



## Student-generated scoring rubrics: Examining their formative value for improving ESL students' writing performance



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### ABSTRACT

Rubrics are valued for their potential to clarify teachers' expectations, identify strengths and weaknesses, and direct students toward self-evaluation (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013). While many instructors use rubrics to assess second language writing, students are rarely involved in their development and application. This can leave students without knowledge of how rubrics are created and/or used, inhibiting their motivation and writing performance (Skillings & Ferrell, 2000). This classroom-based study investigated the effect of developing and/or applying a rubric on the writing performance of adult English as a second language learners studying at an intensive English program in the US. Using a pretest-posttest, control group design, four groups completed two summary writing tasks. One class created a rubric, another class practiced scoring with the rubric, while the third class only saw the rubric, and the fourth class served as a control group. Scores were then compared for both summary writing tasks. It was found that the holistic scores on the post-test summary writing task were significantly higher for those students who participated in the development and/or application of the scoring rubric. The findings can raise awareness for including students in the assessment process, resulting in improved writing performance.

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In the assessment of complex performance-based tasks, scoring rubrics are often used to measure students' performance. Despite some of the criticisms leveled against the use of scoring rubrics (see Wilson, 2007), research has generally supported the claim that scoring rubrics can be valuable for a variety of reasons when used to assess students' performance, including: (a) increased consistency of judgment when assessing performance; (b) enhanced consistency of scoring across individuals, assignments, and between raters; and (c) valid judgment of performance assessment that could not be obtained via conventional tests (see Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). In addition, it has been argued that scoring rubrics offer the potential to "teach as well as evaluate" (Reddy & Andrade, 2010, p. 437), particularly when students are directly involved in the development and/or use of scoring rubrics. However, very little research has been conducted regarding which types of student involvement make the biggest difference for improving students' writing performance.

While the findings from some of these studies suggest that involving students in the development and/or use of scoring rubrics can result in improved writing performance, overall, the results from this line of research have been mixed. As Panadero and Jonsson (2013) note, varying results are likely due to methodological differences, most notably the inclusion/exclusion of a control group and the type of intervention used in the study design (e.g., self-assessment, peer-assessment, training on rubric development). Therefore, additional research that draws on these methodological considerations is nec-

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essary to gain a better understanding of which type of student involvement leads to the greatest improvement in writing performance.

While students are often introduced to a scoring rubric prior to or at the end of a writing assignment, they are rarely involved in the development and application of scoring rubrics. This situation is quite common, despite evidence which suggests that the co-creation of rubrics is beneficial to students (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013; Reddy & Andrade, 2010; Wolf & Stevens, 2007). As a result, instructors are missing out on the use of scoring rubrics to help students learn and improve their writing. Thus, the effects of having learners develop and apply scoring rubrics in classroom writing assessments should be more closely considered.

Finally, research regarding the role of scoring rubrics for improving writing performance has primarily focused on instructional contexts that include native speakers (L1) of English. Although this research might help to inform second language (L2) writing instruction and assessment, numerous researchers have acknowledged that there are marked differences between L1 and L2 writers (e.g., Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hinkel, 2015; Hyland, 2002). Furthermore, despite claims that scoring rubrics can be beneficial for the formative evaluation of L2 students' writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013), studies that directly address these claims do not appear to exist in L2 writing research. Therefore, research that specifically investigates L2 writers and their involvement in the development and/or use of scoring rubrics would likely be more informative.

The present study seeks to examine the extent to which different components of student involvement in the assessment process facilitates better L2 writing performance. Drawing on the considerations (both theoretical and methodological) expressed by a number of researchers, as discussed in detail in the following section, this classroom-based study investigates the impact of the development and use of scoring rubrics on writing performance across four groups of English as a second language (ESL) students at an intensive English program (IEP<sup>1</sup>) in the US.

## 1. Review of the literature

Over the past decade there has been a growing number of studies on the formative potential of scoring rubrics in writing (see Panadero & Jonsson, 2013). The majority of these studies have considered the impact of using rubrics when students partake in self- and peer-assessment. However, very few studies have investigated how the process of having students co-create scoring rubrics might impact their writing performance. Furthermore, the studies regarding the formative potential of scoring rubrics have largely been conducted with L1 writers, not L2 writers. In the sections that follow, research regarding the different types of student involvement associated with using scoring rubrics is covered, focusing primarily on studies conducted in L1 writing research. In addition, methodological considerations associated with prior research are highlighted. Finally, an overview of the present study is provided.

### 1.1. Research on viewing a scoring rubric

A number of researchers have claimed that scoring rubrics appeal to teachers and students because they increase the transparency of teacher's expectations regarding the criteria for a quality performance, enhance students' awareness of learning goals, and enable the provision of feedback that can help students to identify strengths and weaknesses in their work (Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008; Panadero & Jonsson, 2013). Despite the general consensus that seeing a scoring rubric prior to a writing assignment will help students to write better, only a small number of empirical studies (exclusively in L1 writing research) have been conducted to investigate this claim.

One such study, from Goodrich Andrade (2001), found that students who viewed a copy of a scoring rubric prior to writing showed better understanding of assessment criteria. In this study, nine groups of middle school students ( $n = 242$ ) in the US were assigned to either a treatment group, which received a copy of the scoring rubric prior to each writing assignment, or a control group, which did not view the rubric. Students in both groups were asked to write three essays. At the end of the study, students were probed to explain which criteria they viewed as being the most relevant when teachers would evaluate their writing. Overall, students belonging to the treatment group were able to identify more of the criteria by which their writing was evaluated (by their teachers). The author concluded that, by allowing students to see the rubric, they were beginning to develop "an understanding of the qualities of effective writing as defined by the rubrics they received" (p.2).

More recently, Howell (2011) explored the impact of allowing 80 undergraduate students to view a scoring rubric in a 200-level course, titled Juvenile Delinquency. Using a pre-post, quasi-experimental design, the author compared the writing performance of students belonging to two different groups, a control group and a treatment group. While the control group ( $n = 40$ ) was not given access to the scoring rubric at any point during the assignment, the treatment group ( $n = 39$ ) had access to the grading rubric when the assignment was first introduced. An independent samples *t*-test revealed that the treatment group significantly outperformed the control group, while a regression analysis revealed that treatment condition was the strongest predictor associated with score assignments. These findings support the results of several other studies that have also investigated the effect of letting students see a scoring rubric ahead of a writing assignment (e.g., Andrade, 2000; Andrade, Wang, Du, & Awaki, 2009; Sundeen, 2014).

<sup>1</sup> Intensive English programs (IEPs) are university-based programs in which students participate in a large number of accelerated English language courses.

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