

The Design and Use of Speaking Assessment Rubrics

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Abstract

Speaking is the most difficult skill to assess objectively and reliably. It involves a combination of different variables that may have no or little correlation with each other, and all of them may need to be assessed separately to avoid or at least to reduce the subjectivity of the assessment. The aim of this study is to investigate the existing practices in design and use of speaking assessment rubrics. It also reveals and discusses the most common rubrics used in international worldwide excepted English language tests, as well as recommendations for the development of the speaking assessment rubrics. This work is believed to be useful for educators to revise their teaching methodology in order to strengthen the alignment between the students' learning outcomes and the assessment of speaking skills in order to increase the benefit of the assessment data enabling teachers to provide more constructive feedback and support the improvement of the English as a foreign language speaking skills.

Keywords: Learning outcomes, rubrics, criteria, assessment, speaking skills, EFL

1. Introduction

Human beings, whether they do it consciously or unconsciously, “create rubrics – guidelines for decisions for evaluation and assessment – in their minds every day” (Quinlan, 2012, p. 2). The rubrics we create in our minds help us to make decisions based on knowledge we have and our current objectives.

The word rubric has Latin origin and it comes from the word red. In online Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), the first listed meaning of rubric is “an authoritative rule” and the last meaning is “a guide listing specific criteria for grading or scoring academic papers, projects, or tests”. Brookhart (2013) explains that the transformation of the colour word to rule or guide goes back to the Middle Ages when the important rules for the conduct of liturgical services were often printed in red to attract the readers' attention.

In education rubrics are often an integral part of a strong, objective and effective assessment tool, also because it is useful for formative (for learning) and summative assessment (of learning) purposes. The main purpose of rubrics is supporting students in the learning process, which is possible by guiding students' activities and also giving them a clearer understanding of their own learning process and progress. Rubrics are indicators of the attainment of learning goals, thus are important for the alignment of learning outcomes with assessment.

2. Definition of the Term “Rubric”

Generally, rubric is described as a set of criteria/rules or guidelines that can be used to assess one's work or success of a task (Berger, 2011). Numerous scholars (Berger, 2011, Brookhart, 2013, Walvoord, 2010, Orlich, et al., 2010) distinguish two primary components of rubric: criteria and standards (also known as scoring scales). Criteria “describes what is evaluated, and standards describe the level of achievement and task involvement in reaching that level” (Orlich, Harder, Callahan, Trevisan, & Brown, 2010, p. 347).

Rubrics, like any other assessment tool, are useful for certain purposes and impractical in others. The major purpose of assessment rubrics is to assess performance. Assessing students' performance examiner can whether observe the process of doing something (for example, oral communication or presentation) or observe the product that is the result of students' work (for example, essay, term paper or project) (Brookhart, 2013).

In educational context assessment according to rubrics does not function well when the performance consists of answers to the questions like multiple choice tests or matching tasks, where there is only one correct answer (they are best assessed as right or wrong). Nevertheless, sometimes even test performance can be assessed with rubrics. For example, how well, appropriately, or how completely the question was answered.

Rubrics can be designed in different shapes and sizes, but generally, four main types of assessment rubrics can be distinguished (Berger, 2011):

- *Checklist* – is a simple list of items designed for both assessor and student to check if every item is presented.
- *Rating scale* – is very similar to checklist, because it consists of a list of items, but in addition to list, it has a scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.
- *Analytic/descriptive rubric* – works on each criterion separately, provides scales for a list of components and a description for each rating. This type of rubric is used to assess important task where each component needs to be evaluated separately.
- *Holistic rubric* – is the one that is used to assess a project or product as a whole. It describes the

performance by applying all the criteria at the same time and making possible an overall judgment about the quality of the work.

The benefits of using rubrics in assessment are multidimensional and directly connected to the purposes they are used for. Thus, rubrics are useful for both teacher and students in using them as an assessment tool, as well as usage of assessment rubrics as instructional tools (Walvoord, 2010). If an assessment rubric is used, it is essential to share them with students before they begin their task or test, so they can use rubric as a guide to a better performance. Using rubrics in teaching and learning has the potential to positively affect the students' attribution of success or failure, removing the students 'mystery' of how assessment is evaluated and providing clear directions for performance that are within the control of the student.

3. Assessment Rubrics Design

To create a rubric Berger (2011) suggests starting from looking for existing rubrics. Nowadays with the help of modern technologies, it is possible to find ready-made rubrics very easy and fast. Analysing rubrics made by others may help to develop the one that is mostly suits the needs of the learner, learning task and program. The creation process of successful and effective assessment rubric must undergo several essential stages (North Carolina State Dept. of Public Instruction, Raleigh. Instructional Services, 2001), so assessor/student should find the answers to the following questions:

- What is the purpose of assessment? It is very crucial to determine the purpose for the assessment. For example, if students are assessed to see if they have enough knowledge to pass to the next level rubrics will be different from the assessment performed to identify instructional needs of individual group of students.
- What are the objectives of the assessment? It is necessary to determine what students are expected to know or be able to do to assess them effectively. Assessors must decide if they want to concentrate on one aspect (for example, speaking), or they want to assess several aspects (for example, listening and speaking) at the same time.
- What is the most appropriate task for assessment? The task is what students actually perform to show their knowledge and abilities. It would be more beneficial and fair if the selected task can be accomplished at many levels (full range of students in the classroom).
- What is the procedure of assessment? Students feel themselves more confident if they are familiar with the format/procedure of the assessment, so anxiety of the assessment will be reduced and the result will be more objective.
- What are the most appropriate scoring criteria for assessing students' performance? Criteria must be designed according to the assessment objectives. It helps teachers/students to understand the requirements and gives them opportunity to develop necessary strategy to reach the goals (Brookhart, 2013).
- What are the most appropriate grading scales for the scoring criteria? Each criteria may be given different weights. The detailed description of the scales helps assessor to grade the students' performance objectively on one hand, and on the other hand, gives students opportunity to predict the total score and later, based on information from the rubric, have clear understanding of their weakness and strengths.
- How to interpret the results of the assessment? The meaning of the assessment results must be explained according to the objectives of assessment, so it can be used by students/parents/teachers to focus on possible improvement. Analysing the performance according to the rubrics, gives opportunity to identify the weakness and strength of a student/performance and to determine the focus of future activities (Walvoord & Anderson, 2011).

Rubrics are very important from very beginning of learning process till the very end. They reflect the purposes and the destination of a program; show what students have learnt, as well as the quality of knowledge they have, and determine the future plans for further improvement. That is why designing the rubrics for assessment teachers must take into consideration every single detail to make their rubrics meaningful and objective.

4. Speaking Assessment Rubrics

Speaking assessment is usually reported as an overall mark on bands scales or score points, in order to provide valid, reliable and consistent results of assessment, that show the learners' speaking achievement/level (Council of Europe, 2014). Assessment scales for speaking skills generally may be distinguished between holistic and analytic.

The holistic method of assessment is used to assess learners' performance as a whole, without judging the component parts (criteria) separately (Mertler, 2001). This assessment is normally used when judgment needs to

be performed very quickly. It may be more appropriate for formative assessment to assess students' work very quickly, where it can be difficult to evaluate students' performance on a set of criteria. Holistic scoring is time saving, however, it does not provide specific feedback for improvement and may cause the difficulties scoring students' work spanning varying levels.

The analytical method is used to judge students' performance first assessing individual parts separately, then the results of individual scores are summed to calculate a final total score. Analytical assessment rubric consists of two parts - criteria and scales (weight). This method of assessment provides useful information for students and teachers about areas of strength and weakness. However, compared to holistic assessment, analytical assessment is time-consuming and, even with a good rubric, assessors may not arrive at the same score (if the criterion is not well-defined) (Mertler, 2001).

Students' performance can be defined using whether quantitative (numerical, for example, grades from 1 to 5), qualitative (descriptive, for example excellent, good, satisfactory, poor, etc.) assessment scales, or a mixture of both labels.

A numerical value can be given to each criteria according to the level of importance. If one criteria is more important than another, it is given more weight (in case of equal importance each criterion has the same weight). The value given to each component depends on the objective of the program and the information desired to be received from assessment.

A qualitative assessment scale gives information about students' achievement/level described by a label, given according to the quality of students' performance. This method of assessment can give a vivid picture of students' achievements, providing information about the quality of their knowledge (for example, a "satisfactory" label means that student passes the exam, but improvement is necessary).

Designing the criteria and giving the weight/label to each component and their descriptions teachers should take into consideration the objectives of the course/program/assessment and students' levels of proficiency. However, if the assessment is conducted, for example, to find out whether students are ready to study in English at a university, all of them may be involved in the same exam without considering their level of language proficiency, where the purpose of assessment is to judge whether the candidates have the appropriate level of proficiency.

Speaking is the most difficult skill to assess objectively and reliably. It involves a combination of different variables that may have no or little correlation with each other, and all of them may need to be assessed separately to avoid or at least to reduce subjectivity of the assessment. "A speaker may produce all the right sounds but not make any sense, or have great difficulties with phonology and grammar and yet to be able to get the message across" (Kitao & Kitao, 1996, p. 2). Effectiveness of speaking may also depend on such factors as listener/assessor's accent, background knowledge, personal attitude toward a speaker and individual biases. Besides that, speaking is judged during the face-to-face interaction (except the situations where speaking assessment is done via computer and the voice is recorded, but the assessment itself is done by human), in real time, and between the examiner and a candidate (Luoma, 2004).

The major aim of speaking assessment is "to identify properties which characterize the spoken English of non-native speaking students of English" (Tracing, 2011, p. 233), which is reached through setting of clear criteria, on which observation and judgment is based (Jones, 2011).

Green (2013, p. 230) defines criteria as "the qualities of a performance on which a rating is based". Brownlie et al. (2004, p. 13) describe criteria as "standards for performance", that shows students what is observed and evaluated. Thus, assessment criteria is an instrument which is used by both teachers and students to draw the way they follow to reach their goals.

Students' performance is more beneficial if they are involved in the setting these criteria, negotiation, and understanding of it. It is essential for students to know not only what task and activities they are required to do and the form of assessment they will be involved into, but they also need to know what they are expected to do to be accounted as successful. These strategies will ensure students that assessment is not isolated from the learning process and that it is an irreplaceable part of their education (Jones, 2011).

It may be not an easy task to design speaking assessment criteria because it is not only the determination of possible criteria that can be used to assess students speaking skills, but also narrowing the list down to the most essential and relevant ones considering the objectives of the program/course/lesson/etc.

As the status (subjective/objective, summative/formative) and the form (prepared presentation, interview, picture description, etc.) assessment is conducted in may vary according to its purposes and the learners to be assessed, there is not one definite set of best criteria that will serve in every situation. To design the most appropriate list of criteria, it is absolutely essential to know for what framework the list is created. There is a list of possible speaking assessment criteria suggested by Knight (1992) that shows a variety of criteria from which teachers may choose the most appropriate ones for particularly their context (students' needs, curriculum/ course objectives, etc.). According to Knight (1992), the list consists of eight various criteria:

- *Grammar* (range and accuracy). Grammar is one of the most often used criteria in assessing students'

speaking, which is usually described as a set of rules by which the language is created, or a set of rules used for combining sentences. Students may also be assessed for the range of grammar they use in their oral performance, which stands for amount of grammatical rules and how accurately/correctly students are able to use them.

Following the grammar rules does have an impact on the comprehensibility of the utterance, so the quality of communication largely depends on it. On the other hand, there is a misleading concept that knowledge of grammar rules and ability to use them in speech is considered as mastering the language itself, however, communication is more than simply following the grammar rules.

- *Vocabulary* (range and accuracy). Vocabulary is another very popular criteria that is used to assess students' speaking skill, which refers to a number, range, and accuracy (choosing the right words and forms of the words according to the particular context) of the words used in a particular subject. Vocabulary accuracy assessment criteria, however, can be incomplete, if it is used separately from sociolinguistic appropriateness of words' selection (i.e., variant/dialect, style, jargon, etc.).
- *Pronunciation* (individual sounds, stress, rhythm, intonation, and linking/elision/assimilation). Assessing students' pronunciation accuracy is usually compared against the native speaker's natural speech production. English is quickly becoming a language of international communication, so more and more people from different countries use it as their first language. That makes it very difficult to set the standards to apply. That is why teachers should focus on only major peculiarities of English language pronunciation (comprehensibility in the first place).
- *Fluency* (speed of talking, hesitation while speaking, hesitation before speaking). Fluency is one another popular criteria in assessing students' oral performance, which is often mentioned in contrast to accuracy. When assessment focuses on fluency, assessors judge students' ability to speak naturally without worrying too much about being completely accurate. The sub-criteria (speed, hesitations) should be decoded correctly because they may vary in the natural flow of speech as well and they may be features of the fluency (for example, fluency is rather the ability to know how and when to hesitate, or when to speak slowly). Moreover, fluency is not something that stands by itself, it depends on the level of language skills - it is hardly possible to produce meaningful speech without appropriate vocabulary stored in their mind, and knowledge of the grammar rules to combine them into sentences.
- *Conversational skill* (topic development, initiative, and conversation maintenance). Conversational skills criteria is described as the ability to maintain a conversation. It assesses speakers' ability to maintain the coherence of his own utterances and with the speech of the interlocutors, taking turns in conversation, using pauses and fillers, correcting oneself, asking for further information and details to develop the topic of the conversation. In addition, the rules of etiquette (politeness norms) may also influence the conversational skills.
- *Sociolinguistic skill* (distinguishing register and style, use of cultural references). This criteria refers to sociolinguistic appropriateness of a speaker, which involves ability to select the right registers and styles, (such as formal and informal) and the balanced use of cultural references. Assessment according to sociolinguistic skills focuses on students' ability to evaluate situations and decide what the right thing to say is in terms of manners, politeness, tactfulness, etc. to be contextually appropriate. Mastering these skills is as important as mastering grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, etc. This criterion is not easy to assess, however, its close interconnection with lexical accuracy may be taken into consideration while observing students' sociolinguistic skills.
- *Non-verbal* (eye-contact and body language). Speaking involves not only producing the words, but also the message expressed with the help of body (posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact) or what is also called non-verbal communication. The message delivered verbally is supported by the non-verbal signs to provide more natural, vivid and clear understanding of the speech.
- *Content* (relevance of arguments and ideas). This criteria refers to logic and consistent arrangement of arguments, ideas, comments, etc. to the speakers' point, leading to better and easier understanding.
- *Pragmatic competence*. Assessment of pragmatic competence aims to measure the ability of a learner to communicate his/her intended message clearly, on the other hand, assess the ability to interpret the received message as it was intended by the interlocutor.

Some exams have a criterion "general impression", which is very important, as, like Gestalt psychologists fairly believe, the whole is not a mechanical sum of the parts.

Criteria used for the assessment of spoken language in the world wide known tests, such as TOEFL, IELTS, Cambridge ESOL, is based on a set of pre-defined factors: range of vocabulary, accuracy, speaking delivery, pronunciation, ability to respond immediately and adequately, and the use of different language instruments. These criteria are used to describe students' knowledge and skills demonstrated during the oral examination. Table 1 shows the criteria and their weight in the assessment of oral proficiency in the different English tests.

Table 1. TOEFL, IELTS and Cambridge ESOL speaking exams criteria.

Exam:	TOEFL	IELTS	Cambridge ESOL
Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaking Delivery • Use of Language • Topic Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluency and Coherence • Lexical Resource • Grammatical Range and Accuracy • Pronunciation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grammatical Resource • Lexical Resource • Discourse Management • Pronunciation • Interactive Communication
Scale	25% (0-30 score scale)	25% (1-9 score scale)	20% - 25%

If we look at the assessment criteria presented in the table 1, we observe that some tests focus on scoring oral performance on a number of analytic (range, phonological control, etc.) and more general (sociolinguistic appropriateness, sustained monologue, etc.) skills. Vocabulary range/accuracy and grammar range/accuracy are measured in all three tests. In TOEFL pronunciation is not mentioned, however, it does not mean that it is not measured. The use of “language” criteria also involves knowledge of how to pronounce words correctly. The same criteria in TOEFL also, in fact, include the range of vocabulary and grammar range/accuracy, but IELTS and ESOL assess them separately.

Fluency is another criteria, that is used, to refer vary considerably. In IELTS it is taken as a separate criteria, but in TOEFL (it is assessed in Speaking Delivery criteria), but in ESOL (assessed in Interactive Communication criteria) fluency is not emphasized in list of criteria.

Interaction, which refers to the ability to initiate discourse, take turns when appropriate during the assessment to keep the conversation going, and ability to connect speaker's own thoughts and ideas to the discourse, is mentioned in TOEFL and ESOL. However, during the IELTS exam students are required to take turns on some stages of the test, but it is not reflected in the public version of assessment criteria (British Council, 2014).

Finally, coherence (connecting the ideas together) and cohesion (joining sentences together), that go hand in hand with each other, are referred to under different labels: In Cambridge ESOL –as “Discourse Management”, in TOEFL –as “Topic Development”, while in IELTS –as “Fluency and Coherence”.

The relevance and importance given to each of the criteria in TOEFL, IELTS, and Cambridge ESOL varies depending on the nature of the test, however, they are in essence the same for all three tests.

Common European Framework of References (CEFR) for Languages (Council of Europe, 2014) scale for spoken assessment involves five different criteria: range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence. These five criteria are the most common ones for oral performance assessment (Roca-Varela & Palacios, 2013).

5. The Use of Rubrics

Quinlan (2012, p. ix) distinguishes three types of teachers in educational world of using rubrics for assessment of students' performance: “those who use rubrics for all of their subjective assignments, those who never use rubrics and prefer to ‘grade with their gut’ concerning subjective assessments, and those new teachers who are just not sure what a rubric is and why it matters”. It is clear that there are hardly any teachers who stand against rubrics. Walvoord (2010), sharing her teaching experience, states that teachers, who were given training on how to construct and use rubrics, accept them immediately, and ask themselves why they did not start using rubrics years ago. Obviously, the use of rubrics is important for successful assessment.

Once the assessment rubric is ready to use, it is necessary to develop a strategy how to use it to benefit the learning process. Of course, strategy may differ according to the purposes of the assessment, but generally, the process of using assessment rubrics undergoes three important stages:

- *Introduction* of assessment rubrics to students. When students are given the rubrics and necessary explanation of what every item stands for, it unpacks the requirements, expectations from students in the assessment task, and some clues about the elements and approaches. There are some possible activities teachers may use to help students to understand the mechanism of assessment rubrics:
 - Sampling (teacher provides samples, or smaller sections of samples, of a complete performance (written work or recorded video/audio of oral performance)¹ ;
 - Practice (students evaluate a performance individually using rubrics);
 - Discussion (students share their ideas about the performance, giving explanations of how they use/used the rubrics.
 - Teacher's feedback (teacher evaluates the same sample, explains why s/he thinks so, and explains how s/he used the rubric to assess the work).

In addition, teachers should show students not only exemplary work to use as example for students to

¹ To use a work or a piece of work, teachers have to ask for permission from the owners of the work. Name or any other personal information has to be erased.

model, but also less successful performance to show “how ‘bad one’ looks like” (Quinlan, 2012, p. 5), which is usually very effective for students’ understanding of what they are expected to know and able to do.

- *Assessment process.* Assessment rubrics provide assessors with a detailed framework for consequent judgment of individual student performance.
- *Assessment feedback.* Rubrics provide helpful information to markers for the provision of systematic feedback on student performance according to each criterion, so students can use feedback information to develop strategy for further improvement. Scoring according to rubrics also provides students a vivid picture of how grades are derived.

The main point about using criteria for assessment is that they should be primarily used to improve the learning outcomes, as in formative assessment. Even summative assessment can be used to improve students’ learning, by introducing the criterion and standards beforehand, instead of making immediate judgments based on intuition.

The decision on whether to use or not to use rubrics to assess students’ performance is based on many different factors, such as time, purpose, status, etc., as well as understanding the pros and the cons of using rubrics for assessment (Table 2).

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of using assessment rubrics (designed by the researcher).

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gives information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ about what will be assessed ○ standards that need to be met ○ about where students are in relation to goals • increases consistency/objectivity in assessor rating of performance/products/understanding • provides teachers with data to support grades • enables teachers to see what a particular student does well and what is need to be developed • helps teachers to give feedback to their students • provides information about the course (content, teaching methodology, etc.) and helps to make decisions about possible improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • requires practice to apply well • one and the same rubric cannot be applied to every task • may be too complex, so students may feel overwhelmed with the assignment • design and application is time-consuming • forces students to focus on some particular components, which may prevent them from taking initiatives to explore learning • when the assessor(s) all the time write something in their papers, it may cause student anxiety • assessors, following the criteria in the rubric, may not hear the whole speech

The most of the disadvantages mentioned in the table above usually are caused by the lack of competence. That is why to be able to design and use speaking assessment rubrics effectively teachers may need special training and practice. For example, design and application of rubrics will take less time if a teacher knows where to find the ready-made rubrics, how to adapt them to her/his students, or how to design rubrics her/himself, etc. together with the sufficient practice the time spent on preparation and use of rubrics will be substantially reduced.

6. Conclusion

Objective assessment is necessary, as students need to feel they are fairly assessed, on the other hand, subjective assessment permits to assess students’ analytical skills, creativity, etc. Whenever we deal with subjective assessment, the use of rubrics is one of the most important parts of the assessment procedure in the educational sector for assessing students in a formative and a summative way. The use of rubrics is highly recommended by scholars for more than just one aspect. For example, they are good for detailed feedback to students after and during an assessment. Another meaningful use of rubrics is the guidance of students and their improvement in learning, which is very important for the quality of an educational institution at the end. The development and the use of rubrics are challenging, but the rewards that educators, students, and parents receive deserve the effort.

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