

# Students' perception towards rubrics in efl speaking classrooms: a case study at a university in Viet Nam

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**Abstract:** Speaking is one of the important but difficult skills of English, and teaching speaking requires educators to have different techniques in order to gain the highest results in their speaking lessons. This paper investigates students' attitude towards the use of rubrics in teaching English speaking in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU), and the effects of the use of rubrics in improving their speaking skills. This study is supposed to be practical for both educators and students in the application of rubrics in English speaking classes and the university and in Vietnamese contexts in general.

**Keywords:** Rubrics, EFL, speaking, English-majored students

## 1. Introduction

In the current globalisation, English is considered as a popular language and one of the main subjects in schools, colleges and universities. Both public and private school systems provide English classes for students. Language centers have been springing up in many cities in Vietnam, especially in big cities to meet these everincreasing needs of the communities. English teaching and learning English has proved itself to be a necessity in the educational system of Vietnam. English, especially the speaking skill, requires students to practice more and more because it can help them in every aspect of their lives and work.

Having being a teacher of English for years, the author has found students' speaking skills are not assessed exactly and effectively. Speaking skill is almost ignored and students almost make no progress in this skill due to various reasons, such as lack of visual teaching aids, lack of parental attention, and lack of time for practice. Being aware of these difficulties, the author tries to find out and apply techniques that can help students overcome the problems students may encountered in their speaking.

Human beings, whether consciously or unconsciously, create rubrics - guidelines for decisions on evaluation and assessment - in their minds every day (Quinlan, 2012). The rubrics people create in their minds help them to make decisions based on knowledge they have and their current objectives. By using rubrics with clear academic league tables along with a list of specific requirements in English speaking to achieve that score, the teacher can help students identify goals and requirements. Rubrics also help students select the right ideas, which are reasonable

to express their thoughts and feeling in speaking. With clearly-set rubrics, students can know how to organize ideas logically, and as a result, they can have more passion in learning how to speak English more confidently in communicative activities and in oral tests in their language curriculum.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary lists the first meaning of "rubric" as "an authoritative rule" or as "a guide listing specific criteria for grading or scoring academic papers, projects, or tests". Berger (2011) describes rubric as a set of criteria/rules or construction which can be applied to assess one's work or success of a task. Rubrics can be produced in various shapes and sizes, but in general, Berger (2011) forms it into four main types: (i) checklist, (ii) rating scale, (iii) analytic/descriptive rubric, and (iv) holistic rubric.

The advantages of applying rubrics in assessment are numerous and instantly connected to the purposes they are used for. Rubrics are helpful for both teachers 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 important to share them with students before they start their task or test, so they can use rubrics as a construction to a better performance. It is a positively potential influence to students' attribution of success or failure when using rubrics in teaching and learning. Rubrics can remove the students' "mystery" of how assessment is carried out and provide clear directions for performance that are within the control of the students.

## 3. Methodology

The research was conducted at TDMU which is located in Binh Duong province. This university

was chosen because it was the university where the researchers were working. It was also because speaking rubrics had been applied in this university; however, the effects of this application had never investigated. The study aims to figure out the students' feedback towards the use of rubrics in speaking lessons and in improving their speaking skills. Towards this aim, the study seeks answers to the two research questions: (i) *What are students' attitudes towards rubrics?*; (ii) *Do rubrics help improve students' speaking performance?*

The design of this research is almost quantitatively. The rationale for this approach is that quantitative data and results will draw the whole picture of the research problem under investigation. Quantitative research is "connected with the production of numerical data that are "objective in the sense that they do not exist dependently of the researcher" (Denscome, 2010, p.237). The participants included 215 randomly-selected second year English-majored students at TDMU. These students had been experienced with the use of rubrics in their speaking classes. The data collected from the questionnaire were then processed and displayed by tables and charts for analysis.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

##### 4.1. Findings

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed a grouped into the two questions mentioned above.

a) Students' attitude towards the use of rubrics in speaking classes

*Table 1. Students' responses related to their attitude towards the use of rubrics in speaking classes*

Questions	A	Responses (N=215)				
		B	C	D	E	
1	Do you think rubrics should be shared before a speaking activity?	165	37	11	2	0
	A. completely agree	78.76%	15.20%	5.11%	0.93%	0.00%
	B. agree					
	C. no idea					
	D. disagree					
	E. completely disagree					
2	How do you feel about the rubrics in your speaking classes?	161	43	7	4	0
	A. very interesting	74.89%	20.00%	3.25%	1.86%	0.00%
	B. interesting					
	C. No idea					
	D. uninteresting					
	E. completely uninteresting					

As can be seen from Table 1, 78.76% of the students highly appreciate rubrics. It can be revealed

that sharing rubrics before doing the speaking activity is extremely significant. Rubrics can make students fully understand the way or the technique to meet the requirements of speaking skill. It permits them to achieve a greater sense of control over what they have spoken. Fortunately, not many students have negative attitudes towards the sharing of rubrics in before speaking activities, with the percentages of the students choosing options C (no idea), D (disagree), and E (completely disagree) being 5.11%, 0.93%, and 0.00% respectively.

In response to the questions about students' feeling about the rubrics used in their speaking classes, most of the students agreed upon the idea that the rubrics used were very interesting (161 out of 215 students, accounting for 74.89%), interesting (43 out of 215 students, accounting for 20%). Fortunately, very few students chose option C (no idea) or D (uninteresting) with the frequencies being 3.25% and 1.86% respectively, none of the students chose option E (completely uninteresting)

b) Students' perception on the effectiveness of rubrics in improving their speaking skill

*Table 2. Students' responses related to their perception of the effectiveness of rubrics in improving their speaking skill*

Questions						
	A	B	C	D	E	
3	How effective do you think rubrics can help you to improve your speaking skill?	135	56	17	5	2
	A. Very effective	62.81%	26.04%	7.90%	2.32%	0.93%
	B. Effective					
	C. no idea					
	D. Ineffective					
	E. Completely ineffective					
4	Do you think rubrics can help you develop your speaking accuracy?	140	57	16	2	0
	A. completely agree	65.12%	26.51%	7.44%	0.93%	0.00%
	B. agree					
	C. no idea					
	D. disagree					
	E. completely disagree					

As seen from Table 2, 88.85% of the students agreed that rubrics help them develop their speaking skills effectively. These students were almost enthusiastic and motivated by the use of rubrics in their speaking classes. After a series of activities with the use of rubrics, students

demonstrated significant improvement in their speaking ability as well as they were also found to be quite fluent and accurate in their speaking. They also felt more confident to speak English in real life situations as well.

Regarding the question ““Do you think rubrics can help you develop your speaking accuracy?””, 91.63% of the students showed their agreement or even complete agreement. Only 2 students (0.93%) showed their disagreement with the use of rubrics in developing their speaking accuracy. Clearly, using rubrics can help students improve their speaking ability, especially developing their speaking accuracy.

#### 4.2. Discussion

Speaking is the best way to fall in line with the world. However, it is a complicated process which involves a number of cognitive and metacognitive activities such as brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting, and revising. Learning to speak is difficult especially for those speaking a second or a foreign language in academic contexts since they do not know how to express their ideas effectively. As effective speaking is considered a problem for most EFL learners, it is necessary to find out teaching techniques that can help learners improve their speaking performance.

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the implementation of rubrics is effective in motivating students to learn, in helping them to operate and manage the ideas for speaking activities. For many students, speaking is considered the most difficult skill to master. Among major problems include how to generate ideas and how to express these ideas well. To overcome these problems, an outlining strategy in the form of rubrics is proposed to be applied in teaching speaking. Many students find speaking difficult, and they find getting started the most difficult part of speaking. Rubrics can reduce these difficulties by giving students a whole strategy to get them started. With speaking rubrics, ideas are freely associated and spoken out without pressure, thus reducing tension and resistance in speaking. Rubrics also aid the recall of existing memories.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations can be made:

*For the teachers:* Sharing rubrics is a technique which will lead students to be more independent; thus it is good to be applied in both small and big classes. It is simple, fun and arousing creativity. That is why,

it is recommended for teacher to make the best use of rubrics in their speaking class.

*For the students:* Sharing rubrics is a simple technique which can be used for speaking activities. The use of rubrics is helpful not only in the learning process in the language classroom but also in other speaking activities, such as in operating and controlling ideas, opinions and thoughts. As a result, it is suggested that students should learn how to use rubrics in their language learning effectively.

*For future researchers:* A similar research with wider samples and varied population characteristics is also promising.

In educational environment, rubrics play an integral part as a strong, objective and valuable assessment tool, also because of its usefulness for formative (for learning) and its summative assessment (of learning) purposes. The main objective of rubrics as a teaching tool is to support students in the learning process, which is made possible by constructing students' activities and also helping them understand more clearly their own learning process and progress. Rubrics are also indicators of the achievement of the learning targets, therefore, they are essential for the alignment of learning outcomes and assessment.

#### 5. Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that sharing rubrics before speaking lessons is an effective teaching technique for teaching English speaking to English-majored students at TDMU in particular and English language learners in general. Rubrics are simple to use, and they can arouse students' sensitivities in creating and controlling their ideas. Students can be more motivated and encouraged to speak English and improve their speaking skills through the use of rubrics.

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