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## THE EFFECTS OF USING RUBRICS AND FACE TO FACE FEEDBACK IN TEACHING WRITING SKILL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*Research Article*

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# **THE EFFECTS OF USING RUBRICS AND FACE TO FACE FEEDBACK IN TEACHING WRITING SKILL IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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## **Abstract**

The use of rubrics in assessing the writing performance is very popular. In general, educators in universities use rubrics for a more accurate assessment of students writing performance. The first aim of this study is to investigate how using rubrics in teaching writing skills can affect the writing performance of students. The second aim is to investigate how giving of face to face feedback by teachers can have an influence on students writing performance. To this end, ESL Writing Grading Rubric was used in the teaching of writing skill to the preparatory school students (n=36) to help them understand the targets for their learning and the standards of quality for writing skills in order to improve their writing performance. Also, face to face feedback was given to the writing assignments of students to promote the students' awareness about their writing drawbacks. The qualitative analysis of the findings based on the open-ended questionnaire and focused group interview showed that using rubrics in teaching writing skill and also giving face to face feedback improved the students writing performance. Students reported that by gaining awareness about the rubric, they could check their writing work, give feedback to their peers' work, produce high-quality writings, and got better grades.

*Keywords:* writing skill, writing rubrics, preparatory school students, face to face feedback

## **1. Introduction**

How writing skill is taught and assessed in EFL context is a topic which attracted high interest among researchers around the globe. Also, using rubrics as a way of teaching and assessing students writing skill is more popular than ever in education nowadays. Finson (1998) defines rubrics as a guide to follow when grading assessments or activities. According to Finson (1998), the rubric can be either holistic or analytic. Holistic rubrics are applied when the overall quality of students' responses is assessed. They are more product-oriented than process-oriented. However, analytic rubrics are applied to score very specific responses of students on different parts of an assessment according to the established criteria. Analytic rubrics are more process-oriented than product oriented. Rubrics show what is expected in writing assignments and describe levels of students' writing performance quality (Saddler & Andrade, 2004). Although some studies (Campbell, 2005; Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010) use rubrics only to assess students writing performance, some others (Charney, 1984; Saddler & Andrade, 2004) use them to figure out how analytical feedback provided by using of rubrics can help improvement in instruction and learning of writing skill. As Andrade (2005) and

Schneider (2006) have discussed, rubrics can be used both for instructional and evaluative purposes. Rubrics are frequently used by teachers to grade student assignments but many authors (Saddler & Andrade, 2004; Stiggins, 2001) maintain that they can serve another important role: rubrics can teach as well as evaluate. As stated by Andrade (2000), instructional rubrics refer to different levels of quality of specific assignments such as an essay or a research paper from excellent to poor. They aim to give informative feedback to students about their writing assignments and also assess their works in more detail. Instructional rubrics can have different formats according to the skill involved, but all of them have two common features: (1) list of criteria and (2) degrees of quality. According to Andrade (2000), using of instructional rubrics is beneficial because:

- They are easy to be used and explained;
- They make teachers' expectations very obvious;
- They provide students with more informative feedback about their strengths and weaknesses;
- They support learning;
- They support skills development;
- They support the development of understanding;
- They support good thinking. (p.4)

Most of the students in EFL contexts find writing skills challenging and they struggle with writing when they start their education in preparatory schools after being accepted in universities. This situation in a country like Turkey has some important reasons. Firstly, students do not possess adequate knowledge of writing due to a lack of attention to writing skills in high schools. Secondly, students do not understand what makes a finished writing assignment good because they do not know what their institution and educators expect from them. Thirdly, although the students writing assignments during the classes are provided with written feedback, most of the students cannot understand the reasons for their mistakes and they also cannot figure out the answers. Fourthly, while assessing the writing skill of students in exams, most of the educators assess the students' writings holistically and the criteria and standards for writing skill are kept secret. So, the students cannot understand what counts and how the educators determined their grades. Some students can figure that out on their own, but some others need to receive written or oral feedback from their educators. Using instructional rubrics in teaching writing skill is one of the ways of solving this problem. If a well written instructional rubric which articulates different kinds of mistakes that the students tend to make, gives details about the expectation of institutions and educators, and elucidates the quality of a good writing assignment from excellent to poor is used in our classes in teaching of writing skill then there will be obvious criteria for writing and assessing any kind of writing assignment. According to Lund and Kirk (2002), rubrics guide both educators and students through learning and assessment process with a goal of helping them understand what the students must do to attain mastery of writing skill.

Numerous studies investigated the effectiveness of rubrics in assessing EFL/ESL students writing skill but a few studies (Cothran, 2003; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986; Marzano, 2000) pointed to the effectiveness of using instructional rubrics in teaching and learning of writing skill. For instance, Marzano (2000) reported that rubrics in addition to being an accurate measure of students' learning of writing skill, may even promote students' learning as well. The results of another study performed by Cothran (2003) showed that rubrics are a constructive addition to teachers' methods of teaching as they can offer a meaningful way to plan for and interpret students learning. Fuchs and Fuchs (1986) conducted a meta-analysis on 21 different studies and concluded that teachers who use rubrics to guide instruction and assessment were more

efficacious than teachers who used traditional assessment methods at increasing students' achievement.

However, learning any skill is not a direct result of teacher performance in the classroom. Teacher action will have no effect if there will not be any performance from students. After learning a skill like writing, it is the responsibility of the student to produce and then he/she can expect feedback from their teacher. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback is a "consequence" of performance and generally follows the instruction which provides knowledge or skill. Feedback is what takes places second and has an influential effect on students learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Also, what kind of feedback is needed and works in different classrooms must be investigated. Here in this study, face to face feedback was chosen to be used in classrooms by teachers.

Hence the purpose of this study was to investigate "How using of rubrics in teaching writing skill can affect writing performance of students?" and "How giving of face to face feedback by teachers can have influence on students writing performance?". On the other hand, when feedback is combined with effective instruction in classrooms, it can be very powerful in enhancing learning.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants and Procedures**

A total of 36 ELT students who were enrolled in the preparatory school at Cukurova University took part in this study. After the first achievement test, most of our students started complaining about their grades in the writing section and asked us to reread and regrade their papers. Some of the students also said that they were expecting higher grades. After rereading some papers, we noticed that there is no problem with grading and our students only are not aware of the grading rubric which is used in our school so they cannot figure out what their writing problems and mistakes are. We thought that if our students get some knowledge about the type of criteria that must be met in writing exams, then they can have better performance.

So, all the participating students were asked to write a paragraph/essay in an assigned topic in every class meeting (three per week) for two weeks and immediately after writing performance they were asked to exchange their papers with their classmates and correct each other's mistakes and give a point to their peers' writing performance. After that, face to face feedback about each student's writing performance was provided by their teacher. In the first class meeting of the third week of the study, rubric instruction (Appendix A) was started. ESL Writing Grading Rubric which was very similar to the rubric which is used in our school while grading writing exam papers was chosen and according to the needs of our students was taught. As stated by Andrade (2000), instructional rubrics should be written and explained in a language that can be understood by students. By teaching rubric, we had two aims: firstly, to create student awareness about what their writing performance lack and secondly to let students rely on themselves not the teachers' feedback because sometimes teachers face with time shortage in their classes in giving feedback to all of the writing performances of the whole class and they cannot correct their students mistakes instantly.

In ESL Writing Grading Rubric, some important categories are evaluated:

- (1) Sentences, paragraphs, and format: An excellent essay/paragraph should have complete and easy to read sentences and various conjunctions and transitions should be used to connect these sentences. Also, sentences must be started in different ways and have various lengths. All the sentences must address the task and be relevant to the topic.

- (2) Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary: The best piece of writing may only have 1-2 small errors in this area. High-level grammar and sophisticated vocabulary according to the level of students are expected. Furthermore, using a range of sentence structures and grammar tenses must be used in order to have a high quality piece of writing.
- (3) Thesis statement and topic sentences: To have an excellent piece of writing, these parts must be very well done. How and where to write a thesis statement or a topic sentence and which information should be included in these parts are very important aspects of a good writing.
- (4) Ideas: The ideas have to be expressed in an obvious, logical, and organized way. The supporting examples and information should be strong.
- (5) Task completion, effect on the reader: An excellent piece of writing must provide a conclusion and have to be reader-friendly and easy to understand on a first glance.

After teaching ESL Writing Grading Rubric to our students in two class meetings, they were required to reevaluate and regrade their peers' writing performances which once they had evaluated and graded without using rubric but this time using rubric. From the fourth week of this study, the participating students were asked to write essay/paragraph about assigned topics by using a rubric. Again, they were asked to exchange their writing performances with their peers and evaluate each other's writings by using rubric once in a week. Moreover, the immediate and face to face feedback was provided to all their writing performances by their teachers until the end of the semester. Saddler and Andrade (2000), describe that the quantity and quality of feedback that writers receive while writing process can help them to produce a well-crafted writing performance.

At the end of the semester, an open-ended questionnaire that was developed by researchers of this study and was based on the related literature was given to all participating students and they were required to answer two questions. These questions were about the usefulness of teaching ESL Writing Grading Rubric in learning and improving the students' writing skills and also the efficiency of teachers' face to face feedback on students writing skill's development.

A focused group interview was conducted with all the participating students in five groups of 7-8 and they answered two questions about "How can teaching of rubric in writing skill affect writing performance of students? And "How can giving face to face feedback by teachers influence students' writing performance?". These focused group interviews were all audio-taped and transcribed. The purpose behind doing interview was that it allows researchers to delve into interviewees' world as it allows for asking further explanation spontaneously and thus, minimizes possible misunderstandings. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), focused group interview aims to understand how a particular group of students with the same or similar contexts experience the subject of inquiry and to provide solutions for old and new problems.

### 3. Results

The qualitative data obtained from open-ended questionnaire and focused group interview were analyzed using content analysis procedures. Webber (1990) defines content analysis as "a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text" (p.9). In other words, content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for reducing many words of text into fewer content categories according to explicit rules of coding (Webber, 1990). The thematic analysis method was adopted to interpret the data in this study due to its flexible nature and independent stance from certain theories, which pave the way for the researcher to

self-regulate the research process. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is considered as “a foundational method for qualitative analysis” (p.4).

The analysis of the data obtained from open-ended questionnaires initiated with particular data units and then creating codes, themes, and categories. All interview data were transcribed verbatim, and these transcriptions were reviewed by the researchers for accuracy. The recurring themes were identified and then analyzed. These themes were listed and grouped into similar categories. These data represented the participants’ viewpoints about how teaching writing rubric and giving face to face feedback by the teacher affected the students’ writing performance.

The responses of the participants to two open-ended questions of the questionnaire which elicited their viewpoints about the effectiveness of teaching writing rubric are displayed in Table 1.

*Table 1. Participants’ elicited views about rubric instruction*

Students reported that rubric instruction helped them in:	<i>f</i>
1. Producing high-quality writing tasks	27/36
2. Identifying their strength and weaknesses in writing skill	18/36
3. Understanding institutional and teachers’ expectations	19/36
4. Checking their writing performances themselves	29/36
5. Giving feedback to their peers’ writing performances	30/36
6. Writing better	15/36
7. Getting better grades	25/36

Table 2 illustrates the participants’ viewpoints about teachers’ face to face feedback to students’ writing performance.

*Table 2. Participants’ elicited views about teachers’ face to face feedback*

Students reported that teachers’ face to face feedback helped them:	<i>f</i>
1. To discuss their mistakes with their teachers	24/36
2. To provide correct answers for their mistakes	20/36
3. To learn about the reasons for their writing mistakes	31/36
4. Not to repeat their mistakes again and again	25/36

The content analyses of the qualitative data obtained from a focused group interview yielded interesting expressions about the effectiveness of teaching rubric in writing skill and giving face to face feedback by teachers to students' writing performances. Focused group interview data verified our questionnaire data in other words students viewed the rubric instruction and teachers face to face feedback very positively. Excerpts 1-4 illustrated some of the students' viewpoints about the effectiveness of rubric teaching.

*"I did not know what should I do exactly when I was doing a writing task, especially in the exam. I did not know what exactly they (teachers and institutions) wanted. But after learning about rubrics, I can write better than before and I know in which parts of my writing I have problem". (Excerpt 1)*

*"Before, I could not revise my writing tasks. Now, I could revise and correct them according to what I learned in rubric instruction. I can also give feedback to my peers' writing performance". (Excerpt 2)*

*"By learning about rubrics, I understood the drawbacks of my writing and I tried to solve them. Now, I am aware of my teacher's expectations so I can write better than before". (Excerpt 3)*

*"I think rubric instruction was very useful for me. Before that, I did not give importance to some points while I was doing my writing task. But now I am more careful about things like punctuation and grammatical points. I can say that I can write better than before". (Excerpt 4)*

Excerpts 5-8 shed light on how giving face to face feedback to students' writing performances was beneficial.

*"I think face to face feedback was very beneficial. Previously, I did not know how to correct my mistakes but in face to face feedback sessions, I can discuss my writing problems with my teacher". (Excerpt 5)*

*"When my teacher gives me face to face feedback, I am certain about how I should correct my mistakes". (Excerpt 6)*

*"When I was correcting my mistakes according to my teacher's written feedback, I was not sure about my corrections". (Excerpt 7)*

*"After my teacher's face to face feedback to my writing tasks, I started to write better and not to repeat my mistakes again". (Excerpt 8)*

#### **4. Discussion**

The first research question of this study aims at figuring out whether teaching rubric was beneficial in students writing skill development. The content analysis of the qualitative data of the questionnaire and focused group interview illustrated that teaching rubric was beneficial in developing students' writing skill. Students reported that by gaining awareness about writing rubric they could give feedback to their peers' writing performances, check their own writing performance, produce high quality writing tasks, get better grades, understand institutional and teachers' expectations, identify their strength and weaknesses in writing skill, and finally write better. The present study echoed the findings of previous studies (Cothran, 2003; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986; Marzano, 2000) which showed that teaching of rubric in writing skill is very useful and constructive in developing of students writing performance. Lund and Kirk (2002) stated that rubric can lead both teachers and students throughout learning and assessing procedure in order to make them understand what the students need to do to achieve mastery of the content.

The second research question of this study quests for answers to the question of whether giving face to face feedback to students writing tasks were beneficial in developing their writing skill. The content analysis of participants' responses to questionnaire and focused

group interview questions implied that teachers' face to face feedback to students writing performances were advantageous in developing their writing skill. The participants reported that teachers' face to face feedback helped them to learn about the reasons for their writing mistakes, to discuss their mistakes with their teachers, to provide correct answers for their mistakes, and also gave them awareness not to repeat their mistakes again and again.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it appears that many students want to have rubric instruction in their classes in order to develop their writing skill. Also, they believe that teachers' face to face feedback is better than written feedback and they confirm that face to face feedback promoted their writing skill. Considering the findings of the current study and the relevant literature on teaching and learning writing skill the following implications were drawn for the development of students writing skill.

The findings of the current study according to the students' experiences of writing classes in their preparatory school recommend that students should be aware of the writing rubrics that are used in evaluating the students' writing performances in their schools in order to understand the expectations of their teachers and institutions. Also, with the goal of developing students writing skill, face to face feedback should be given to all the students to make them notice their weaknesses and realize their strengths so that they can evaluate their own writings and make corrections without the help of their teachers and become autonomous learners. In addition, by this way, students will be able to give feedback to their peers' writing performances.

## **6. Implications**

This study indicates some support for using instructional writing rubrics and face to face feedback by teachers to improve students writing skill. Therefore, it would be reasonable to share our expectations and our assessing rubrics as teachers with our students. Also, we should allocate some time to give face to face feedback to our students writing performances in order to enhance their chance of success in learning writing skill.

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## Appendix A

ESL Writing Grading Rubric				
	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Format, Content, & Structure	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. None of the writing is about the topic.</li> <li>2. The essay does not explicitly answer the question.</li> <li>3. The writing is disorganized, having only a body paragraph.</li> <li>4. No logical progression of ideas, no use of transitions between paragraphs.</li> <li>5. Writing needs to be more interesting and mature.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Some of the writing is about the topic.</li> <li>2. The essay answers nearly all parts of the question.</li> <li>3. The writing is somewhat organized, having an introduction and body paragraphs, but missing a conclusion paragraph.</li> <li>4. Some logical progression of ideas in some parts of the essay, but not others; a few transitions, but not throughout the whole essay.</li> <li>5. Writing is somewhat interesting and mature.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Most of the writing is about the topic.</li> <li>2. The essay answers all parts of the question with interesting information.</li> <li>3. The writing is organized, having an introduction, body and conclusion paragraphs.</li> <li>4. Clear, logical progression of ideas; uses appropriate transitions.</li> <li>5. Writing captures audiences' attention</li> </ol>	N/A
Grammar	More than 10 errors in sentence structure, verbs, parts of speech, pronouns, prepositions...	8 to 10 errors in sentence structure, verbs, parts of speech, pronouns, prepositions...	4 to 7 errors in sentence structure, verbs, parts of speech, pronouns, prepositions...	1 to 3 errors in sentence structure, verbs, parts of speech, pronouns, prepositions...
Vocabulary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Poor word choice; most words are used incorrectly; sentences are simple and do not send a basic message.</li> <li>2. No detailed expressions.</li> <li>3. Use of the L1.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Simple word choice; some words are used incorrectly; sentences are simple and send a basic message.</li> <li>2. Almost no detailed expressions.</li> </ol>	Good word choice; some effort is made to use complex sentences and new vocabulary; there are some mistakes but the argument of the essay is clear.	Many new words used correctly; strong efforts to expand the vocabulary; words and expressions are eloquently presented.
Spelling	More than 7 spelling errors.	5 to 7 spelling errors.	3 to 4 spelling errors.	0 to 2 spelling errors.

<https://www.rcampus.com/rubricshowc.cfm?code=GX64387&sp=yes>>Rubric: ESL Writing Assessment (Intermediate)</a>