



Understanding variations between student and teacher application of rubrics



Jinrong Li*, Peggy Lindsey

Department of Writing and Linguistics, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA 30460, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 January 2015

Received in revised form 9 July 2015

Accepted 19 July 2015

Available online 18 August 2015

Keywords:

Writing rubrics

Rubric interpretation

Student and teacher perspectives

ABSTRACT

While rubrics have their limitations, many studies show that they can clarify teacher expectations, and in comparison to a simple score or a letter grade, provide more information about the strengths and weaknesses of students' writing. Few studies, however, have explored the variations between students' and teachers' readings of rubrics and how such differences affect student writing. This article describes the findings of a mixed-methods research study designed to identify discrepancies between students' and teachers' interpretation of rubrics and investigate how such mismatches influence the use of rubrics. For the study, students and instructors in a first-year writing program at a medium-sized state university were provided with a rubric created for end-of-course assessment and asked to share their understanding of the rubric and apply the rubric to a sample student paper previously normed by faculty. The researchers then explored discrepancies between the students' and the instructors' interpretation and application of the rubric in essay evaluation. Data analysis revealed significant differences between faculty and students. The article concludes with suggestions for how to address these differences in the writing classroom.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

While rubrics have been widely used in many disciplines to facilitate both assessment and learning, many instructors continue to question their effectiveness as assessment and/or instructional tools for the writing classroom (Broad, 2003). Research on the reliability and validity of rubrics for writing assessment suggests they can help raters focus more on content and development than mechanics, and can improve consistency in the feedback students receive (Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010). Multiple studies also suggest that rubrics are useful instructional tools that can be used to clarify teacher expectations and guide students to learn to assess their own work against established criteria (Andrade, 1999, 2000; Andrade & Du, 2005; Reddy & Andrade, 2010; Sundeen, 2014; Wang, 2014). Andrade (2000) and Reddy and Andrade (2010) in particular advocate the use of instructional rubrics that can serve as part of formative assessment to support learning (see also Andrade & Du, 2005; Wang, 2014).

Yet various studies also reveal serious flaws with rubrics, including discrepancies among different raters applying the same rubric (Hunter & Docherty, 2011) and inconsistencies as a result of the same rater applying the same rubric to different students. Huang's (2009) review of 20 major empirical writing assessment studies, for example, concluded that a rater's background, experience, training and the type of task all contributed to differences between ratings for Non-Native English

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +001 515 441 3936.
E-mail address: jli@georgiasouthern.edu (J. Li).

Speakers and Native English Speakers. A study by [Lindsey and Crusan \(2011\)](#) also suggested that individual raters might apply rubrics differently based on the rater's assumptions about the writer's ethnicity. Further research questions the extent to which rubrics actually help students improve as writers. [Covill \(2012\)](#), for example, found that students using rubrics did not write better papers than those who were simply required to identify strengths and weaknesses of their own papers. [Wilson \(2007\)](#) asserted that far from helping students improve as writers, rubrics were a liability for students because their feedback was overly generic, making them "ultimately incapable of genuine, specific, ultimately helpful responses" (p. 63) necessary for writers to develop. It seems that for every rubric proponent celebrating rubrics as a way to improve scoring consistency ([Jonsson & Svingby, 2007](#); [Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010](#)) and increase teacher confidence about the fairness of their evaluations ([Silvestri & Oescher, 2006](#)), there is a more cautious or even hostile voice suggesting that rubrics may cause more problems in writing assessment than provide solutions ([Boulet, Rebbecchi, Denton, Mckinley, & Whelan, 2004](#); [Schenck & Daly, 2012](#)).

While our own experiences as writing instructors have led us to concur that rubrics can be useful in instruction and assessment, we also share the common concerns about how to use them: how can we create rubrics which are applied consistently by a single rater, among different instructors, and by students and instructors? There is no simple answer. Studies clearly show that multiple factors contribute to a lack of consistency: (1) different perceptions of what constitute good writing ([Crusan, 2001](#); [Huang, 2012](#); [Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010](#)), (2) the characteristics of the student population ([Green & Bowser, 2006](#); [Lapsley & Moody, 2007](#)), (3) rater bias ([Lindsey & Crusan, 2011](#); [Tyler, Stevens, & Uqdah, 2009](#)) and (4) the use of vague or ambiguous language to articulate the criteria ([Beyreli & Ari, 2009](#); [Fang & Wang, 2011](#); [Schenck & Daly, 2012](#)).

Yet to address any of these factors, we assert that addressing the last – the use of vague and ambiguous language – is the most crucial. It is also perhaps the most challenging aspect of rubric design ([Moni, Beswick, & Moni, 2005](#); [Tierney & Simon, 2004](#)). On the one hand, rubric language must be as precise as possible because vague or ambiguous language will not be accurately or consistently interpreted by its users ([Payne, 2003](#)). Studies indicate that when rubrics contain vague, subjective, or ambiguous terms, raters will assign grades based on their overall impression of a paper rather than the criteria described ([Knoch, 2009](#); [Weigle, 2002](#)). And yet more precise language does not always lead to more effective rubric application. Some research does in fact indicate that rubrics with more detailed descriptors can significantly increase rater reliability and help raters better distinguish different aspects of writing (e.g., [Knoch, 2009](#)), but other studies suggest that expanding explanatory details in rubric criteria is meaningless ([Huang, 2012](#)) and that such rubrics only make subjectivity more visible ([Turley & Gallagher, 2008](#)). The possible gap, then, between what the rubric says and how a reader interprets it has serious implications for a rubric's assessment and instructional value.

Therefore, this study explores how instructors and students interpret the language used in a particular rubric and how they apply the rubric in the evaluation of a sample student paper, as well as how instructors might address such variations through instruction. While multiple studies document the variations between students and teachers in their understanding and interpretation of rubric criteria ([Ecclestone, 2001](#); [Rust, Price, & O'Donovan, 2003](#); [Sadler, 2005](#); [Webster, Pepper, & Jenkins, 2000](#)), few empirical studies have examined such variations and how they might affect learning. Therefore, the current study aims to bridge the gap by examining the variations between student and teacher interpretation and application of writing rubrics. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. To what extent do the instructors differ from the students in their understanding and interpretation of the criteria in the rubric?
2. To what extent do the instructors differ from the students in their evaluation of the sample student paper using the rubric?
3. How do the instructors and the students perceive the intended purpose of rubrics in writing classrooms?

2. Method

The study aimed to identify discrepancies in how instructors and students interpreted a holistic writing rubric and how they applied the rubric in the evaluation of a sample student paper. In the investigation of such variations, we adopted a Convergence Triangulation Model ([Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 64](#)), a mixed-methods design involving concurrent collection and analysis of complementary qualitative and quantitative data on the same topic. We collected two types of quantitative data to identify differences in how the instructors and the students understood and applied the rubric: (1) the frequencies of focal points or keywords highlighted in the rubric; and (2) the scores assigned to the student paper based on the rubric. Concurrent with this data collection, we gathered qualitative data from a focus group interview with the instructors and from students' responses to open-ended questions on a questionnaire to further examine the discrepancies and how such differences may affect the instructors' and students' use of the rubric in the writing classroom.

2.1. Participants

The study participants consisted of 119 students enrolled in the first course of the two-semester composition sequence and five instructors teaching this course in the fall of 2014 at a medium-sized state university in the United States. The five

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/344250>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/344250>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)