

## **BENEFITS OF USING RUBRICS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS ASSESSMENT**

**Keywords:** performance-based assessment, rubrics, holistic rubric, analytic rubric

**Setting the problem, main research questions, hypothesis.** Assessment of learner performance in foreign language classrooms has always been one of the biggest concerns facing educators. It has often been the case that while learners can perform well on a test, they may still lack a good command of the language, which allows them to complete real-world tasks in authentic communicative situations. Thus, the assessments must go beyond the requirement to memorize and recall information, and provide a measure to show how well a learner uses learned knowledge and applies all language skills to accomplish a task. In this respect, the performance-based assessment implies the integration of language and content areas [2, p. 3], and is particularly appropriate in the realm of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, aimed at developing professionally oriented communicative language competences, enabling learners to communicate effectively in some academic and professional environments [4, p. 109].

Depending on what tasks learners are assigned to perform in order to demonstrate what they can do with a foreign language, one distinguishes between product, performance, and process assessment approaches. A product assessment approach refers to giving the learners assignments that are usually done outside the classroom and result into samples of the practical application of language knowledge, as such writing reports, designing web pages and creating audio or video records. For performance-oriented assessment learners are expected to prepare and display in the classroom the ability to interact and apply their knowledge and skills to fulfil a task that resembles a real-life situation (e.g. presentation talk, skit, role-play, debates etc).

The purpose of process-oriented assessment is to involve learners into reflecting upon their thinking and reasoning skills, sources of motivation, and learning strategies. This can be done through think-aloud techniques, self- and peer assessment checklists, surveys, learning logs, and so on [2, p. 3-4]. In all cases, we need an instrument to measure the performance of a given task, and one of the most suitable tools is a rubric, which is a set of criteria to describe learners' work in terms of levels of performance quality [1, p. 4]. In fact, the rubric is an assessment tool that clearly outlines expectations for learner's work and as such rubrics can perfectly suit the purposes of peer and self-assessment. Rubrics can also be effectively employed for ESP continuous classroom assessment. In any case, rubrics intended for grading specific assignments must be shared with

learners before evaluation is initiated so that they understand what is required to get a certain grade [3, p. 20].

On the whole, learners should be able to refer to the rubric to see what they will be assessed on anytime they need. This will remove mystery from the evaluation process, helping students focus on how they can maximize their performance and achieve the score they want [6, p. 870-871]. Moreover, in contrast to other assessment tools, like checklists, rubrics always give the learner some space for further progress, because when the rubric addresses the work that will be done, it always contains some positive potential of future performance and help learners realize what they need to do to excel. In this respect, rubrics serve as a powerful motivation booster.

**Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments.** A rubric is typically organized as a table that comprises the components of the task to be assessed, levels of performance, criteria that describe performances at different levels, and scoring. The rubric components may vary depending on the tasks expected to complete. On the one hand, there are general rubrics that can be used for assessment of a range of similar tasks, and task-specific rubrics developed to assess a particular kind of performance.

General rubrics needn't be rewritten for each assignment, but provide lower reliability and require much practice to apply. Task-specific rubrics are more reliable and easier to apply, but since they contain detailed answers they cannot be shared with learners and may be useful only for summative assessment. On the other hand, there are holistic and analytic rubrics, which treat either one criterion at a time or all criteria together.

A holistic rubric evaluates the overall performance in a qualitative manner. The scores give an overall impression of the quality of learner's work and often use a four- or five-point scale, such as "excellent/ good/ fair/ satisfactory/ poor (needs work)". The advantage of holistic rubrics is that they offer the convenience of fast marking which is easy to interpret, and provide high reliability. The drawback, however, is that there is a lack of strong feedback for improvement.

For that reason, holistic rubrics are used for summative assessment, for example at an examination, when the score is needed for anything but a final grade. Analytic rubrics break down the performance into different dimensions to be evaluated, and assign point values to each so that the total sum of points will secure a quantitative measure of learner's work. For example, a speaking rubric might include the dimensions of pronunciation, use of proper tenses, transitions, vocabulary, and fluency, while a writing rubric may include idea explanation, coherency, grammar accuracy, layout, and range of vocabulary. The advantage of analytic rubrics, which are best for formative assessment, is twofold. First, we can give different points to the different dimensions, reflecting their relative importance. Second, we can provide more information to learners about their individual weaknesses and strengths, and thus facilitate the learning progress. The only downside is that preparing analytic rubrics takes much more time [1, p. 6-11; 2, p. 6; 5, p. 17-25].

**Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings.** The steps to create a rubric include the following: reflecting upon the learners' needs and identifying the learning objective, deciding upon the task and dimensions of performance to be evaluated, choosing the gradation levels of performance quality, assigning a point value to each of these, and describing the criteria within a dimension. Building an effective rubric involves two major aspects: coherent sets of appropriate criteria, and well-written descriptions of levels of performance for these criteria. It is advisable to start with the best quality of each dimension and then indicate any flaws or mistakes that will cause the learner to lose points off their best quality performance.

Most importantly, we must avoid negative language when listing the criteria as lower quality levels should be descriptive and informative rather than discouraging. As we can see, designing a rubric will require time and effort, and this is where technology can help. There are a number of free tools available online that you can use to create rubrics (e.g. RubiStar, Quick Rubric, Rubric Maker). Once registered, you get access to customized rubrics for a variety of performances, or may develop your own rubric from scratch, save it and be able to edit it and adapt to the needs of your classroom any time you like.

As a result, constructing an appropriate rubric is central to meaningful performance-based assessment. It makes grading process timely, and provides a detailed and often easier-to-read feedback for the learner. In fact, the problem of assessing learners' actual performance in foreign language classrooms can be solved by developing clear measurement rubrics and the wise use of technology. A rubric includes the specification of the skill being examined and what constitutes various levels of performance success. Instead of judging the performance, the rubric describes it and therefore it can be used for better feedback and teaching observation. By sharing the rubric and letting learners know what exactly is expected to bring them a certain grade or score, we will also increase motivation and improve performance.

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