

# **Teachers' and students' initial reactions to the use of rubrics for assessment**

Belinda HO

City University of Hong Kong

## **Abstract**

This study aimed at exploring through questionnaires, preference forms and interviews the teachers and the students' reactions to the use of rubrics, which was a new way of assessment to them, in a Communication Skills course in Computing taught in a university which newly adopted the outcomes-based approach in teaching and learning (OBTL). How they felt about this new way of assessment, the perceived advantages of the rubrics, the problems that they faced when using the rubrics, possible solutions, and the type of rubrics that they preferred were examined. Results show that most teachers and students were positive about this new way of assessment and all of them preferred analytic rubrics to holistic rubrics.

## **Introduction**

Because student-centred learning is a general trend in education, most of the discipline-based English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses taught to students in different departments in the university of this study were task-based and student-centred. When outcomes-based approach in teaching and learning (OBTL) was newly implemented in the university, the ESP teachers should have no problem setting intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and designing teaching and learning activities (TLAs) and assessment tasks (ATs) to align with the ILOs. The major problem lay in the use of the rubrics for assessment because teachers and students were only familiar with using very simple assessment forms. Thus, teachers and students have had difficulties appropriating the new concepts and putting the new way of assessment into practice.

A rubric, according to Pate et. al. (1993), is "a scaled set of criteria that clearly defines for the student and the teacher what a range of acceptable and unacceptable performance looks like". A great deal has been recorded in the literature explaining what rubrics are, how to design rubrics, and the advantages of using rubrics (Arter 1990, Chicago Public Schools 2000, Pickette and Dodge 2001). However, little has been mentioned about the teachers' and students' reactions to the use of rubrics, the problems that occurred when the rubrics were used in a newly introduced outcomes-based teaching and learning (OBTL) setting and the solutions to these problems.

This study aimed at exploring teachers' and students' reactions to the use of rubrics for assessing speaking and writing tasks in a Communication Skills course in Computing taught in an OBTL format. Their reactions included:

- (1) how familiar the students were with this new way of assessment,
- (2) how they felt about this new way of assessment and the rubrics,
- (3) the perceived advantages of the rubrics,

- (4) the problems that they faced when using the rubrics,
- (5) the solutions to their problems, and
- (6) the type of rubrics that they preferred.

### **Research method**

The teacher-researcher, who was the coordinator of an ESP course “Communication Skills course in Computing” (which had 7 groups of students, totalling 110, and taught by 4 teachers), designed the rubrics for two speaking and two writing assignments for the teachers and students to use in this course. Analytical rubrics with two or more separate scales were designed instead of holistic rubrics which used only a single scale that yielded a global rating because there were multiple graders and they provided the students with the clearest and most detailed feedback about their work and how to improve it (Chicago Public Schools 2000).

A questionnaire was given out to 110 students at the end of the semester to find out how they felt about this new way of assessment, the advantages of the rubrics perceived by them, the problems they faced when using the rubrics and possible solutions.

To find out which type of assessment form the students found most helpful, three types of rubrics for assessing the students’ performance in a technical interview were shown to them, and they were asked to choose the one that they preferred. The content of the three forms was the same. Form A and Form B were analytical rubrics and Form C was a holistic rubric. In Form A, which was the one used in the course, all the criteria for assessment within each category were put in boxes. In Form B, the criteria were listed as bulleted points. The teacher ticked all the items that the students could achieve in these two forms and gave them a grade within each category and then an overall grade. In Form C, all the criteria within each category were placed into one big box so that the teacher did not have to tick each item and the students were just given a holistic grade on the assignment. The students were asked to indicate on a preference sheet which form they preferred and gave the reasons for their preference.

The teachers teaching the course were given the teacher version of the questionnaire and preference form to complete in order to gain their opinions on the new way of assessment.

### **Results**

The answers to the research questions are summarised below.

(1) How familiar the students were with this new way of assessment

All teachers and a majority of students (91%) reported that the students were familiar with this new way of assessment mainly because of the teacher’s clear explanations at the beginning of the course.

(2) How they felt about this new way of assessment and the rubrics

Three teachers and 88.7% of the students liked the new assessment forms because of their advantages and one teacher and 11.3% of the students had reservations about these rubrics because of the problems they encountered when using these forms.

(3) The perceived advantages of the rubrics

Regarding the design of the form, both teachers and students thought that the present design could help students prepare for their assignment and receive feedback.

Detailed guidelines and criteria were shown on the form and thus could help students to have a clear idea about what they needed to achieve in each assignment.

(4) The problems that they faced when using the rubrics

➤ The teachers' problems:

Because most students obtained high grades, some teachers perceived that not being able to differentiate the standard of students easily by the marking scheme was a problem. Since the teachers were only expected to tick the items on the assessment forms, some of them sometimes also had difficulty indicating to the students their problems which were not listed on the assessment form.

➤ The students' problems:

Some students remarked that the items were too detailed and there were so many words on the form that they did not want to read them seriously. Most students expressed the concern that the actual marks obtained for each item on the assessment form were not shown and they did not know how the final grade was calculated. While some students thought that the assessment criteria on the form helped them to know what to focus on in the assignment, some students remarked that it was too restrictive for them only to focus on the items mentioned on the form.

(5) Possible solutions to their problems

Because the teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks in the OBTL setting were aligned with the intended learning outcome, students were expected to be able to achieve as many outcomes as possible. Differentiating the standard of the students should not be an issue. Both teachers and students recommended adding a "Comment Section" to the bottom of the form for teachers to write comments to solve the problem related to the restrictions brought by the amount of assessment items listed on the form. They also shared the view that the items could be made simpler by using shorter phrases so that it would be easier for the students to understand the criteria. The students needed to be reminded repeatedly that the focus of their attention should be on the kinds of ILOs achieved and yet to be achieved rather than on how high the final grade was.

(6) The type of rubrics that they preferred

Both teachers and students preferred analytic rubrics with cells and did not like holistic rubrics because more information was provided on the form. The points were more clearly presented as there were lines and boxes on the form and appropriate headings were listed. It was easy to read and follow.

## **Implications**

The following suggestions regarding how to design and use the rubrics that could bring more benefits to the students can be made.

- (1) The words and phrases on the form should be short and simple. Instead of having all the specific details put on the form, the detailed information, explanations and examples could be given to students in the briefing session by the teacher before the assignment was introduced to the students.
- (2) Since different dimensions of the communicative tasks in an ESP course often need to be assessed and it is helpful to categorize the items to let the students see clearly how they are assessed, it seems to be more desirable to design analytic rubrics instead of holistic rubrics for ESP courses.
- (3) On rubrics which assess speaking and writing activities, a “Comments Section” could be added at the bottom of the form for the teacher to write comments on students’ performance if necessary. Regarding assessing writing activities, in addition to the use of a rubric, the comments could also be put on the appropriate places of the written script as well to bring the greatest benefit to the students.
- (4) To break through the restrictions imposed on the students by the rubrics, if the students’ achievement exceeded what was listed on the rubrics, bonus marks could be given to them to encourage outstanding performances.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that in broad terms, most of the teachers’ views were in line with those of the students. Most teachers and students were positive about the use of rubrics for assessment in an ESP course in a newly introduced OBTL setting.

Since this was only an exploratory study and the sample was limited, the results could not be generalized. However, it is hoped that the suggestions regarding how to design and use the rubrics in more desirable ways in this particular course in this study will be a useful source of reference for teachers of ESP courses when using rubrics to assess speaking and writing assignments not only in newly-introduced student-centred learning contexts in the universities in Hong Kong, but also in similar learning contexts in different parts of the world.

## **Acknowledgements**

The work described in this paper was fully supported by the FHS Research

Grant of City University of Hong Kong (Project No. 9610090).

I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to the teachers and students who participated in this study without whose help I would not have been able to complete this study.

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