Using Rubrics in EFL Classrooms:
Student Perceptions and Attitude

英語クラスにおけるルーブリック使用
－学生の認知と態度－

Mari Kochiyama*　　Jonathan Aliponga*　　Christopher C. Johnston*
河内山　真理　　ジョナサン・アリポンガ　　クリストファー・C・ジョンストン

Abstract

　　Assessment is as important as other teaching processes. In order for assessment to be effective, teachers should develop a good rubric. The main goal of this paper was to determine Japanese university students' perceptions of and attitude toward rubrics or use of rubrics. A 23-item questionnaire was utilized in this study. Results show that students' positive perceptions matched their positive attitude toward rubrics or use of rubrics. Positive perceptions and attitude were evident in all variables. With the given benefits of using the rubrics which were viewed and received favorably by the majority of the students, EFL teachers or any teacher should not have second thoughts in creating and using them.

I. Introduction

　　This paper researches the perceptions and attitudes students have of teachers using rubrics in the classroom. Students often worry if they are being graded fairly, and vice-versa teachers often struggle to grade each student accurately. The best solution to this dilemma is for the teacher to implement rubrics for assessing students. A rubric is a scoring tool that lays out the specific expectations for an assignment (Stevens & Levi, 2005). It is an accurate and fair assessment tool to measure a student's ability.

　　There are obvious signs that indicate a teacher needs to start using rubrics. For example, when the teacher is dealing with high number of students and overwhelming amounts of assignments and tests to correct, or when the teacher is struggling to make accurate and fair comments to each individual student. Moreover, when the students are having difficulty reading the teachers handwritten comments and the teacher feels they are spending too much energy and time correcting papers while developing carpel tunnel syndrome in the process. These are clear indications that the teacher should start using rubrics for assessing

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＊関西国際大学教育学部

students.

There are many advantages to using rubrics. Teachers use rubrics because they help us understand what comprises a course grade and allow students to perceive evaluation as fair and meaningful. They let us know what students can do to improve their performance (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). They give detailed feedback of students' strengths and weaknesses (Andrade, 2000). Students may complain that they cannot fully understand the teacher's grading scheme or comments, thereupon using rubrics will make it easier for both the students and the teacher. Rubrics offer a clear and concise explanation of what is expected for a test or an assignment. Rubrics will ultimately save the teacher time by detailing requirements, and allowing the teacher to not have to comment subjectively on an individual basis.

Teachers undoubtedly benefit from using rubrics, but how do the students feel about the use of rubrics. Students are able to set goals and take responsibility for their learning. Students can clearly know their strengths and weaknesses enabling them to improve their performance. Rubrics can also be used for peer assessment which will help them judge the quality of their classmates' work while helping them notice the quality of their own work.

As teachers, it is very important to know how Japanese students feel about using rubrics. There has been very little research done on university students' attitude and perceptions towards rubrics in Japan. Various American studies have demonstrated students' positive attitudes towards rubrics in post-secondary schools. Bolton's (2006) study asserted that rubrics enabled them to engage in important processes, including identifying critical issues in an assignment. Andrade and Du (2005) showed that using rubrics helped them focus their efforts, produce work of higher quality, earn better grades and feel less anxious about an assignment.

The following research surveys Japanese university students to examine the following questions:

1) What are students' perceptions of the use of rubrics?

2) What are students' attitudes toward the use of rubrics?

II. Methods

1. Participants

A total of 40 students from a private university in Kansai region in Japan took part in this research. 18 are males and 12 are females. 19 students are first year, 17 are second year, 3 are 3rd year, and 1 is first year. The students used rubrics in their reading and speaking courses. It was their first time to use rubrics in these courses.

2. Instrumentation

The questionnaire contains a total of 23 statements to find out students' opinions and attitudes toward the use of rubric. It is divided into three sections. The first section has 9 statements that relate to perceptions of the use of the rubrics in the class. The second section consists of 9 statements asking about attitude toward rubrics or use of rubrics. These two sections have almost the same questions. For the perception section, an example statement "Rubrics were utilized in the class which enabled me to know what was expected of me," was changed to "I like the use of rubrics because it enables me to know what is expected of me" for the attitude section. The last section consisting of 4 statements is about background information which contains statements that ask for year level, gender, number of years learning English, etc.

Responses for Section 1 and Section 2 were scored from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 7 ("Strongly Agree") on a Likert scale. For ease of interpretation, the data were collapsed into a three-point scale. For instance, data for "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" were merged and labeled as "Agree."

The questionnaire was translated into Japanese and checked for clarity and accuracy by a Japanese teacher of English. Then it was administered to a test group of university students to ensure its comprehensibility. Considering the feedback of the students, it was revised and finalized.

The questionnaire was made available at SurveyMonkey. The link to the questionnaire was sent to respondents through e-mail.

III. Results

Table 1. Students' perceptions of rubrics

	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Know expectations	24	60	7	18	23	9
Improve performance	22	55	9	23	23	9
Give detailed feedback of strengths and weaknesses	25	63	5	13	25	10
Understand course grades	26	65	8	20	15	6
Perceive evaluation as fair & meaningful	25	64	6	15	21	8
Self-assess skills or performance	24	60	7	18	23	9
Reflect course objectives	26	65	9	23	13	5
Clear and easy to understand	23	58	10	25	18	7
Easy to use	21	53	12	30	18	7

n (total number of respondents) = 40

Generally, the results in Table 1 show that more than 50% of the students had favorable perceptions as regards rubrics or agreed that the use of rubrics had positive effects.

Specifically, 65% of the students thought the use of rubrics enabled them to understand course grades, and the rubrics reflected course objectives. 64% said that it made evaluation fair and meaningful. While 63% perceived it to give them detailed feedback of their strengths and weaknesses, 60% viewed it to enable them to know the course expectations and self assess their skills and performance. 58% believed that the rubrics were easy to understand, while 55% thought it improved performance. 53% perceived rubrics as easy to use.

Table 2. Students' attitude toward rubrics

	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Know expectations	23	58	11	28	15	6
Improve performance	25	63	7	18	20	8
Give detailed feedback of strengths and weaknesses	25	63	7	18	20	8
Understand course grades	27	68	6	15	18	7
Perceive evaluation as fair & meaningful	26	65	8	20	15	6
Self-assess skills or performance	25	64	6	15	21	8
Reflect course objectives	22	55	14	35	10	4
Clear and easy to understand	23	59	9	23	18	7
Easy to use	22	55	10	25	20	8

n (total number of respondents) = 40

As regards students' attitude, more than 50% of the students had a positive attitude toward rubrics or the use of rubrics. 68% had a positive attitude toward the use of rubrics for enabling them to understand the course objectives. 65% and 64% liked it because it enabled them to perceive evaluation as fair and meaningful, and to self assess their skills and performance, respectively. 63% liked it because it improved their classroom performance, and enabled them to know their strengths and weaknesses. Other variables that received positive attitude are rubrics were clear and easy to understand (59%); it enabled them to know course expectations (58%); rubrics reflected course objectives (55%); and rubrics were easy to use (55%).

IV. Discussion

Results revealed that the majority of students utilized in this research had positive perceptions of and attitude toward rubrics or use of rubrics in their courses.

Know what was expected of students. As important as understanding student expectations of the course is knowing the course expectations. In our study we articulated the course expectations as explicitly as possible, so that our students could bring their own expectations in line with the course objectives. We prepared the rubrics in advance and explained them at the beginning of the semester thereby provided students with a better idea of the course expectations. As Allen (1997) emphasizes, descriptors of the task or

assignment should help to guide the students in constructing the final product, and if the descriptors are not well defined, the students will not know what is required of them.

Know what students could do to improve performance. In our classroom, we clearly showed to the student how their work would be evaluated and what was expected from them by using the rubrics. This made our expectations clear, and we showed them to meet these expectations. This in turn helped them set goals and assume responsibility for their learning because they knew what comprised an optimal performance and could strive to achieve it. Furthermore, we also provided them with specific feedback about their areas of strength and weakness and about how to improve their performance. When students estimated their grades prior to the submission of assignments and focused their efforts with the use of rubrics, performance on subsequent assignments improved (Bolton, 2006). Bolton's finding is similar to the that found by Andrade and Du (2005) which states that pre-service teacher education and undergraduate reported that using rubrics helped them focus their efforts, produce work of higher quality and earn better grade.

Give students detailed feedback of their strengths and weaknesses. The rubrics for each of our courses are analytical which provided our students with more informative feedback about their strengths and areas in need of improvement. Students more easily comprehended the reasoning behind our assessment of their work because the areas of strength and weakness in performance were marked on the rubric. When teachers do have something to say about the assignment or task, they can often simply circle an item in the rubric, rather than struggling to explain the flaw or strength they have noticed and figuring out what to suggest in terms of improvements because the rubrics contain detailed descriptions (Andrade, n.d.).

Understand what comprise course grades. Our rubrics define the key aspects of the assignment, and distinguish the characteristics of excellent work from good, mediocre, or poor work. For example, in our writing class, creativity and risk-taking are essential elements of excellent work in our course, so we made sure that we built these attributes into the rubric. Moreover, it was helpful for our students to know in advance that doing everything "right" would earn them an 85%, whereas a 100% would require them to produce something particularly original, insightful, or bold. As Huba and Freed (2000) and Popham (1997) explain, a rubric reveals the scoring 'rules'. It explains to students the criteria against which their work will be judged. More importantly it makes public key criteria that students can use in developing, revising and judging their own work.

Perceive evaluation as fair and meaningful. The analytical rubrics contain a set of criteria, detailed descriptions and level of performance for evaluating student work. These rubrics enabled us to make explicit, objective and consistent the criteria for performance of a given assignment or task. This made grading fair and transparent. In the study of Powel (2001), the results revealed that providing rubrics when handing out and explaining the assignment prompt or brief, as well as the use of rubrics for grading or marking by the

instructor was associated with better student attitudes about fairness and satisfaction with grading (Andrade & Du, 2005).

Self-assess skills or performance. In our classes, we trained our students to use rubrics to assess their own work and that of their classmates. By allowing students to take responsibility of their own learning through self assessment, teachers are empowering their students partly drawing out the authority from the teachers. In a supporting argument, Hendry (1996) stated that by involving students in self-assessment activities which provide students with the opportunity to develop metacognitive and more general learning skills, tutors are empowering students.

Reflect course objectives. As the University of Hawaii at Manoa (2012) emphasizes, in order for the rubric to be successful, the criteria should relate to the course outcomes. This is exactly what we did. When our rubrics were created, the objectives for each course were taken into consideration. Each criterion in our analytic rubrics reflected the course objective.

Clear and easy to understand. We keep our rubrics simple and easy to understand. We limit the use of academic language. We see to it that the criteria or dimensions and descriptions are not vague. We clearly define the levels of quality.

Easy to use. Being able to easily use the rubric means understanding what it is about and how it is used. We observed the following steps suggested by Andrade (n.d.). First, we showed students examples of good and not-so-good assignment, then identified the characteristics that made the good ones good and bad ones bad. Second, we used the discussion of models to begin list of what counts in quality work. Third, we described the best and worst levels of quality, then filled in the middle levels based on our knowledge of common problems and the discussion of not-so-good work. Fourth, we had students use the rubrics to evaluate the models we gave them in Step 1. Fifth, we gave students their task. As they worked, we stopped them occasionally for self- and peer-assessment. Sixth, we gave students time to revise their work based on the feedback they got in Step 5. Finally, we used the same rubric students used to assess their work. The modeling was done many times until the students understood the contents and how to use it. If the students have an understanding of how the rubric works, they will be better able to gear their assignment towards its standards.

V. Conclusion

Generally, students' positive perceptions matched their positive attitude toward rubrics or use of rubrics. Rubrics or use of rubrics may have other benefits for EFL teaching and learning. However, as far as this study is concerned, positive perceptions and attitude were evident in all variables. The use of rubrics enabled students to understand what was

expected from them, improved their academic performance, provided them detailed feedback of their strengths and weaknesses, enabled them to understand their course grades, self-assessed their skills or performance, and provided their with fair and meaningful evaluation of their academic performance. The seven steps that we observed in using the rubrics, namely: looking at models, listing criteria, articulating gradations of quality, practicing on models, using self-and peer-assessment, revising, and using teacher assessment, were believed to have contributed to boosting the learning leverage of rubrics. With the given benefits of using the rubrics which were viewed and received favorably by the majority of the students, EFL teachers or any teacher should not have second thoughts in creating and using them.

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