

## The Use of Rubrics in Assessing Students Oral Performance Case of Oral Expression Classes of Kasdi Merbah University -Ouargla

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to unveil some key concepts related to authentic assessment in the oral expression classes by using scoring rubrics. Therefore, we shall sketch out some key pertinent in assessing students oral performance. Assessment as an ongoing process monitors and evaluate students learning. Learning outcomes are observed according to what students can do to demonstrate their understanding. So they should intensively practice their skills with a parallel teacher's feedback to help them improve. The use of rubrics to assess the learners' speaking abilities must be consistent, clear and cyclic to enhance the learners communicative competence.

**Keywords:** authentic assessment, rubrics, oral presentations, students performance, communicative competence

### ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إثبات أهمية استعمال قواعد التصحيح لتقويم و تقييم التعبير الشفهي لطلبة الانجليزية بجامعة قاصدي مرياح ورقلة و رفع وعي الأساتذة لاستعمالها في تقويم و تقييم المهارات اللغوية. تنطلق الدراسة من فكرة الإختلاف بين تقويم المحتوى و تقييم المهارة خاصة المهارات الشفهية التي يشوبها الغموض و الصعوبة فمن أجل تقويم موضوعي و شفاف على الأستاذ أن يصمم قواعد تصحيح وفقا لمعايير واضحة ليتمكن من تطوير أداء الطلبة من جهة، و ليراجع القواعد و المعايير من جهة أخرى ليصل بذلك الى تقويم مستمر و محين و محدث.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تقويم أصلي، قواعد التصحيح، عروض شفوية، أداء الطلبة، مهارة تواصلية.

### Résumé

Cette études tente de souligner l'importance de l'évaluation authentique et continue des présentations orales des étudiants de l'anglais comme langue étrangères par l'usage des rubriques d'évaluation qui présente des critères claires et objectifs pour l'évaluation. Dans ce contexte on va dévoiler quelques concepts clés liés à l'évaluation authentique dans les cours d'expression orale en utilisant des grilles de notation. Les résultats d'apprentissage sont observés en fonction de ce que les élèves peuvent faire pour démontrer leur compréhension. Ils doivent donc mettre en pratique leurs compétences de manière intensive avec les commentaires d'un enseignant parallèle pour les aider à s'améliorer. L'utilisation de rubriques pour évaluer les capacités d'expression des apprenants doit être cohérente, claire et cyclique pour améliorer la compétence de communication des apprenants.

**Mots-clés:** Evaluation authentique, grilles d'évaluation, présentations orales, performance des étudiants, compétence communicative.

## **Introduction :**

The enterprise of assessment is to examine the learners' performance and achievement during their learning process. Within the last two decades, a remarkable shift of interest in assessment has arisen in an attempt to review integral issues of educational reform. Moving towards a learner-centered approach to language teaching and testing, scholars are emphasizing the learning outcomes rather than the teaching input. In parallel, language teachers can teach content or skills so that they assess them differently. It is believed that skills present a relatively more difficult area of assessment namely oral skills because they display extra linguistic features in addition to verbal language and which are difficult to measure due to their multidimensional nature (Brown, 1994, Harmer, 2007). More recently, assessing the learners' oral expression is the main concern of various scholars (Kang, 2013; Celce-Murcia, 2013; Louma, 2004). It has become viewed as "an essentially interactive process, in which the teacher can find out whether what has been taught has been learned, and if not, to do something about it" (William, 2007, p. 1054). Perhaps one of the most common tools to assess learners' performance are rubrics as a more transparent and fair way to evaluate and score the learners' process and product.

## **1. Oral Performance Assessment**

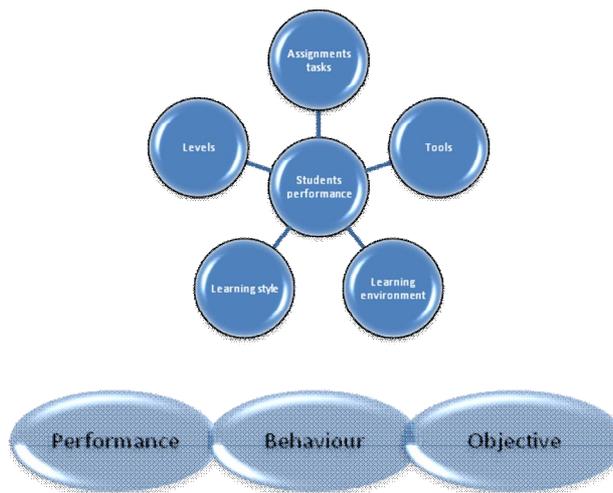
It is imperative to assess students' listening and speaking skills in settings that are relaxed and tension-free. For all practical purposes, this means that students need to remain unaware that they are being evaluated on their oral performance. This can be accomplished by involving the students in various oral activities and by circulating around the room to listen to them as they work through the activities. Activities that work well include information gaps, retelling stories, summarizing, games, and role-plays, as well as the presentation of projects and oral reports, and discussions resulting from "envelope activities," in which students in groups draw a slip of paper out of an envelope and talk about the topic written on the slip of paper.

As this study is principally devoted to oral performance assessment, it is essential to consider some specific aspects when assessing this skill. For instance, the context in which the assessment takes place, the students' ages, their cognitive and linguistic levels, the characteristics and appropriateness of the assessment task and, in general, the whole process that assessing the oral skill implies, from its planning to its implementation.

First, it is vital to consider that neither native speakers nor foreign learners produce complete sentences, specific vocabulary or a very structured syntax (Brown & Yule as cited in O'Malley & Valdez, 1996). In spite of this, some pause fillers, phrases and simple sentences are used. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that this also depends on certain features such as age and gender (O'Malley & Valdez, 1996). Understanding what a speaker says is part of oral communication. The proposition or idea is its basic unit of meaning (Richards, as cited in O'Malley & Valdez), and it should be retained to comprehend the message. Listening comprehension is defined by Brown and Yule (as cited in O'Malley & Valdez) as the process of arriving at a reasonable interpretation. According to Murphy (as cited in O'Malley & Valdez), listening and speaking should be taught and assessed in an integrated way because they are two interdependent language processes. Regarding oral assessment O'Malley and Valdez (p. 61) affirm that:

Assessment of oral language should emphasize on a student's ability to interpret and convey meaning for authentic purposes in interactive contexts. It should include both fluency and accuracy. Cooperative learning activities that present students with opportunities to use oral language to interact with others— whether for social or academic purposes—are optimal for assessing oral language.

Students performance is linked to many aspects that should be taken into account in designing assessment tools.



**Figure 1. Students performance**

The authors recognize the importance of planning for assessment, and these are the steps they suggest: identifying the purpose, planning the assessment, developing the rubric or scoring procedure, setting the standards, involving students in self- and peer assessment, selecting the assessment task, and keeping record of the information

Beginners	Advanced beginners	Intermediate	High intermediate	Advanced
Listening for the gist. Matching descriptions to pictures. Using total physical response (TPR). Inferring meaning from the context. Information that can be familiar for learners and include visual aids.	Oral presentations. Reading what they have written. Describing a chart. Giving instructions.	Oral reports and public speaking performances.	Listening for the gist of the message. Taking notes. Analyzing. Evaluating.	Summarizing. Note-taking. Using fewer visual cues

**Table 1. Types of Assessment Task Based on Students’ Proficiency Levels**

Table 1 summarizes the types of speaking activities and assessment tasks suggested by some authors depending on the learners’ proficiency levels. They recommend the application of different assessment instruments because of the different types of information that can be provided about students’ needs and further instructional goals (The American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages, Brown & Yule, Murphy, Omaggio Hadley [as cited in O’Malley & Valdez, 1996]).

O’Malley and Valdez (1996) suggest the following oral assessment tasks proposed by numerous authors: oral interviews, picture-cued descriptions of stories, radio broadcasts, video clips, information gaps, story/text retelling, improvisations, role-plays, and simulations, oral reports, and debates. All of these tasks are for different levels of proficiency and target different language functions, as may be seen in Table 1 (Bachman & Palmer, Genishi, González Pino, Hughes, Oscarson, Underhill [as cited in O’Malley & Valdez]).

Oral language assessment targets the students’ ability for communicative and academic purposes. As Cummins (as cited in O’Malley & Valdez, 1996) states, face-to-face interaction and negotiation of meaning with the use of contextual cues, gestures, facial expressions and intonation make up a part of communicative or conversational skills (context embedded). However, academic language is more context-reduced and more cognitively demanding. Cummins sees communicative language functions as those that express meaning and that are not cognitively demanding. Academic language functions can be used across content areas, for instance, looking for and reporting information, comparing, ordering,

classifying, analyzing, inferring, justifying and persuading, solving problems, synthesizing, and evaluating (Chamot & O'Malley, Hamayan & Perlman, O'Malley [as cited in O'Malley & Valdez]).

## **2. Assessment Rubrics:**

In addition to all of their other responsibilities, assessment is a time-consuming activity to be achieved by teachers, such as planning classes and preparing materials and extracurricular activities. Moreover, we have found difficulties in determining clear assessment criteria among teachers to assess students' oral performance. One of the main repercussions of this has been that students do not reach the minimum knowledge level, which affects the quality of a language program and indicates a lack of clear criteria among teachers. The rubric appears then as an assessment instrument that can be easy to use and that can establish clear criteria for what to assess.

Brookhart (as cited in Moskal, 2000) identifies a rubric as a descriptive scoring scheme that can be developed by a teacher to evaluate the process or the product of a student's work. Mertler (2001) defines it as a rating scale with specific performance criteria defined in advance. Taggart and Wood (as cited in Taggart, Phifer, Nixon, & Wood, 1998) clarify that rubrics emerged from the need to assess more authentic activities and that they are useful for establishing achievement targets. Custer (as cited in Taggart et al., 1998, p. 58) indicates that when rubrics are shared with students, the students "experience more empowerment for their own learning, find learning and assessment less threatening, and become more reflective about their learning."

Based on what some authors have established, we may say that rubrics have characteristics that can be linked to some qualities of assessment, such as transparency, reliability and practicality. Without doubt, rubrics positively influence formative assessment and students' learning and autonomy.

Rubrics are transparent because they explicitly present what the teacher expects. This quality makes the assessment clearer and easy to understand, and it prevents subjectivity when scoring. Assessment with a rubric can be more objective because the criteria and the weight given to each scale are evidently cited from the beginning.

The focal reason rubrics are practical is time. According to Stevens and Levi (2005), teachers who are accustomed to working with rubrics can create a new one in less than an hour, perhaps by adapting one they already have or adding changes depending on their specific assessment needs. Creating a new rubric may take more time, but the time invested is valuable because the grading time is reduced. Rubrics make grading easier and faster because: (a) What is expected from students is already defined in the rubric, (b) rubrics permit to teachers to place the student's work in a range that gives students an rapid idea of what they did well and where they have to improve, (c) the rubric is the format the teacher uses to emphasis his/her attention on the student's performance, and this facilitates not only speed in taking additional notes but also the individualized feedback that can be provided through specific comments, and (d) the scoring guide rubrics facilitate grading for the teacher, helping him or her to save time. Rubrics also promote formative assessment because they offer students feedback about their strengths and weaknesses (Phifer & Nixon as cited in Taggart et al., 1998).

Rubrics can also be used as self and peer-assessment forms. When students are trained to use rubrics for this purpose, they become clever and skillful in identifying and finding solutions for their and other people's problems. Moreover, rubrics support individual guidance by helping learners to move from "a dependent level of understanding to a highly independent level of higher order analysis" (Shwery as cited in Taggart et al., 1998, pp. 84-85). This leads students to use rubrics to self-analyze the quality and result of their work. According to Moskal (2000), when students are evaluated with descriptive rubrics, they may become aware of the extent to which their performance complies with the criteria or not. This becomes formative assessment since the description of the criteria allows the students know what they have accomplished and what they have missed, which does not happen.

It is important to mention that the core reason to determine the type of rubric to use rests on the purpose of the evaluation. There are analytic, holistic, task-specific and general scoring rubrics. The main difference between an analytic and a holistic rubric is that the former allows the evaluation of separate factors and the latter permits an overlap in the evaluation criteria, which means that the criteria can be

combined in a descriptive single scale. The rubrics can also be utilized to assess specific tasks or for students' development of a particular skill, oral for instance (Moskal, 2000).

In my point of view, rubrics are effective ways to keep track of students' performance. Rubrics are sets of descriptions of criteria used for assessment, together with a rating appropriate for each description, presented in chart form. They are more descriptive than simple letter or number grades, and serve as feedback for students. Using the rating scale for each rubric, students can keep track of their own progress in listening and speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary and grammar.

### 3. Benefits of assessments rubrics:

Within the LMD Reform in Algeria that enhances competency-based teaching, authentic assessment is vital in continuing evaluation as being the core of teaching in the new learning contexts. The diversity of assessment tools and methods affords ways to implement authentic assessment to realistically achieve curricular goals. Rubrics can certainly help designing authentic assessment to get the following benefits:

- More objective assessments : fairness of results
- Explicitness and transparency.
- Consistency of results and grades .
- Easy scoring and data gathering about students in the context of large classes.
- Validity
- Reliability
- Relates needs to outcomes by analyzing and measuring multi-traits behaviors in the students performance.
- provide a framework that clarifies assessment requirements and standards of performance for different grades. In this, they support assessment as learning; students can see what is important and where to focus their learning efforts.
- enable very clear and consistent communication with students about assessment requirements and about how different levels of performance earn different grades. They allow assessors to give very specific feedback to students on their performance.
- when students are involved in their construction, encourage them to take responsibility for their performance
- when used for self-assessment and peer assessment, make students aware of assessment processes and procedures, enhance their meta-cognitive awareness, and improve their capacity to assess their own work
- can result in richer feedback to students, giving them a clearer idea where they sit in terms of an ordered progression towards increased expertise in a learning domain.
- by engaging staff teams in rubric-based conversations about quality, help them develop a shared language for talking about learning and assessment.
- help assessors efficiently and reliably interpret and grade students' work.
- systematically illuminate gaps and weaknesses in students' understanding against particular criteria, helping teachers target areas to address.

### 4. Challenges of using assessment rubrics:

Using assessment rubrics can present the following challenges:

- When learning outcomes relate to higher levels of cognition (for example, evaluating or creating), assessment designers can find it difficult to specify criteria and standards with exactitude. This can be a particular issue in disciplines or activities requiring creativity or other hard-to-measure capabilities.
- It can be challenging for designers to encompass different dimensions of learning outcomes (cognitive, psychomotor, affective) within specific criteria and standards. Performance in the affective domain in particular can be difficult to distinguish according to strict criteria and standards.
- Assessment rubrics are inherently indeterminate (Sadler, 2009), particularly when it comes to translating judgments on each criterion of an analytic rubric into grades.
- Breaking down the assessment into complicated, detailed criteria may increase the marking workload for staff, and may lead to distorted grading decisions (Sadler, 2009) or students becoming over-dependent on the rubric and less inclined to develop their own judgment by creating, or contributing to the creation of, assessment rubrics (Boud, 2010).

### 5. How to design a rubric:

An assessment rubric can be analytic or holistic.

- Analytic rubrics have several dimensions, with performance indicators for levels of achievement in each dimension.
- Holistic rubrics assess the whole task according to one scale, and are appropriate for less structured tasks, such as open-ended problems and creative products.

Assessment rubrics are composed of three elements:

- a set of criteria that provides an interpretation of the stated objectives (performance, behaviour, quality)
- a range of different levels of performance between highest and lowest
- descriptors that specify the performance corresponding to each level, to allow assessors to interpret which level has been met.

One useful design strategy is to take a generic assessment rubric (for example, Orrell, 2003) that matches well with the assessment task objectives, discipline, level and other contextual setting, and adapt it for your own use, rewriting the attribute descriptions to reflect the course context, aims and learning outcomes, and to apply to the specific assessment task.

Decide how the judgments at each level of attainment will flow through into the overall grading process and how rubric levels correspond to grades. Does the attainment of "advanced" skill or knowledge mean that a distinction or high distinction will be awarded? Does "developing" mean resubmission or fail?

Assessing with rubrics has several advantages arising from best classroom practices. It:

- Ensure that assessment rubrics are prepared and available for students well before they begin work on tasks, so that the rubric contributes to their learning as they complete the work.
- Discuss assessment rubrics with students in class time. Use these discussions to refine and improve rubrics in response to students' common misunderstandings and misconceptions.
- Practice using rubrics in class. Have students assess their own, their peers' and others' work.
- Involve students in developing assessment rubrics, and involve them more as they become competent in doing so. This encourages them to be independent and to manage their own learning.
- Frame your assessment feedback to students in the terms laid out in the rubric, so that they can clearly see where they have succeeded or performed less well in the task.

Ensuring fairness include students in developing an assessment rubric; this can help each student to understand the assessment criteria.

Provide the assessment rubric for a task to students early, to increase its value as a learning tool. For example, you might distribute it as part of the task briefing and guidelines presentation. This helps students understand the task, and allows them to raise any concerns or questions about the task and how it will be assessed.

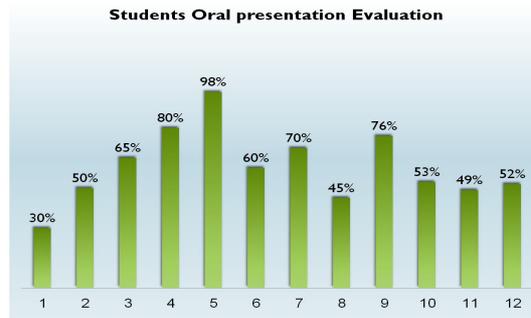
Write rubrics in plain English, and phrase them so that they are as unambiguous as possible.

In my oral classes, Oral presentations are one of the most effective tasks that promote the students communicative activities. Relying on rubrics to evaluate their products can be improved in a continuous way by asking students to reflect on their performances in a self –evaluation sheet. Below is an example of what is regularly done after oral presentations.

**Table2.**Students oral presentation evaluation

	Students performance	Parentage
1	I am aware of defining quality of my presentation	30 %
2	I can judge and revise my own presentation	50 %
3	Topics are easy and accessible	65 %
4	I study to pass exams only	80 %
5	I enjoy mu oral expression classes	98 %
6	I feel nervous when I deliver my oral presentations	60 %
7	Oral presentation take a lot of my time and effort	70 %

8	I can't engage in interactions easily	45 %
9	I have to work on my vocabulary	76 %
10	I use learning strategies in analysing, explaining and taking decisions	53 %
11	I learn from participation and peers more than from listening to the teacher's explanation	49 %
12	I still have to work on my timing	52%



**Figure 2.** Students oral presentation evaluation

For a more criteria –based assessment students performance is observed according to the following rubric in Table 3. It is not only easy to use for scoring but it provides the learners with their strengths , weaknesses, areas of mastery, and areas that should be revised

**Table.3.** Analytic rubric for oral presentations

	4 Excellent	3- Good (14-15)	2- Average (10-11)	1-Below expectations (8 and less)
Delivery	Clear, attention holding, maintains interest by providing more than four connected details -sufficient	- Clear beginning - Reading few notes - Some supporting details	- Provides just the necessary parts with few supporting details	- No interesting details - No audience engagement - No confident talk
Content	- Full acquaintance - Answers all questions - Explanations - Examples	- Gives some answers - No elaboration - Some evidence	- Incomplete - Some irrelevant parts - Answers only basic questions	- Do not grasp the information - Cannot answer questions - No clear purpose and ideas
Organisation	- Well organized - Logical relationship between parts - Good time management	- Somehow organized - Good pacing - Some minor errors odd ideas	- Just the necessary parts of the topic - Minimum details	- Not organized - Difficult to follow
Language Verbal and non-Verbal	- Good word choice - Variety of words - Correct grammatical structure - Good eye contact - Appropriate body language ,fluid talk with no hesitation and pauses - Intelligible pronunciation	- Good word choice - One or two grammar errors - Inconsistent eye contact - Acceptable body language - Few hesitations and pauses - Few pronunciations mistakes	- Plain English - Some unexpected grammar and pronunciation mistakes - Rare use of non verbal communication	- Poor language with many mistakes - No confidence - Many hesitations and pauses - Difficult to understand

## **Conclusion**

Scoring rubrics were an effective authentic assessment tools in my oral classes since it helped in improving communication between the teacher and the learner, creating more confident learners, raising their self esteem, gaining more authentic results, achieving higher level performance and consistent results,

raising awareness about objective assessment with clear criteria, defining measurability of more complex language behavior, shifting attention to affective feedback, appropriately assessing any subject area, and finally providing a tool for recycling and planning assessment.

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