



FACILITATING THE EVALUATION OF EFL STUDENTS' PARAGRAPH WRITING EXAMS THROUGH DEVELOPING AN ANALYTIC RUBRIC

Sarra FELLAHI

Associate Professor, Sétif 2 University
Department of English. Sétif 2 University
s.fellahi@univ-setif2.dz

Abstract : Teaching writing presents significant challenges, particularly in the evaluation of students' written work. Despite the considerable time that writing teachers invest in reading and comprehending their students' compositions, they often struggle to provide fair assessments and appropriate scores, especially during examinations. To address these challenges, the present study explores the effectiveness of a paragraph analytic rubric as a tool for assessing students' writing. This rubric aims to unify evaluation criteria and ensure consistent scoring across all students. Developed by the researcher, the rubric has been implemented by second-year EFL writing teachers at the Department of English, Sétif 2 University, during the first semester writing exams over three consecutive years. In this action research project, teachers participated in a questionnaire and focus group discussion that assessed their satisfaction with the paragraph rubric, revealing positive feedback regarding its utility in grading exams. The findings from this research contribute to the establishment of clear assessment criteria for formal exams that require paragraph writing. By employing this rubric, the study seeks to enhance the reliability and fairness of writing assessments, ultimately improving both teaching practices and student learning outcomes in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Analytic rubric, Exam Evaluation, Paragraph writing, Rubric creation, Writing teacher.

FACILITER L'EVALUATION DES EXAMENS DE REDACTION DE PARAGRAPHES DES EFL ETUDIANTS GRACE AU DEVELOPPEMENT D'UNE GRILLE D'EVALUATION ANALYTIQUE

Résumé : L'enseignement de l'écriture présente des défis significatifs, notamment dans l'évaluation des travaux écrits des étudiants. Malgré le temps considérable que les enseignants de l'écriture consacrent à lire et à comprendre les compositions de leurs élèves, ils ont souvent du mal à fournir des évaluations justes et des notes appropriées, en particulier lors des examens. Pour relever ces défis, la présente étude explore l'efficacité d'une grille analytique de paragraphes comme outil d'évaluation des écrits des étudiants. Cette grille vise à unifier les critères d'évaluation et à garantir une notation cohérente entre tous les étudiants. Développée par le chercheur, la grille a été mise en œuvre par des enseignants de rédaction en deuxième année d'anglais langue étrangère au Département d'anglais de l'Université Sétif 2, lors des examens de rédaction du premier semestre pendant trois années consécutives. Dans ce projet de recherche-action, les enseignants ont participé à un questionnaire et à une discussion en groupe focal qui ont évalué leur satisfaction à l'égard de la grille analytique, révélant des retours positifs concernant son utilité pour la notation des examens. Les résultats de cette recherche contribuent à établir des critères d'évaluation clairs pour les examens formels nécessitant la

rédaction de paragraphes. En utilisant cette grille, l'étude vise à améliorer la fiabilité et l'équité des évaluations écrites, améliorant ainsi à la fois les pratiques pédagogiques et les résultats d'apprentissage des étudiants dans des contextes d'EFL.

Mots-clés : Grille analytique, Évaluation des examens, Rédaction de paragraphes, Création de grilles, Enseignant en écriture.

Introduction

There would be no better way to depict the difficulty of correcting exam papers and providing a grade to students' writing than this vivid description: "It is a November midnight, Johnny Carson has just ended, and throughout the block the last lights flick off—all but one that is. A single orange light blooms in the darkness. It is the English teacher, weary eyed, cramped of leg, hand, and brain, sifting listlessly, but doggedly through piles of themes, circling, marking, grading, commenting, guilt-ridden because the students were promised that the papers would be returned last week. The fifth cup of coffee grows cold and bitter. Just one more paper. And then one more, and then . . ." (Judy, 1981, p.208 in Zamel, 1985)

Writing instructors frequently encounter significant challenges in assessing and grading student compositions, particularly during examinations. This difficulty arises from the subjective nature of writing evaluation, which can lead to inconsistent grading practices among different educators. For instance, a single paragraph or composition may receive varying scores from multiple teachers, potentially impacting a student's academic career prospects. Many instructors report that they require two to three years of experience in order to confidently and accurately assign grades. This lack of clarity often leaves students questioning the rationale behind their scores. When faced with dissatisfaction regarding their grades, students may struggle to understand the assessment process, particularly when they perceive discrepancies in grading standards between different instructors. Such perceptions can foster feelings of unfairness, especially if they observe peers receiving higher marks from other teachers.

The absence of a standardized assessment policy at the university level exacerbates these issues. The reliance on holistic scoring methods further complicates the matter, as no definitive answer key exists for evaluating written work. Consequently, the current assessment practices undermine the credibility of the grading process and contribute to student frustration and confusion regarding their academic evaluations. Addressing these systemic issues is essential to enhance fairness and consistency in writing assessment. Therefore, the researcher suggests that developing an analytic easy-to-adopt rubric can be

very helpful for writing teachers. The study aims to test the usefulness of a paragraph analytic rubric in assessing students' paragraph writing and unifying the evaluation criteria to ensure consistent scoring for all students in formal exams that require paragraph writing. To meet these objectives, two research questions are raised:

Q1. What are EFL writing teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the paragraph analytic rubric in promoting consistent scoring during formal exams?

Q2. How do EFL writing teachers perceive the impact of a paragraph analytic rubric on the quality and fairness of student writing assessments?

1. Literature Review:

1.1. Defining Rubric

Rubrics are structured assessment tools that provide clear guidelines for evaluating student performance based on specific, preestablished criteria. According to Mertler (2001), these rating scales serve as scoring guides that help educators systematically assess the quality of student work. Dawson (2017) expands on this definition by highlighting three essential features of effective rubrics, as identified by Popham (1997): evaluative criteria that outline what is being assessed, quality definitions that describe varying levels of performance for those criteria, and a scoring strategy that facilitates consistent and objective evaluation. Together, these components make rubrics invaluable in promoting transparency and fairness in the assessment process, ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes.

1.2. Literature on Rubrics

The wide literature on rubrics reflects their significance in enhancing educational outcomes through structured assessment. Andrade (2000) emphasizes that rubrics clarify assessment criteria and promote critical thinking and meaningful learning experiences across various educational contexts. This notion is supported by Brookhart (1999), who discusses how effective classroom assessment principles, including rubric use, contribute to improved student learning. Additionally, Moskal (2000) provides a comprehensive overview of scoring rubrics, detailing their purpose and types, while offering practical insights into their design. Together, these studies highlight the multifaceted benefits of rubrics in fostering student engagement and learning. Further research by Andrade and Du (2005) reveals that students perceive rubric-referenced assessments as clearer and fairer, enhancing their overall engagement with the learning process. Popham (1997) offers a balanced view by addressing both the strengths and limitations of rubrics, thereby providing educators with

insights into best practices. Mertler (2001) contributes practical guidelines for designing effective rubrics tailored to classroom needs. Collectively, this body of work illustrates that when thoughtfully constructed, rubrics serve as powerful tools for assessment that not only streamline grading but also enrich the educational experience for both students and instructors.

2. The Process of Creating a Rubric

Creating an effective rubric is crucial for both evaluating student performance and enhancing the learning experience. Andrade (2000), as cited by Korycinski (2011, p.45), identifies two types of rubrics: performance rubrics, which are developed solely by the instructor, and instructional rubrics, which incorporate student input in the design process. The following steps outline the process for constructing a rubric:

1. **Reviewing Existing Examples:** The process begins with an analysis of various rubrics and assessment strategies from similar courses. This examination provides educators with insights into different methods and standards used to evaluate student performance.
2. **Developing a Criteria List:** A comprehensive list of criteria is compiled to guide the evaluation of students' assignments. This list should capture the essential elements that define quality for the specific task or assignment.
3. **Revise Criteria for Reliability:** After establishing the initial criteria, it is important to review and refine them to ensure reliability and validity. Engaging in discussions with colleagues or testing the criteria against sample student work can enhance their effectiveness.
4. **Set Quality Levels:** Performance levels are established based on predetermined standards, often using a scale that categorizes work into various proficiency levels (e.g., exemplary, proficient, needs improvement). This framework helps clarify expectations for students.
5. **Draft and Revise the Rubric:** A draft of the rubric is created, incorporating all criteria and performance levels. Following this, revisions are made based on feedback from peers or trial assessments with actual student work to ensure clarity and effectiveness.

Through following these steps, educators can develop rubrics that can facilitate assessment and serve as valuable instructional tools, guiding students along their learning journey.

3. Challenges in Implementing Rubrics

Despite their numerous advantages, the effectiveness of rubrics can be compromised by inconsistencies in performance criteria across various levels.

Research indicates that many existing rubrics suffer from a lack of clarity and coherence in their descriptors, which can create confusion for both educators and students (Tierney & Simon, 2004, p. 67). Additionally, the process of designing rubrics can be intricate; educators often face challenges in establishing valid and reliable criteria that accurately reflect student performance (Tierney & Simon, 2004, p. 68). In summary, while rubrics are valuable tools that can significantly enhance teaching and assessment practices by clarifying expectations and improving feedback mechanisms, careful attention must be paid to their design and implementation. Addressing the challenges associated with rubric construction is essential to fully realize their benefits within educational contexts.

4. Methodology:

The study employed an action research design to investigate the usefulness of a paragraph analytic rubric in assessing students' writing and unifying the evaluation criteria at the Department of English, Sétif 2 University. The researcher developed the paragraph analytic rubric and applied it with the writing teachers in evaluating the first-semester writing exam at the Department of English, Sétif 2 University.

This rubric proposal aims to help teachers have quick decisions about providing marks and enable them reduce student confusion regarding grading. The selected criteria are designed to specifically evaluate six key writing criteria in the paragraphs of second-year EFL students:

- Paragraph Structure
- Support
- Unity
- Coherence
- Grammar
- Mechanics

The writing exams consist of two tasks, each scored out of ten marks. The first task involves editing and proofreading a paragraph containing various mistakes that students must correct. In the second task, students are required to compose a paragraph on a given topic. Consequently, writing teachers often grapple with how to effectively score students' work out of ten marks while accurately assessing their ability to craft an effective topic sentence, develop well-formed supporting sentences that adequately support the main idea, and formulate a concluding sentence. Furthermore, teachers consider essential elements such as unity and coherence, which encompass the overall organization of the paragraph, the use of transitions, and cohesive devices. Grammar is

evaluated by examining sentence-level errors, while mechanics includes spelling and punctuation accuracy.

At the beginning of the process, the scoring rubric developed by the researcher was sent to colleagues, the members of the marking team, via email in order to check and discuss their shared understanding for both quality and clarity. Negotiations with two experienced colleagues in teaching writing helped in taking decisions about the final structuring version of the rubric. Once a positive feedback was received, the rubric was taken as a central element of evaluating the exam.

Table1
Paragraph Analytic Rubric

Topic sentence	Well developed and clearly defined	1
Detail 1 (major and minor)	Concrete, specific and relevant	1
Detail2		1
Detail3		1
Concluding sentence	Summarizes the content	1
Coherence	Logical order(climax). Writing is smooth and sentences are well connected through appropriate use of transitions and conjunctions.	1
Grammar	Fewer than 3 sentence errors	2
	4-7 errors	1
	More than 8errors	0
Mechanics	Spelling,punctuation, capitalization and indentation.	
	Fewer than 3 errors	2
	4-7	1
	More than 8 errors	0

The study was conducted over three successive academic years. During this period, the second-year EFL writing teachers at the Department of English, Sétif 2 University, used the paragraph analytic rubric to evaluate the first-semester writing exam. After the evaluation process, focus group discussion was held during a pedagogical meeting moderated by the researcher in order to provide an insight into how the marking team think about the scoring rubric after their trial, evaluate their experience and find out any inconvenience. The teachers were also asked to respond to a questionnaire that explored their perceptions of the usefulness and effectiveness of the paragraph analytic rubric. Teachers' surveys are comprised of eight close-ended statements to be answered with a number ranging from one (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Focus Group Discussion Results on EFL Writing Teachers' Perceptions of the Paragraph Analytic Rubric

The focus group discussion conducted with EFL writing teachers provided valuable insights into their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the paragraph analytic rubric in promoting consistent scoring during formal exams.

5.2. Positive Reception of the Rubric

Participants expressed a considerable level of satisfaction with the use of the rubric for assessing students' written work during the first writing exam. The teachers noted that the rubric facilitated a more structured and objective evaluation process, allowing them to clearly identify and articulate the strengths and weaknesses in student writing. This satisfaction with the rubric's ability to provide a structured and objective evaluation process aligns with previous research that emphasizes the benefits of analytic rubrics in standardizing assessments (Tierney & Simon, 2004).

5.3. Preference for Analytic Over Holistic Scoring

There was a unanimous agreement among participants that the paragraph analytic rubric represents a more effective evaluation method compared to holistic scoring, which was commonly employed in writing exams. The teachers highlighted that while holistic scoring often leads to subjective interpretations of student performance, the analytic rubric provides specific criteria that guide the assessment process. This specificity not only enhances fairness but also helps educators communicate clearer feedback to students.

5.3. *Ease of Decision-Making*

The discussion further revealed that participants experienced little difficulty in determining scores when using the rubric in comparison to the usual way used to correct exam paragraphs. The clarity and detailed nature of the criteria outlined in the rubric allowed teachers to make informed judgments about student performance without ambiguity. This ease of scoring contributed to a more efficient assessment process, enabling educators to focus on providing constructive feedback aimed at improving students' writing skills.

6. Survey Results on EFL Writing Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of Paragraph Analytic Rubric on the Quality and Fairness of Student Writing Assessments.

Table 2

Results of Teachers' Perceptions of the Usefulness of The Developed Rubric in Evaluating Writing Exams

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
It allows you to grade students more objectively.	0	0	0	2	2
It allows you to grade students fairly.	0		0	2	2
It reduces the grading time.	0	0	0	3	1
It makes your expectations clear to students.	0	0	0	2	2
It is a subjective way of evaluation.	2	2	0	0	0
It provides students with more information about their strengths.	0	0	0	2	2

It helps students to identify their weak areas in need of improvement.	0	0	0	2	2
It helps students understand the nature of their marks.	0	0	0	3	1
Students are more convinced about their marks	0	0	1	0	3
It is useful for novice teachers	0	0	0	0	4
You feel more confident about deciding the mark.	0	0	0	0	4
It is confusing and difficult	4	0	0	0	0

6.1. Perceptions of Objectivity and Fairness in Grading

The results regarding the statement "It allows you to grade students more objectively" indicate a strong consensus among teachers, with all respondents agreeing that the rubric enhances objectivity in grading. This suggests that educators believe the structured criteria provided by the rubric help minimize personal biases and subjective interpretations that can often influence grading decisions. Similarly, for the statement "It allows you to grade students fairly," there were no strong disagreements, with two teachers agreeing. This reflects a shared belief that the rubric facilitates equitable assessments across all students, potentially leveling the playing field and ensuring that each student's work is evaluated based on consistent standards. The emphasis on fairness is crucial in educational settings, as it fosters trust in the assessment process and encourages students to engage more fully with their writing assignments.

6.2. Impact on Grading Efficiency and Clarity

When evaluating the statement "It reduces the grading time," three teachers agreed and one strongly agreed, indicating that the rubric is perceived

as an effective tool for streamlining the grading process. This efficiency is particularly valuable in busy academic environments where instructors must balance multiple responsibilities. The structured nature of the rubric allows teachers to quickly reference specific criteria while assessing student work, thereby expediting the overall grading process. In terms of clarity, responses to "It makes your expectations clear to students" were also positive, with two teachers agreeing and two strongly agreeing. This suggests that the rubric successfully communicates assessment criteria to students, enhancing their understanding of what is expected in their writing. Clear expectations can lead to improved student performance, as learners are better equipped to meet the outlined standards when they understand how their work will be evaluated.

6.3. Support for Student Learning and Understanding

The rubric received favorable feedback regarding its ability to provide constructive feedback to students. For instance, both statements about providing students with information about their strengths and helping them identify weak areas received agreement from two teachers each, with two also strongly agreeing. This indicates that educators believe the rubric effectively supports student learning by highlighting areas for improvement and fostering a growth mindset. By clearly outlining strengths and weaknesses, the rubric encourages students to reflect on their writing and take ownership of their learning process. Additionally, concerning the statement "It helps students understand the nature of their marks," three teachers agreed and one strongly agreed, indicating that the rubric aids in clarifying grading for students. This understanding can reduce anxiety surrounding assessments and promote a more constructive dialogue between teachers and students about performance expectations.

6.4. Utility for Teachers and Confidence in Evaluation

The results demonstrate strong support for the rubric's utility among novice teachers, as all four respondents strongly agreed with the statement "It is useful for novice teachers." This highlights the rubric's role as a valuable resource for less experienced educators who may need additional guidance in assessment practices. For novice teachers, having a clear framework can alleviate some of the uncertainties associated with grading and provide a foundation upon which they can build their teaching practices. Furthermore, all respondents reported feeling more confident about their marking decisions when using the rubric, as indicated by unanimous agreement on "You feel more confident about deciding the mark." This confidence is essential for fostering a positive teaching environment where educators feel empowered to make informed judgments about student work.

Lastly, there was unanimous disagreement with the statement "It is confusing and difficult," suggesting overall satisfaction with its implementation among educators. This positive reception implies that the rubric not only enhances assessment practices but also empowers teachers by providing clear guidelines for evaluating student work effectively.

7. Recommendations

It is essential to recognize that a rubric should not be viewed as a fixed document. Instead, it may require adjustments or enhancements based on markers' experiences in practical application, feedback from students, changes to the associated assessment, or shifts within the local context or broader academic discipline. Therefore, it is advisable for teams to periodically review the rubric, ideally on an annual basis, to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness. Additionally, rubrics can serve dual purposes; they can function not only as assessment tools but also as instructional resources. Making the evaluation criteria transparent to students is crucial, as it helps them understand expectations and promotes accountability in their learning process. Furthermore, incorporating rubrics for self-assessment enables students to produce higher-quality writing while fostering their ability to monitor their own progress and identify areas for improvement. Lastly, establishing a comprehensive assessment policy at the university level is recommended. Such a policy could provide clear guidelines and examples of work across different grade levels, serving as valuable references for future student cohorts. This resource would also benefit newly recruited staff members who may not have participated in initial team discussions but are expected to contribute to the grading process.

Conclusion

This study explored EFL writing teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the paragraph analytic rubric in promoting consistent scoring during formal exams. The findings from the focus group discussions and the survey revealed the multifaceted benefits of using rubrics in assessing student writing. The ability to grade fairly and objectively enhances teacher confidence and fosters trust among students. Furthermore, detailed grading criteria empower learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses, promoting self-directed improvement. Novice teachers can rely on rubrics as valuable tools that facilitate effective evaluation practices, ultimately contributing to a more supportive and engaging educational experience for all involved. The study revealed a strong endorsement of the rubric, with participants expressing satisfaction in its application for assessing student writing. Teachers recognized the advantages of

using an analytic rubric over holistic scoring, noting that it provided a structured framework that enhanced objectivity and clarity in evaluation. The recommendations stemming from this research emphasize the dynamic nature of rubrics, advocating for regular reviews to ensure their ongoing relevance and effectiveness. By utilizing rubrics not only as assessment tools but also as instructional aids, educators can enhance student understanding of evaluation criteria and foster self-assessment practices that promote continuous improvement in writing skills. Furthermore, establishing a comprehensive assessment policy at the university level would provide valuable guidance for both students and faculty, particularly for new staff members who may lack prior exposure to collaborative grading discussions. Future research could further investigate the long-term impact of rubric use on student performance and engagement, providing deeper insights into best practices in EFL writing assessment.

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