diction are present.	Student describes 2 aspects of the photo in a logical way, but uses minimum amount of information necessary. Errors in grammar/ diction are present, but <b>do not impede comprehension.</b>	Student describes 3 aspects in a logical way, but uses minimum amount of information necessary. Errors in vocabulary, grammar/ diction are present, but <b>do not impede comprehension.</b>	Student clearly describes 4 aspects of the photo in a logical way, including possible locations, people, actions, descriptive adjectives, and prepositions of location. Vocabulary, grammar/ diction are mostly appropriate.	Student clearly describes 5 aspects of the photo in a logical way, including possible locations, people, actions, descriptive adjectives, and prepositions of location. Vocabulary, grammar/ diction are mostly appropriate.	Student clearly describes 5+ aspects of the photo in a logical way, including possible locations, people, actions, descriptive adjectives, and prepositions of location. Vocabulary, grammar/ diction are appropriate.	
<b>Give your opinion</b>	Does not attempt task, or response is irrelevant to the question.	Gives a relevant opinion, but unable to give reason or examples.	Gives an opinion, but with minimum amount of information (e.g. only 1 distinct reason). Responses are limited to shorter phrases with frequent hesitation. Vocabulary, grammar/diction are somewhat appropriate and <b>do not impede comprehension.</b>	Gives an opinion, but with minimum amount of information (e.g. only 1 distinct reason). Responses are limited to shorter phrases with some hesitation. Vocabulary, grammar/diction are mostly appropriate. <b>do not impede comprehension.</b>	Gives a clear opinion supported with reasons and possibly examples. Produces utterances which tend to be short with some pauses. Vocabulary, grammar/diction are mostly appropriate.	Gives a clear opinion supported with distinct reasons and possibly examples. Produces utterances which tend to be short with some pauses. Vocabulary, grammar/diction are mostly appropriate.	Gives a clear, effective opinion supported with distinct reasons and examples, and produces longer utterances. Vocabulary, grammar/diction are appropriate.	
<b>TOTAL</b>								/15

	1	2	3	3.5	4	4.5	5	Score	
<b>Reading Aloud</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>課題に答えていない。</li> <li>単語や孤立した文章で話す。</li> <li>発音の誤りにより、言葉が理解できない。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>誤ったフレーズで話す(意味のあるフレーズで区切る)ことができない。</li> <li>発音が理解できない。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>フレーズの区切りを理解せず、話し方が単調である。</li> <li>音韻の特徴があまり捉えられない。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>フレーズの区切りを理解せず、話し方が単調である。</li> <li>発音が理解できないことがあるが、音韻の特徴をより多く捉えられている。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>主に文レベルで読み、文章を意味のグループに分けて読める。</li> <li>音韻的特徴が捉えられず、単調になつてほとんど理解することができない。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>主に文レベルで読み、文章を意味のグループに分けて音読できる。</li> <li>音韻的特徴をたいぶ捉え、単調になつてもなく、ほとんど理解することができている。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ほとんどのためらいのない自然な速度、文章レベルで読める。</li> <li>発音の間違いがあつても最小限であり、コミュニケーションが取れる。</li> </ul>	5	
<b>Describe a picture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>課題に答えていない。</li> <li>論理だつた順序で重要な点を説明できない。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>写真の特徴を論理的に1点説明できる。</li> <li>十分な情報や詳細は説明できない。</li> <li>語彙や文法、語法に大きな間違いがある。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>写真の特徴を論理的に2点説明できるが、必要な情報は少ない。</li> <li>語彙、文法、語法の誤りがあるが、理解することはできる。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>写真の特徴を論理的に3点説明できるが、必要な情報は少ない。</li> <li>語彙、文法、語法の誤りがあるが、理解することはできる。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>場所、人、行動、適切な形容詞、場所の前置詞を使って説明できる。</li> <li>語彙、文法、語法はほとんど適切である。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>場所、人、行動、適切な形容詞、場所の前置詞を使って写真の特徴を5つ適切に説明できる。</li> <li>語彙、文法、語法はほとんど適切である。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>場所、人、行動、適切な形容詞、場所の前置詞を使って写真の特徴を5つ以上適切に説明できる。</li> <li>語彙、文法、語法は適切である。</li> </ul>		
<b>Give your opinion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>課題に答えていない。</li> <li>質問と無関係な回答をする。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>関連する意見を言えるが、理由や例をあげることができない。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>意見を言えるが、情報が少ない(例えば1つの明確な理由のみ)。</li> <li>受け答えは、言いよどみ、限られた語句や短い単語による解答。</li> <li>語彙、文法・語法は適切なものもあり、理解することはできる。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>意見を言えるが、情報が少ない(例えば1つの明確な理由のみ)。</li> <li>受け答えは、言いよどみ、限られた語句や短い単語による解答。</li> <li>語彙、文法・語法はほとんど適切である。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>理由や例をあげ、はっきりとした意見を言える。</li> <li>言葉が短くスムーズでないことがある。</li> <li>語彙、文法・語法はほとんど適切である。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>明確なきちんとした理由と例をあげ、はっきりと意見を言う。</li> <li>時々言葉が短くスムーズでないこともある。</li> <li>語彙、文法・語法はほとんど適切である。</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>明確なきちんとした理由と例をあげ、はっきりと効果的な意見が言え、長い会話ができる。</li> <li>語彙、文法・語法は適切である。</li> </ul>		
<b>TOTAL</b>								/15	

Figure 2. Rubric Semester 1, 2020

Professor:  
(Peer) Evaluator:

SPEAKING TEST

Name:  
Course name/ number:  
Student number:

	1	2	3	4	5	Score
<b>Reading Aloud</b>	<p>Student can meet the following 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read without sounding monotone</li> <li>Read at the sentence-level</li> <li>Divide passages into sense groups</li> <li>Use pauses</li> <li>Stress content words</li> <li>Read at a natural pace</li> </ul>	<p>Student can meet the following 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read without sounding monotone</li> <li>Read at the sentence-level</li> <li>Divide passages into sense groups</li> <li>Use pauses</li> <li>Stress content words</li> <li>Read at a natural pace</li> </ul>	<p>Student can meet the following 4:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read without sounding monotone</li> <li>Read at the sentence-level</li> <li>Divide passages into sense groups</li> <li>Use pauses</li> <li>Stress content words</li> <li>Read at a natural pace</li> </ul>	<p>Student can meet the following 5:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read without sounding monotone</li> <li>Read at the sentence-level</li> <li>Divide passages into sense groups</li> <li>Use pauses</li> <li>Stress content words</li> <li>Read at a natural pace</li> </ul>	<p>Student can meet the following 5 and has no more than two hesitations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read without sounding monotone</li> <li>Read at the sentence-level</li> <li>Divide passages into sense groups</li> <li>Use pauses</li> <li>Stress content words</li> <li>Read at a natural pace</li> </ul>	
<b>Describe a picture</b>	<p>Student can describe 5 of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time of day</li> <li>Inside/outside</li> <li>Man/woman/child</li> <li>Body type, age, hairstyle</li> <li>Clothing</li> <li>Actions using be+verb+ing</li> <li>Descriptive adjectives</li> <li>Prepositions of place</li> <li>Suggestions for purpose of behavior (because)</li> </ul>	<p>Student can describe 6 of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time of day</li> <li>Inside/outside</li> <li>Man/woman/child</li> <li>Body type, age, hairstyle</li> <li>Clothing</li> <li>Actions using be+verb+ing</li> <li>Descriptive adjectives</li> <li>Prepositions of place</li> <li>Suggestions for purpose of behavior (because)</li> </ul>	<p>Student can describe 7 of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time of day</li> <li>Inside/outside</li> <li>Man/woman/child</li> <li>Body type, age, hairstyle</li> <li>Clothing</li> <li>Actions using be+verb+ing</li> <li>Descriptive adjectives</li> <li>Prepositions of place</li> <li>Suggestions for purpose of behavior (because)</li> </ul>	<p>Student can describe 8 of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time of day</li> <li>Inside/outside</li> <li>Man/woman/child</li> <li>Body type, age, hairstyle</li> <li>Clothing</li> <li>Actions using be+verb+ing</li> <li>Descriptive adjectives</li> <li>Prepositions of place</li> <li>Suggestions for purpose of behavior (because)</li> </ul>	<p>Student can describe 9 of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time of day</li> <li>Inside/outside</li> <li>Man/woman/child</li> <li>Body type, age, hairstyle</li> <li>Clothing</li> <li>Actions using be+verb+ing</li> <li>Descriptive adjectives</li> <li>Prepositions of place</li> <li>Suggestions for purpose of behavior (because)</li> </ul>	
<b>Give your opinion</b>	<p>Student can meet 1 of following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give an opinion</li> <li>Support it with one reason (because)</li> <li>Provide one example</li> </ul>	<p>Student can meet 2 of following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give an opinion</li> <li>Support it with one reason (because)</li> <li>Provide one example</li> </ul>	<p>Student can meet 3 of following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give an opinion</li> <li>Support it with two reasons (because)</li> <li>Provide one example each</li> </ul>	<p>Student can meet 4 of following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give an opinion</li> <li>Support it with two reasons (because)</li> <li>Provide one example each</li> <li>Produce longer sentences</li> </ul>	<p>Student can meet 5 of following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give an opinion</li> <li>Support it with two reasons (because)</li> <li>Provide one example each</li> <li>Produce longer sentences</li> <li>Avoid long pauses</li> </ul>	
<b>TOTAL</b>						/15

	1	2	3	4	5	Score
<b>Reading Aloud</b>	<p>以下のうち2つを満たすことができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 単語に聞こえないように読む</li> <li>● 文章レベルで読む</li> <li>● 意味を理解し区切って読む</li> <li>● ポーズを取る</li> <li>● アクセントをつける</li> <li>● 自然なペースで読む</li> </ul>	<p>以下のうち3つを満たすことができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 単語に聞こえないように読む</li> <li>● 文章レベルで読む</li> <li>● 意味を理解し区切って読む</li> <li>● ポーズを取る</li> <li>● アクセントをつける</li> <li>● 自然なペースで読む</li> </ul>	<p>以下のうち4つを満たすことができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 単語に聞こえないように読む</li> <li>● 文章レベルで読む</li> <li>● 意味を理解し区切って読む</li> <li>● ポーズを取る</li> <li>● アクセントをつける</li> <li>● 自然なペースで読む</li> </ul>	<p>以下のうち5つを満たすことができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 単語に聞こえないように読む</li> <li>● 文章レベルで読む</li> <li>● 意味を理解し区切って読む</li> <li>● ポーズを取る</li> <li>● アクセントをつける</li> <li>● 自然なペースで読む</li> </ul>	<p>以下のうち5つを満たすことができ、2つ以上のためらいがない</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 単語に聞こえないように読む</li> <li>● 文章レベルで読む</li> <li>● 意味を理解し区切って読む</li> <li>● ポーズを取る</li> <li>● アクセントをつける</li> <li>● 自然なペースで読む</li> </ul>	
<b>Describe a picture</b>	<p>以下のうち5つを記述することができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 時間帯</li> <li>● 内外</li> <li>● 男性/女性/子供</li> <li>● 体型・年齢・髪型</li> <li>● 衣料品</li> <li>● be+verb+ingを使ったアクション</li> <li>● 説明的な形容詞</li> <li>● 場所の前置詞</li> <li>● 行動目的の提案(理由)</li> </ul>	<p>以下のうち6つを記述することができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 時間帯</li> <li>● 内外</li> <li>● 男性/女性/子供</li> <li>● 体型・年齢・髪型</li> <li>● 衣料品</li> <li>● be+verb+ingを使ったアクション</li> <li>● 説明的な形容詞</li> <li>● 場所の前置詞</li> <li>● 行動目的の提案(理由)</li> </ul>	<p>以下のうち7つを記述することができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 時間帯</li> <li>● 内外</li> <li>● 男性/女性/子供</li> <li>● 体型・年齢・髪型</li> <li>● 衣料品</li> <li>● be+verb+ingを使ったアクション</li> <li>● 説明的な形容詞</li> <li>● 場所の前置詞</li> <li>● 行動目的の提案(理由)</li> </ul>	<p>以下のうち8つを記述することができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 時間帯</li> <li>● 内外</li> <li>● 男性/女性/子供</li> <li>● 体型・年齢・髪型</li> <li>● 衣料品</li> <li>● be+verb+ingを使ったアクション</li> <li>● 説明的な形容詞</li> <li>● 場所の前置詞</li> <li>● 行動目的の提案(理由)</li> </ul>	<p>以下の9つを記述することができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 時間帯</li> <li>● 内外</li> <li>● 男性/女性/子供</li> <li>● 体型・年齢・髪型</li> <li>● 衣料品</li> <li>● be+verb+ingを使ったアクション</li> <li>● 説明的な形容詞</li> <li>● 場所の前置詞</li> <li>● 行動目的の提案(理由)</li> </ul>	
<b>Give your opinion</b>	<p>以下のうち1つを満たすことができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 意見を述べる</li> <li>● 理由を述べて裏付けられる(なぜなら)</li> <li>● 例を1つ挙げる</li> </ul>	<p>以下のうち2つを満たすことができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 意見を述べる</li> <li>● 理由を述べて裏付けられる(なぜなら)</li> <li>● 例を1つ挙げる</li> </ul>	<p>以下の3つを満たすことができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 意見を述べる</li> <li>● 2つの理由で裏付けられる</li> <li>● それぞれ1つずつ例を挙げる</li> </ul>	<p>以下の4つを満たすことができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 意見を述べる</li> <li>● 2つの理由で裏付けられる</li> <li>● それぞれ1つずつ例を挙げる</li> <li>● 長めの文章をつくる</li> </ul>	<p>以下の5つを満たすことができる</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 意見を述べる</li> <li>● 2つの理由で裏付けられる</li> <li>● それぞれ1つずつ例を挙げる</li> <li>● 長めの文章をつくる</li> <li>● 長い休止を入れる</li> </ul>	
<b>TOTAL</b>						/15

Figure 3. Rubric Semester 1, 2021

## **Methodology**

This project took both a qualitative approach supported by pre- and post-course surveys to be distributed to all targeted groups of first-year students, as well as a quantitative approach through the collection of students' assessment scores across one semester. A post-mid-term meeting was held through which researchers were able to discuss students' speaking assessment performances. The consultation was also an opportunity for group members to examine any supplementary materials or instructions which could support students in their understanding of the rubric and the assessment expectations as well as aiding in their practice and preparations for the final speaking exam. In an attempt to provide all students an equal experience regardless of teaching platforms, it was agreed that all assessment materials including testing documents, classroom instructions, practice abstracts, course textbooks, and the rubric should be identical. It should be noted that one instructor taught using an online platform while the other taught in a face-to-face classroom environment.

## **Participants**

The participants consisted of 10 classes of first-year students across five departments inclusive of Pharmacy, Nursing, Information and Management, Food and Nutrition Sciences, and International Relations. For the quantitative aspect of the study, the researchers selected 2 classes: Nursing and Information and Management (N = 72). For the qualitative aspect of the study, the pre- and post-course survey participants varied as the survey was voluntary and could be taken several times. Totals varied between pre N = 254 and post N = 198 total. Survey questionnaires and results were distributed and collected online using the university's LMS. The surveys were made accessible to students for a one-week window following the speaking assessments.

## **Findings**

The order in which the project findings are presented is based on the research questions (RQs). Each finding is supported by both quantitative and qualitative results or solely qualitative data gathered from the student surveys.

- **RQ1: How did editing and revising the rubric affect student results?**

In order to properly evaluate student development over one semester of the scores on the same speaking tasks, researchers compared the results produced by the same class during the midterm and final assessment. The below graph (see figure 4) also includes the maximum possible

score for reference. The two classes selected were both taking the Freshman English course and consisted of the Nursing and the Information and Management department participants respectively. Though one class was taught online and the other face-to-face, the results were combined.

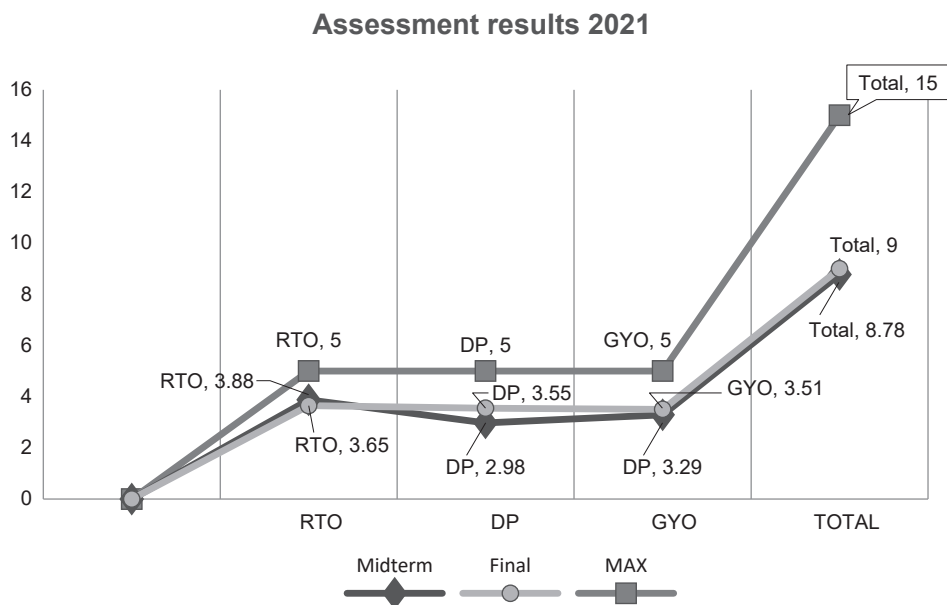


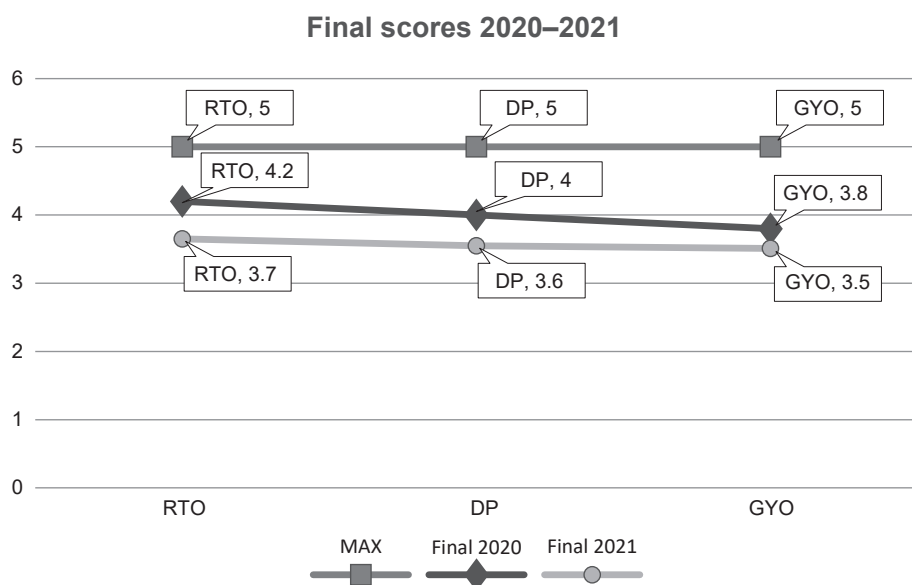
Figure 4. Midterm and final assessment results 2021

A marked improvement is visible in the DP and GYO sections where the focus of both students and instructors lay during practice. Reading is considered by both groups to be the strongest section in the student arsenal. Practice by students for the final RTA may have been disregarded in favor of the more difficult DP and GYO sections. In addition, students may have assumed that their RTA abilities would remain constant through classroom participation and both partner and group discussions over the semester. This explains the drop in the final score of the RTA section of the assessments.

### Efficacy and reliability of the rubric

One of the previously mentioned advantages of using rubrics for speaking assessment was to help instructors assess consistently and impartially. As of 2019 the project has been running for three years or 6 semesters. Therefore, the data that the researchers were able to obtain clearly shows development in this area as well. By comparing the final assessment results of a pre-study incarnation of the rubric and the current revised rubric, the researchers found that the

scores were significantly diminished. However, this development was to be expected. Findings in the previous study (Valies, Herbach, 2021) group members discerned that the influence of the instructor’s bias was still quite strong resulting in either extremely high or low scores. Researchers felt that the rubric was not specific enough in its task completion requirements. This led to this new study’s goal to improve the rubric to the point that a dearth of extremely high scores and/or low scores would be prevented. The envisioned results for the revised rubric were an average score of 3 out of 5 along all three sections in the final speaking assessment. The graph below (see figure 5) shows that the new rubric does indeed produce average scores closer to three.



**Figure 5. Decrease in final assessment scores**

- RQ2: How will editing and revising the rubric increase student confidence?**

This question was answered by examining the results of both the pre-course and post-course surveys. Pre-course many students were unfamiliar with the term rubric or had a very vague concept of it. They all worried about how to use it, and how it would affect their grades in the upcoming course. However, post-course many students commented positively on how their instructor’s explanation supported their understanding of the rubric. Phrases such as “fully understood,” and “I could understand easily because my teacher spoke slowly and clearly”



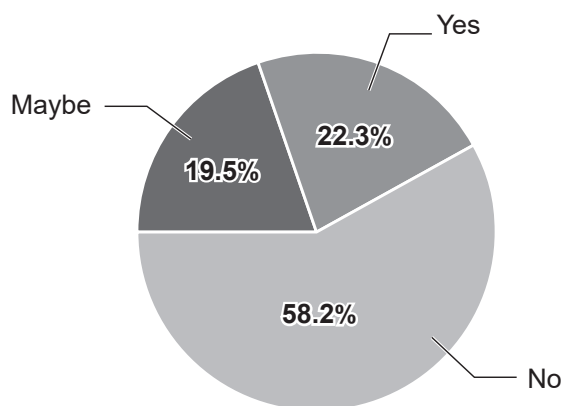
illuminate the fact that clear explanations help both students and instructors feel more confident in learners' task performances.

### Pre-course survey responses

Furthermore, the results of these survey questions were of considerable interest to the researchers as there was an assumption that most students at the tertiary level would have already had some experience in using rubrics in their academic studies. This underpinned the researchers' suspicion that if students had had some experience with rubrics in any of their university courses, their instructors may have assumed that the students were already familiar with and understood the implementation and purpose of their use in supporting students' assessment performances. The combined results of the *no* and *maybe* responses to this question of nearly 80% of students suggest that instructors at the tertiary level need to be cognizant of the fact that students will probably need at least some degree of explanation of and instruction on the purpose and use of rubrics if they are to be used effectively.

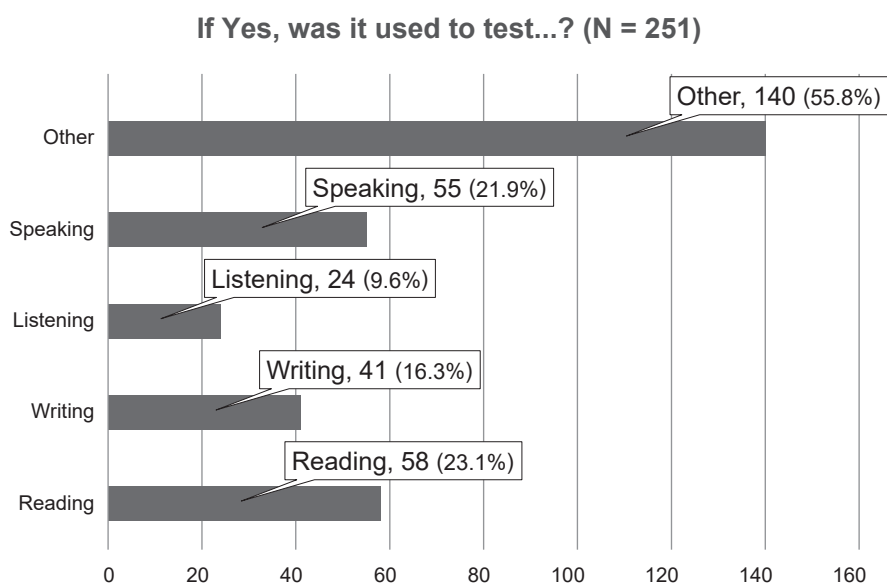
The number of students who responded positively to the question as having some experience with rubrics in an English class stands at only 22.3%. See figure 6. This number indicates that among respondents, only a limited number of their prior English instructors regarded rubrics as providing value in their teaching practices. It is also of interest to consider the aspect of language learning that rubrics have been used to aid in assessing, and this will be further discussed in the next student survey question.

**Student pre-course experience with assessment rubric**



**Figure 6. Student pre-course experience with assessment rubrics**

If taken at face value, the answer to this survey question (see figure 7) would suggest that 55.8% of respondents stated that in their previous English language classroom experiences their instructors used rubrics to assess aspects of language learning outside of the four standards of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Another conclusion that could be surmised is that the respondents' instructors were not clear enough in explaining the use of rubrics in their classrooms which subsequently led to students being unsure as to their specific use. Once again this would suggest that if rubrics are to be used both detailed explanations as to what they are and clear instructions as to how they should be used to support students' language knowledge and skills development are critical in their effectiveness.



**Figure 7. Pre-course rubric use in the English language classroom**

Student responses to the combined categories of *yes*, *somewhat*, and *a little* comprise a total of 76.5%. This would suggest that almost 2/3 of those who replied to this question felt as though they had experienced a positive result from the use of their rubrics in aiding their test preparations. Notwithstanding, the responses to the *not at all* field resulted in 24.3% of students, the same number as those who responded with a *yes* to this survey question. The similarity of numbers at the opposite ends of the response spectrum may also suggest once again that students were unfamiliar with the purpose, the use, and the possible support of rubrics in aiding students with test preparations.

The response to the above survey question (see figure 8) in reference to the effectiveness of the use of rubrics shows that *somewhat*, *a little*, and *not at all* account for a total of 80.1%. This would indicate that most respondents were not absolutely clear as to the effectiveness of rubrics in their experiences. Only 20.7% of students responded positively with a *yes* answer to the question. These results suggest that if rubrics are to be used effectively as tools in an English language classroom, instructors need to be cognizant of how they are implemented into their individual teaching practices. This would include surveying students as to their previous experiences in the use of rubrics, if any, to ensure clarity of understanding in both the purpose and the practice of the tool in support of improving students’ knowledge and abilities.

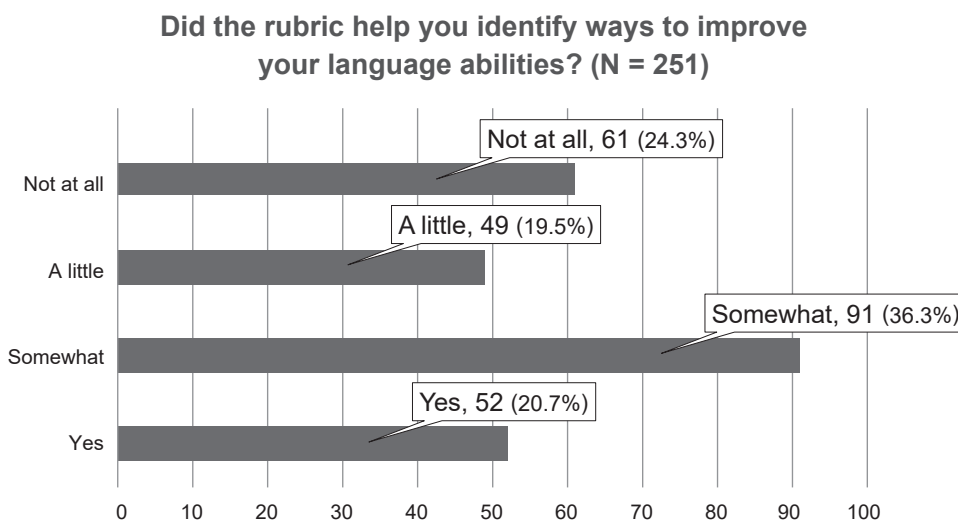
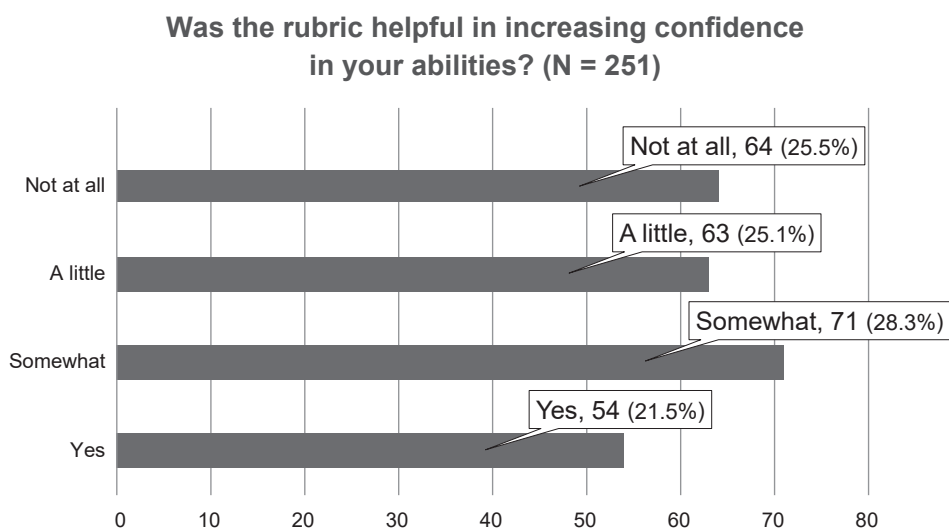


Figure 8. Effectivity of rubrics used before the surveyed course

In reference to rubrics providing aid in building confidence levels of student speaking abilities (see figure 9) the combined results of the *yes*, *somewhat*, and *a little* categories resulted in 74.9% of those who responded. This result would suggest that the use of rubrics in practicing and preparing for speaking examinations in the tertiary classroom was of benefit to the majority of students in building their speaking confidence levels. Nonetheless, the responses to the *not at all* tier of this survey question comprised a total of 25.5% of respondents which exceeded the number of *yes* responses which stands at 21.5%. The number of not at all responses in reference to students being able to build confidence using rubrics was of considerable concern to the project members.



*Figure 9. Rubric effects on student confidence*

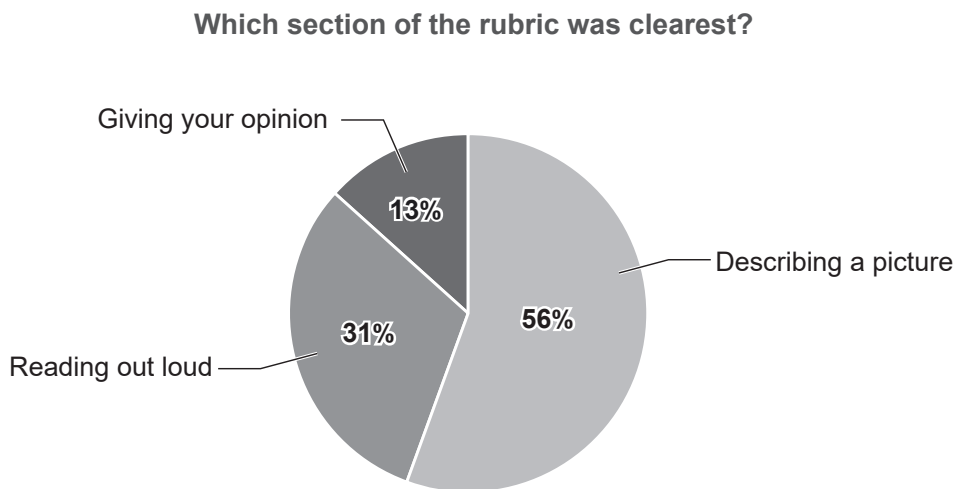
From the responses to this post-course survey question, it is clear to see that over half, 55.6% of students stated that the DP section of the rubric was the clearest. This could be in part due to the fact that students were given explicit step-by-step instructions as to how they should respond to this section of the speaking test. They were instructed in class to move from the largest to the smallest details when describing a picture. For example, the time of day, inside or outside, if inside what type of room, if outside where, a park, a street, on a train or on a bus. Then, how many people, their ages, their sexes, skin color, and body descriptions, followed by clothing descriptions with colors and their positions to each other using prepositions. This was followed by descriptions of the peoples' actions using verbs + ing.

Although the GYO section of the test was also practiced in class using a step-by-step process, the stages for this section of the test were limited in comparison to the DP section. For the GYO sections, students had to respond to a question using some of the vocabulary from the question in addition to their opinions as to whether they agreed with the statement or disagreed with it. This was followed by students being required to give a reason for their opinions and support their reasons with examples. This section of the test had fewer steps than the DP section as it was designed to require students to formulate their own individual opinions in response to the test questions. In this way, students could not just state what was apparent, but had to use their critical thinking skills to perform successfully.

### Post-course survey results

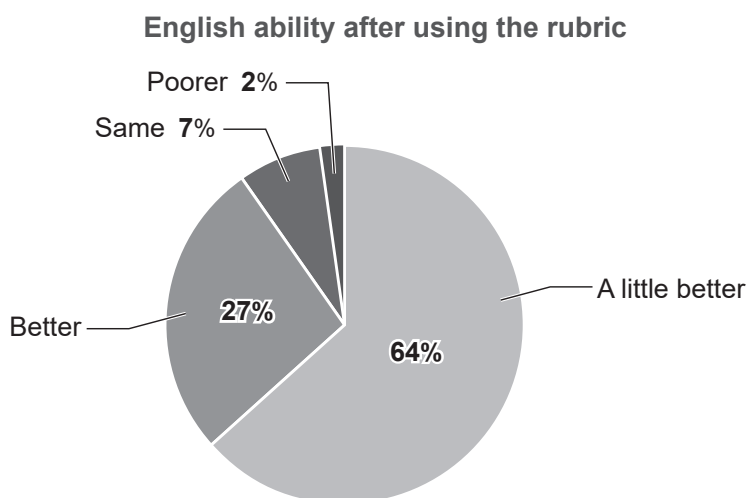
Post-course survey responses had two dimensions. On the one hand, students were content with the rubric used in class and felt both the instruction and the feedback it provided were useful. The comments were overwhelmingly positive and even included some suggestions for further improvement. “If the perfect score differs depending on the task, it is easiest to understand if the evaluation score is displayed in a writing style that makes it easy to see how many points the perfect score is, for example, 9/15. It makes me want to do my best next time.” On the other hand, students found that they wanted or needed more and/or simpler comments on how to study. “I think it is difficult to decide how to study English based on the rubric,” and “There were some things I didn’t understand in rubric’s English expression.”

When asked which section of the rubric was clearest (see figure 10), 56% of respondents chose *Describing a picture*. This section of the newest speaking assessment rubric employed bullet points of the exact requirements for this task’s expected speech acts. This seems to indicate that such a concise layout feature may increase student comprehension of expected speech acts. Regardless of the need for improvement of this aspect of the rubric, the survey responses show that 89.4% of assessment takers in this course feel that this rubric has helped them increase their speaking ability to a significant degree. See figure 11.



**Figure 10. Rubric clarity**

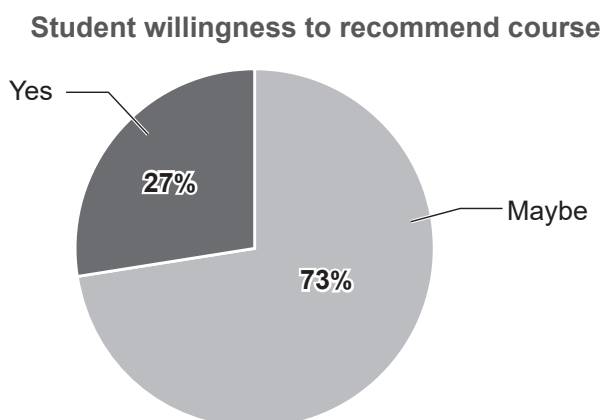
In reference to improved speaking abilities using rubrics (see figure 11), the largest portion of students responded with *a little better* at the rate of 64%. The fact that more students did not reply to the question with *better* could be due in part to their limited use of any rubrics in their tertiary education experiences. Further research would be required to assess whether additional experience with rubrics would result in more positive responses. Nevertheless, when combined with the 27% of students that responded with *better* to this survey question, it is clear that a combined total of 91% of students had a positive opinion as to how the use of rubrics could improve their English-speaking abilities to some degree.



**Figure 11.** Significant increase in speaking ability using the newest rubric

### Conclusion

It is clear from the responses of students to the question of their willingness to recommend the use of rubrics in improving their English language speaking skills that no one responded adversely with the possible choice of *no*. See figure 12. A participant stated: “It prevents teachers from deciding grades based on relative evaluation, so I think it is good idea to introduce.” The majority of students responded with *yes* at 73% followed by *maybe* at 27%. These findings would suggest that all respondents’ experiences were positive enough for them to be prone to recommend the use of a rubric in reference to improving their English-speaking skills to their friends in other classes. “I agree with using rubrics because I will find my weak point clearly.” This student statement supports the conclusion that many found the use of a rubric in their speaking assessments “useful.”



*Figure 12. Student willingness to recommend course*

### **Project Limitations**

Students commented on the difficulties of using the rubric in class as part of their peer evaluation activities during practice. “When I evaluated my friends by using the rubric, I took care of my friends.” This can be corrected by planning for multiple peer evaluation moments per semester so that students feel free to share feedback both positive and negative while practicing both fairness and accuracy. This notwithstanding, no students complained about the fairness of scoring after the midterms or final exams. In addition, instructors fielded questions on how to practice/study more after the midterms and helped students understand where they went wrong and how to do better in preparation for their final exams.

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