

Rubrics for Assessment and Education: A Review on the Efficacy of Rubrics and How to Design One for the Classroom

Levi Hanson

Designing and implementing projects for Taisho University's Department of Communication and Culture, specifically the English Communication Course, has presented many challenges. How can the English language classes, in the case of this paper the English Workshop classes, stimulate and engage students to be an active participant in their own education? Do the students understand the goals of Workshop projects? How does the instructor clearly state class expectations? How can the instructor keep consistency when grading large numbers of students?

Grading rubrics are assessment tools that are designed to answer these questions for both teachers and students. This paper will look at implementing grading rubrics in foreign language classrooms. Stevens and Levi (2013) define a rubric:

At its most basic, a rubric is a scoring tool that lays out the specific expectations for an assignment. Rubrics divide an assignment into its component parts and provide a detailed description of what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable levels of performance for each of those parts. (p. 3)

In a foreign language class where the students' native language is

rarely, if at all, used, students may find it difficult to understand project goals or individual expectations. A concisely made rubric can be designed to help students and teachers alike with these difficulties.

This paper will cite studies that suggest rubrics can be effective tools to assess student performance and aid learning. In addition, I will use Stevens et al. *Introduction to Rubrics* (2013) as a guide to construct a basic rubric, showing as an example one I made for oral presentations in the English Workshop at Taisho University. This paper will also briefly discuss the implementation of this rubric.

Efficacy of Rubrics

In the past few decades, educational institutions have been using rubrics as a way to promote learning and to make grading easier, but have rubrics proven to be effective? From a common sense point of view, we can say that a well-made rubric, which lays out the goals and expectations of an assignment clearly and simply, would seemingly be quite useful for teachers and students alike. In support of this, research suggests that rubrics can have a positive impact in the classroom.

Research conducted by Jonsson and Svingby (2007) investigated claims made by proponents of scoring rubrics, namely claims that rubrics are useful in regards to “increased consistency of scoring... and promotion of learning” (p. 130). They did this by reviewing 75 studies dealing with rubrics and concluded that rubrics can be effective, specifically in regards to performance assessment, learning and teaching. Specifically with learning and teaching, they state that from the viewpoints of educators and students who use rubrics, they can be of benefit. They reported that “the way in which rubrics support learning and instruction is by making expectations and criteria explicit, which also facilitates feedback and self-assessment” (p. 139).

A study done by Heidi Goodrich Andrade (2001) has also shown some benefits in an experiment to determine if rubrics could improve writing scores of students. They designated treatment classes and control classes of eighth grade students. All students wrote three essays and were allowed to complete two drafts of the essays. Andrade and the teachers gave and introduced a rubric to the treatment classes before the students began each essay. They did not give or introduce a rubric to the control classes. Andrade stated that in comparing the essay scores “it was possible to determine, at least in broad stroke, whether or not rubrics can have a measurable effect on student writing” (p. 5). Andrade’s data consisted of the essay scores and a narrative questionnaire that all students completed.

Analyses of the two data variables seemed to show that “simply handing out and explaining instructional rubrics can increase students’ knowledge of the criteria for writing... but that translating that knowledge into actual writing is more demanding” (p. 14). Andrade’s experiment shows that rubrics can have a positive learning effect, especially in regards to students understanding performance expectations. In other words, students in the study who were given and introduced rubrics had a more concrete sense of what constituted good writing, as opposed to the control students. Perhaps what we can learn from this study is that rubrics satisfy one of their primary goals, which Stevens et al. (2013) state as being “a scoring tool that lays out the specific expectation for an assignment” (p. 3).

It must be noted, however, that both the review done by Jonsson et al. (2007) and the experiment done by Andrade (2001) had unclear outcomes in terms of whether the use of rubrics brought about student improvement. In the case of Jonsson and Svingby, the studies they reviewed had varying results, in which they concluded that “the perceptions of the users as to the benefits of using rubrics may therefore be seen as more interesting. A major theme in the comments from both teachers and students, is the perception of clarified expectations” (p. 139).

In the case of the experiment conducted by Andrade (2001) , students in the treatment class, both boys and girls, scored a half point higher than boys and girls in control classes for Essay 2 (p. 10). In stark contrast, results from Essay 3 show that the control girls got slightly higher scores than the treatment girls, with the boys from both groups having statistically even lower scores. In the case of the boys, however, the treatment group did slightly better than the control group (p. 11).

As for Essay 1, there seemed to be no effect, but it must be noted that Andrade (2001) theorizes that “it was many teachers’ and student’s first exposure to a rubric” and that “[the teachers] may not have been adequately prepared to support students in their [the rubrics] use” (p. 12). In addition, Andrade admits that the rubric for Essay 1 “was not written in particularly student-friendly terms” (p. 12). She defends the rubrics for Essay 2 and 3 in that the language was more apt to be understood by the students. The odd results from Essay 3 are contributed to problems with time and external school factors. “Teachers at both schools reported that the third essay assignment came just as their students were attempting to meet new, district mandated portfolio and exhibition requirements for graduation” (Andrade, 2001, p. 13).

Based upon the above review and experiments, rubrics can be used to clearly communicate the goals of a particular assignment, improve feedback and self-assessment and bring consistency to scoring. These findings have led me to believe that rubrics can make a positive impact in English Workshop classes. With these benefits in mind, the next section will elaborate on the construction of a rubric for an English presentation assignment.

Constructing a Rubric

The title of a rubric, which Stevens et al. (2013) call the “task description”, will be the “specific assignment, such as a paper, a poster, or a presentation” (p. 6). The task description of my English Workshop rubric is Presentation Evaluation Criteria (see Table 1). This task description clearly states the purpose of the rubric to any instructor who might see it. However, the rubric title should let students know exactly what the assignment is, and I think my title over-complicates things. Also, this rubric is designed for English learners of various abilities, from the false beginner to the intermediate level student. In the future, I will rename the rubric using simplistic language, eliminating the complicated and redundant words evaluation and criteria.

After the title has been considered, it is time to construct the rubric. Stevens et al. (2013) introduce the basic parts, describing a rubric as a grid that consists of “scales... levels of achievement” in the columns and “dimensions of the assignment (a breakdown of the skills/ knowledge involved in the assignment) ” in the rows (p. 6). The rubric Presentation Evaluation Criteria (see Table 1) has four scales and five dimensions.

What are the scales of a rubric? Stevens et al. (2013) state that a scale “describes how well or how poorly any given task has been performed” (p. 7). Since educators tailor-make their rubrics, there are no restrictions for how many scales a rubric can have. Stevens et al. (2013) recommend using no more than five scales. They state that with increasing amounts of scales, “the more difficult it becomes to differentiate between them” and counter by saying that “more specific levels make the task clearer for the students” (p. 9). Therefore, no more than five scales should be used. In Presentation Evaluation Criteria (see Table 1 for complete rubric) my scales of achievement are shown in column format as follows:

Excellent 素晴らしい！ (3 points)	Good よく出来た (2 points)	Could be better もう少し (1 points)	Needs much improvement 残念 (0 points)
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I chose to use four scales to differentiate between two levels of students who are doing well (Excellent/ Good) and two levels of students who need to make more effort in class (Could be better/ Needs much improvement) . Since a rubric should be easy for students to follow, I will consider implementing three scales in the future. This will cut down on the time it takes a foreign language student to read the individual dimensions of each scale. For example, a rubric with four scales and five dimensions would have twenty boxes detailing the level of achievement, whereas a rubric with only three scales would have fifteen. A rubric with only 15 boxes takes less time for students to read and less time for students to process the expectations.

I would like to mention at this time that I designed the rubric in Table 1 for first-year students and therefore elected to translate each scale and dimension into Japanese, which is the students' native language. This rubric may very well be the first time these students have been exposed to a grading rubric and it is very important that they comprehend what is expected of them. Andrade (2001) says in her analysis of why the first rubric was not effective was because that “the rubric was not written in particularly student-friendly terms” (p. 12). The rubric must be written in a language that facilitates understanding. Academic jargon should not be used in order to avoid any confusion. As for the rubrics I create for second-year students and above, they have no translations attached. This is because the students have been exposed to a rubric before and are familiar with the terms included. Next, I will discuss a rubric's dimensions.

Stevens et al. (2013) state that “the dimensions of a rubric lay out the parts of the task simply and completely” and “[dimensions] should provide a quick overview of the student's strengths and weaknesses” (p.

10). My rubric is specifically for oral presentations, so I assigned the following dimensions to Presentation Evaluation Criteria (see Table 1) :

	Excellent (3points)	Good (2 points)	Could be better (1 point)	Needs much improvement (0 points)
Fluency				
Volume				
Eye contact / Posture				
Gestures / Body language				
Entertainment				

These are the criteria that I deemed most important for the English Communication students. Each dimension in turn will have a corresponding scale, and within the corresponding scale we can find a description of the student's level of achievement. For example, the instructor might circle or check the box corresponding to an Excellent in the Volume dimension of the rubric after watching the student's presentation. In this case, it means the student "speaks with a strong, clear voice" (see Table 1).

I must also mention that the scales of this rubric have been assigned a point system. Not all rubrics are required to have a point system, as in rubrics used for administrative purposes. I find that using a point system for grading gives students a clear visualization of where they stand grade-wise. It also allows instructors a method to give consistency to grading. In the Presentation Evaluation Criteria rubric (see Table 1), the maximum score a student can achieve in the presentation is 15 points. It might be better in the future to make the maximum score 10 point. This might aid the students to get a quicker visualization of where they stand. For example, in a 10 point system it is easy to see that a score of 5 means the student achieved 50%, and therefore needs to improve future performances. A maximum score of 15 points means that a 50% score is equal to 7.5 points, and in my opinion, has less of a visual impact.

Conclusion

My first exposure to rubrics was a seminar conducted by Ehime University at Taisho University. As an English teacher, I'm always looking for ways to clearly communicate my expectations to students. I have found that even students who have entered the English Communication Course who can already converse in English quite well have difficulty understanding the specific goals of an assignment when I explain them orally. They understand them much better when presented with a rubric.

I also noticed that introducing the rubric before a presentation seemed to excite and motivate the students. I presented a rubric to a class of junior students the day of their presentations. After I explained the scales and dimensions of the rubric and allowed them some preparation time, they began to practice by reading their scripts less, making more eye contact and discussing what kind of gestures they might use.

The students were also asked to evaluate their peer's performances. This means they had to constantly refer to the dimensions of the rubric and consider where their fellow students needed improvement and where they did quite well. It is my hope that the students also used the rubric to reflect upon their own performance and what they need to improve in the future to meet the expectations of an excellent student.

Table 1

Presentation Evaluation Criteria

English Communication Course / Workshop Presentation Evaluation Criteria

Please read the form carefully. You will find everything that is expected of you during this project. Do your best to be a successful student.

	Excellent 素晴らしい！ (3points)	Good よく出来た (2 points)	Could be better もう少し (1 point)	Needs much improvement 残念 (0 points)
① Fluency	Well rehearsed. Does not need to look at notes very much. よく練習する。あまりノートを見る必要がない。	Speaks smoothly. Sometimes looks at notes. スムーズに話す。たまにノートを見る必要がある。	A good student, but looks at notes too much during presentation. 良い学生がノートを見すぎる。	Did not prepare well. Can't do the presentation without a script. 練習しなかった。スクリプトでプレゼンすることしか出来ない。
② Volume	Speaks with a strong, clear voice. 大声ではっきりとした声で話す。	Voice is good, but could be stronger. はっきりとした声が、もっと大きくするといい。	Voice is loud in the beginning, but becomes quiet. 最初に声がいいが、だんだん静かになってしまう。	Voice is not loud or clear. Students can't hear or understand. はっきり話さないし、だれも聞こえないし何が言われると分からない。
③ Eye contact / Posture	Looks at the audience while speaking. Head is up and back is straight. 聴衆に見る。姿勢が良くて頭をまっすぐにする。	Looks at audience, but sometimes eyes wander. 聴衆に見るが、たまにきよろきよろ見回す。	Head is down and back is hunched. Often looks at notes. 頭低く下げて背を丸めている。	Slouching. Standing sideways. Never looks at audience. 一回も聴衆に見ない。
④ Gestures / Body language	Uses appropriate gestures. Movement helps the audience understand the presentation. 適当なジェスチャーを使う。動作でプレゼンの内容を聴衆に分からせる。	Good gestures. Sometimes too still. ジェスチャーがいい。たまにじっとしている。	Too stiff and needs to relax. じっとしている。くつろいだほうがいい。	Does not use gestures. Only holds notes or paper. ジェスチャーを使わない。資料しか持っていない。
⑤ Entertainment	Gives an original presentation. Shows pictures, video or material. Audience really enjoys presentation. オリジナルなプレゼンをする。画像やビデオや他の資料を見せる。聴衆を楽しませる。	May not have extra material, but is original and interesting. Students enjoy presentation. 資料が足りないがプレゼンはオリジナルで面白い。皆が楽しむ。	Follows the traditional presentation style. Needs more originality. 昔ながらの形式でプレゼンをする。もっと面白くするといい。	No originality. Student has clearly not tried to make an interesting presentation. オリジナリティー無。全く努力しない。

Total Points out of 15: _____

References

Stevens, D. D., & Levi, A. J. (2013) . *Introduction to Rubrics*. (2nd ed.) . Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

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