

## ***Writing Assessment: Use of Analytical Rubrics to Assess Essay Writing –Case of Third Year LMD Students of Biskra University***

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### **Abstract:**

This work presents the benefits of using rubrics to develop students writing process, and to help the evaluator to enhance both writing assessment and instruction. In a group of 20 undergraduate students, an assignment to write an essay was set followed by rubrics to recognize those students' weaknesses to write an essay. These rubrics clearly served in rethinking the classroom instruction and assessment of writing. They help to integrate certain procedures in the teaching of essay writing on part of the instructor in a formative classroom assessment. On part of the students, they serve them to enact a student-centered assessment that picture their weaknesses as well as their strengths. The use of rubrics enables both the instructor and the student to improve the writing performance.

**Key words:** assessment rubrics, essay writing, process genre based approach, formative assessment, student-centered assessment

### **المُلخَص:**

هذا البحث يعرض فوائد استعمال نماذج التقييم التحليلي من أجل تطوير مستوى الكتابة لدى الطلبة؛ وكذا كيف لهذه النماذج أن تساعد المقيم كي يحسن من تقييم و تدريس قدرة الكتابة لطلبة. و على هذا الأساس تم إخضاع مجموعة من الطلبة متكونة من 20 طالب في مرحلة التدرج إلى كتابة مقال متبوع بنماذج التقييم التحليلي ليتعرف هؤلاء الطلبة على نقاط الضعف بالنسبة لهذه المهارة. هذه النماذج ساعدت بشكل واضح في إعادة التفكير في طريقة تدريس و تقييم قدرة الكتابة في أقسام اللغة الانجليزية في هذا الطور بالذات. و كذا ساعده في إدماج بعض الإجراءات في تدريس المقال علي وجه الخصوص ضمن ما يسمى بالتقييم المرحلي. و هذا من جانب الأستاذ المدرس لمقياس التعبير الكتابي.

أما من جانب الطلبة؛ فهذه النماذج التقييمية ساهمت في إرساء مقترح يرتكز على الدور الأساسي للطلاب في تقييمه الذاتي لكتابه بإعطاء صورة عن نقاط الضعف و قدراته في ذلك.

## **1. Introduction**

The use of rubrics to assess writing emerged from the unclear weaknesses on the part of the student. In Biskra University, most of the students fail to write an essay in terms of its structure as well as the language they use. We attempted to answer the question why these students tend to fail in writing an essay in an academic setting. Accordingly, we made an interview with these students to discover the ignorance of rubrics in most of their writings evaluations. Therefore, we chose to use analytical rubrics to assess their writings. This work led to integrating techniques and strategies that were flourished in the process-genre based approach in the writing instruction, and the principles of formal academic language. Basically, we conducted this research to promote the writing instruction and assessment of Biskra University.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Approaches to academic writing**

Writing is the process of expressing one's ideas using the language material that he/she memorized along one's learning processing. The writer interprets these ideas into composition to a certain audience using the language material that conveys his/her thoughts clearly. In this process, two partners in a text play roles of coding and decoding thoughts. The first partner is the writer who encodes his/her thoughts using a target language that one's second partner shares. The second partner is the reader whose role is to decode these thoughts based on his language register. Generally, writing is the process of forming a text that makes a bridge between the reader and the writer.

Research on teaching writing in a foreign language initiated in the late 1960s, most efforts were devoted to improving techniques for teaching writing. Early writing was viewed as a product mainly concerned with the knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development is mainly the result of the imitation of the input in the form of texts provided by the teacher<sup>1</sup>. It is; therefore, teacher-centered approach as the teacher becomes the arbiter of the models

used<sup>2</sup>. These efforts yielded the process approach which helps students to work through several stages of the writing process. However, efforts changed trends towards the nature of writing in various situations. This, then, emerged the genre approach which focuses on models and key features of texts written for a particular purpose and audience.

In the process approach, a teacher typically makes students follow the steps of prewriting, writing, revising, and editing before achieving the final product, and this sequence teaches students how to write. Writing is a thinking process, and a writer produces a final written product based on his/her thinking after she/he goes through the thinking process.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, in the genre approach, samples of a specific genre are introduced, and some distinctive characteristics of the given genre are pointed out so that students notice specific configurations of that genre. Swales (1990) identified a genre as “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes”.<sup>4</sup>

Students attempt to produce the first draft through imitating the given genre. Thus, a synthesis of the three approaches: product/process/genre gave birth to a fourth approach to writing which is the process-genre based approach. “Writing development happens by drawing out the students' potential (as in process approaches) and by providing input to which the students respond (as in product and genre approaches)”<sup>5</sup>.

## **2.2. Writing assessment rubrics**

Rubrics are assessment tools that are used to measure student's written work. They are tools to evaluate student's performance based on a full range of criteria rather than a single numerical score. Various definitions were set to better draw the lines of a rubric; however, Andrade (2000) set a commonly accepted definition that a rubric is a document that articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing the criteria, or what counts, and describes levels of quality from excellent to poor<sup>6</sup>. On other hand, rubrics are of two types: analytical

and holistic. Analytical rubric identifies and assesses components of a finished product. Holistic rubric assesses student's work as a whole.

Rubrics can teach as well as evaluate. They are used to grade student, but they can serve another. They play a great role when used as a formative, student-centered approach to assessment<sup>7</sup>. It helps students to develop a "vision of success" and "make dependable judgments about the quality of their own work"<sup>8</sup>. Hafner and Hafner (2003) added that undergraduate students can be effective users of rubrics; they represent an effective strategy for teaching and learning in a university context<sup>9</sup>.

A rubric is basically a tool used by evaluators to evaluate essay. Hence, the students can make use of rubrics to write their essay as rubrics help them to meet the required standards stipulated by the university. These standards are the areas of assessment on which the evaluators estimate the nature, quality, extent or significance of an essay. These areas are represented in the format of the essay, development of ideas, sentence structure, organizational pattern, choice of words. Andrade (2000) stated that the criteria are the claim made in essay<sup>10</sup>. The claim is supported by reasons against it which are organization, voice and tone, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions. Rubrics prove its reliability and its validity in assessing essays at a university level. Rezaei & Lovorn (2010) prove in their study

"The use of rubrics for evaluating students' writing emerged from a general dissatisfaction, among teachers and administrators, with traditional essay grading strategies. In today's educational environment of high stakes assessment, many educators regularly and confidently employ rubrics as a way to assess students' work. This is an indication that rubrics are highly regarded as tools that increase reliability and validity in assessment."<sup>11</sup>

A rubric can then facilitate the teaching and learning process; it rather makes it quick and accurate.

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### **3. Methods and Materials**

#### **3.1. Participants**

A total number of 20 participants, all of whom were third year LMD students of Biskra University, take part in this work. These participants' ages ranged from 20 to 29; about 16 were female and 4 were male. They were exposed to writing instruction during their five semesters. Starting from the sentence structure, they learnt the techniques of writing a paragraph; ending with essay writing they covered their program. They studied writing techniques in 180 minutes per week; divided into two sessions of 90 minutes for each one.

#### **3.2. Experiment**

##### **3.2.1. Pilot study**

The participants were expected to respond to an assignment which was to write an essay about any free topic in 60 minutes. This was devoted to observe how the students process the academic essay, and the nature of language they use in an academic setting. Through a set of analytical rubrics of essay assessment, student's written work was evaluated, and brought back to them who used them as a self-assessment tool(see below). The standards were ranged from poor to excellent.

##### **3.2.2. Classroom test: essay writing processing**

Based on the use of assessment rubrics, the 20 students were exposed to a set of drills to train them to process writing through the tenets of process genre based approach to writing. In other words, they were being trained on following the steps of prewriting, writing, revising, and editing before achieving the final product. Furthermore, they were also exposed to a set of drills that clarified that while at university; they should write using an academic language that represent formality of academic paper which is different from those of business and creative writing.

Following the steps of academic writing process, there was an example to learn in the handouts in order to gain time which was a feedback to processing writing. Hence, they were expected to follow

the first step till the final step of processing an essay. They choose the topic and limit the thesis statement. They use listing techniques and sometimes clustering techniques to write item that they mapped out about the topic. Then, they were to write their first draft.

### **3.2.3. Evaluation and feedback**

To achieve the above, the students in the classroom were following the example of an argumentative essay which was entitled “*owning a car while at university*”. They followed the instructor step by step using the board. We wrote the topic and narrowed it; they chose free topics and narrowed them. We listed items that we mapped out to be discussed in the essay, and so did they with the rest of steps of writing process till we reach the first draft.

The same previous rubrics for assessing essay writing were used to evaluate the students’ written works. They process essays using the previous rubrics that were helpful to them; they serve them in enhancing writing performance to be graded by the end from poor to excellent. Students’ written work was then evaluated in a continuous assessment at classroom. Such a rubric gave a clear report evaluating the student writer’s real writing deficiencies.

### **3.2.4. Instruments:**

The third year LMD students at Biskra University were primarily asked to follow the only instrument which was a sample of argumentative essay. In a form of printed handouts of around 20 copies, the students had a sample to follow from the first step till the last one with exercise involved when reaching each step. The students’ task was to follow the steps of processing an academic essay with the instruction of the teacher.

## **4. Results**

In the following diagrams, we display the results of the experiment starting from the pilot study till the integration of the process genre approach using the analytical rubrics for essay writing. The diagram in the left displays the introduction before integrating the process-genre

approach tenets; whereas, the diagram in the right is after using the rubrics that were to help student to self assessment

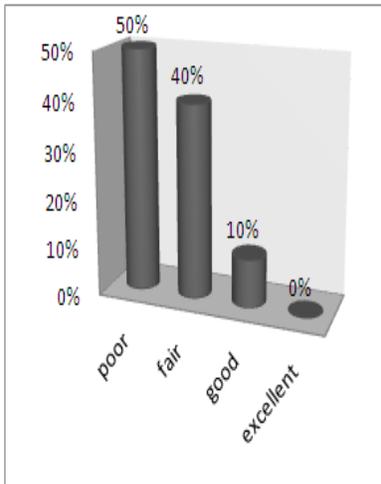


Fig 01: Introduction BEFORE

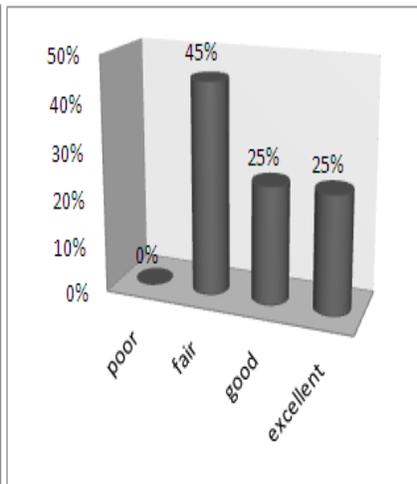


Fig 02: Introduction AFTER

10 among 20 students wrote poor introductory paragraph with unclear thesis statement; 8 of whom wrote fair introductory paragraphs with fairly clear thesis statements. Good introductory paragraphs were written only by 2 students; however, there were no

excellent introductory paragraphs. In the second experiment, the number of student who wrote excellent introductory paragraph with clear thesis statement was 5, and the number of students who wrote good paragraphs was 5 and 9 were fair paragraphs with a fairly clear thesis statement, but there was no poor introductory paragraphs.

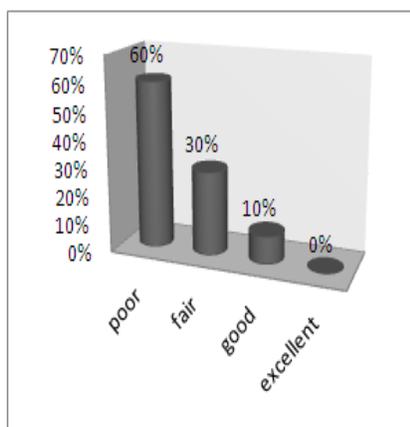


Fig 03: Body Paragraphs BEFORE

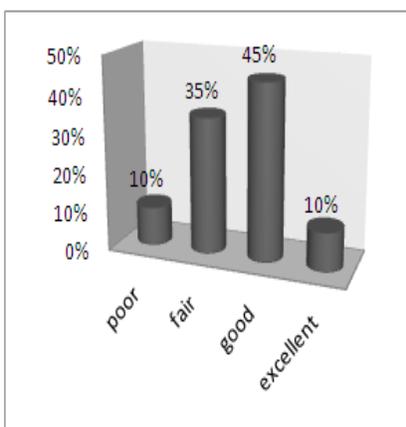


Fig 04: Body Paragraph AFTER

12 among 20 students wrote body paragraphs that do not sufficiently support the thesis and are not organized; whereas, 6 wrote fair body paragraphs that attempt to support the thesis statement. Only 2 students wrote good body paragraphs; no student wrote excellent paragraphs. After the second stage of the experiment, the students with poor body paragraphs were only 2, with fair body paragraphs were 7, with good were 9 and with excellent paragraphs were 2.

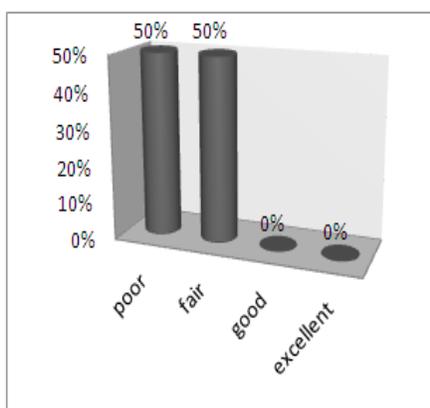


Fig 05: Supporting and developing details BEFORE

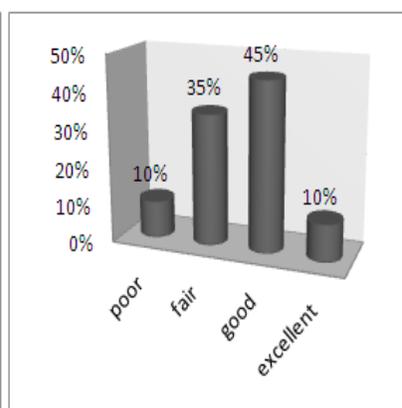


Fig 06: Supporting and developing details AFTER

10 among 20 were poor body paragraphs with examples and explanations that are unclear and insufficient; they provide little support to the thesis statement. The rest of the students wrote fair body paragraphs with fair but insufficient supporting details. There were neither good nor excellent supporting details in the body paragraph. In the second stage, there were 2 poor supporting and developing details, 7 fair paragraphs supporting and developing details, 9 good supporting and developing details and 2 excellent supporting and developing details.

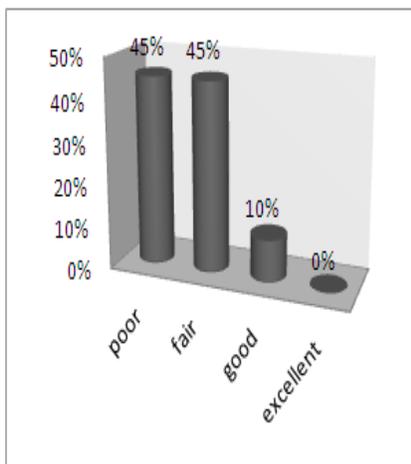


Fig 07: Conclusion BEFORE

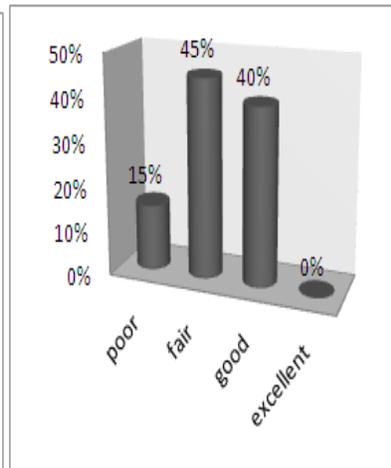


Fig 08: Conclusion AFTER

9 poor and 9 fair conclusions were among 20; 2 were good conclusions which sum up the thesis and reinforce it well. No excellent conclusion that clearly restates the thesis reinforces the major points. In the second stage, 3 were poor conclusions sum up the thesis poorly with little reinforcement. 9 were fair, 8 were good and NO excellent conclusions.

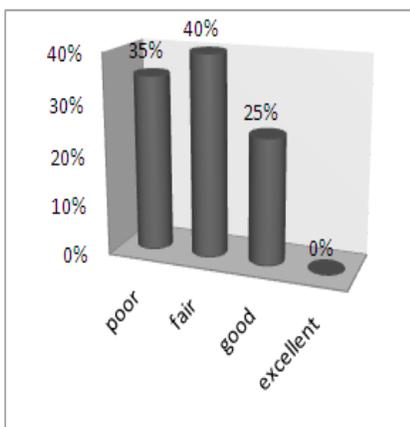


Fig 09: Grammar/ spelling/ punctuation BEFORE

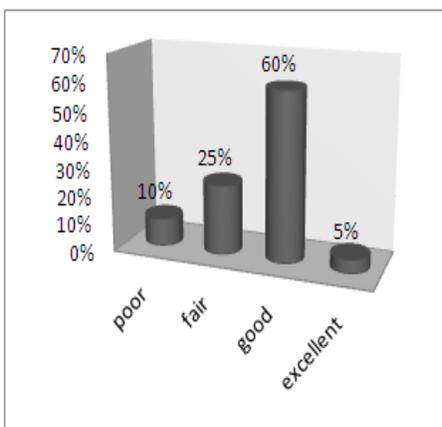


Fig 10: Grammar/ spelling/ punctuation AFTER

Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are poor with frequent errors in 7 paragraphs. 8 were fair with some obvious errors, and 5 were good with accurate and few errors. However, there was no excellent paragraph with accurate and perfect. In the second stage, 2 students keep writing with poor spelling, grammar and punctuation, 5 with fair spelling, grammar and punctuation. 12 students wrote with good spelling, grammar and punctuation. 1 student wrote with excellent spelling, grammar and punctuation.

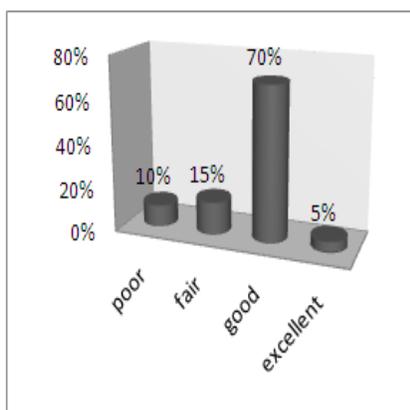


Fig 11: Word choice: use of formal Academic language BEFORE

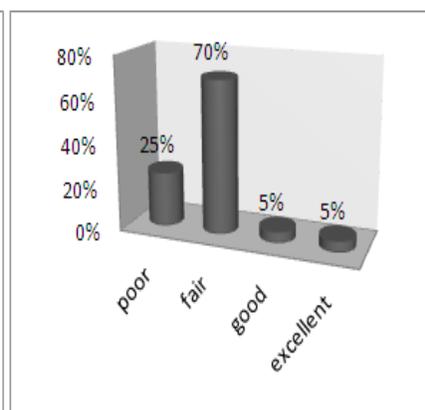


Fig 12: Word choice :use of formal academic language AFTER

5 students were writing with poor formal academic language; whereas, 14 were writing fair formal academic. Good formal language was for just one student; no one wrote with excellent formal language. In the second stage, 2 keep using informal language; 3 used fair language, 14 wrote with a good formal language, and one wrote with an excellent formal language.

## **5. Discussion**

In the above diagrams, the use of rubrics for assessing essay writing proved to be valid and reliable. The rubrics being applied purposefully helped third year LMD students to be exposed to a new strategy to enhance their writing and even their academic language in a more academic setting. As a result, these rubrics help the instructor to achieve his/her formative assessment at EFL classes. They also proved to be good authentic tools for assessing written works at a university level.

On part of the student, assessment rubrics provide the students with a self assessment tool that make them recognize their weaknesses as well as strengths. They confirm to be a student-centered assessment approach by itself; they enhanced the students' writing performance as it is shown in the figures. The use of rubrics in assessing essay writing proves its effectiveness in a continuous classroom assessment for both the instructor/assessor and the students. These results reveal the key aspects of academic self-regulation that involves both goal-setting, planning, self-judgment, and self-reaction<sup>12</sup> (Zimmerman 2000)

## **6. Conclusion**

Based on this study, one can consider the rubrics in assessing essay writing as a key of success in the learning process. Process-genre based approach served as a facilitator to integrate strategies that better enhance students' language production in writing. In other hand, analytical rubrics of assessment better pictures the weaknesses and the strengths of the students. The two trends in English language assessment emerged a new vision in the teaching of writing in Biskra University.

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