TEACHERS’ AND STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON USING RUBRICS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

By

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Finally, special thanks go also to my family for their constant support and cheer throughout my academic achievement. I wouldn’t have accomplished this work without their help.
Dedication
I dedicate this humble work

To my loving parents, siblings, instructors and every knowledge seeker
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Manal Shehab

Abstract

Several researchers in the world of English Language Teaching have been engaged in examining the process of assessing students’ writing using rubrics. Literature indicates that there is a debate among educators concerning the effectiveness of using rubrics on the teaching-learning process. While some consider rubrics as assessment tools that standardize students’ writing and hinder the students’ creative self-expression of ideas, others argue that rubrics enhance the students’ learning and they positively affect the teacher’s performance. This research study examines the teachers’ and students’ viewpoints regarding the effectiveness of using rubrics in a third grade writing classroom in a private school in Lebanon. It also aims to examine the participants’ attitudes toward using rubrics in the writing classroom. Both qualitative and quantitative data were obtained. An in-depth interview with an English Language teacher highlighted the perceived advantages and challenges of using rubrics. A questionnaire addressed to the students portrayed their preference to use rubrics in the writing classroom. A classroom observation conducted by the researcher portrayed the impact of rubrics on the teacher’s and students’ classroom practices. Findings showed that teachers and students are in favor of using rubrics due to the positive impact that they have on the teaching-learning process. The pedagogical implications of the study’s findings were also discussed.

Keywords: Rubrics, Writing, Elementary Students, Classroom Practices, Students’ Learning, Attitudes
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 - Overview

At the present time, the majority of language arts educators believe that learning is a holistic process that involves the social construction of meaning. In language classrooms, students are actively engaged in authentic listening, speaking, reading and writing experiences (Cox, 2002). The interest in developing communicative competence in English as Second Language classrooms has led educators to give more attention to students’ productive skills, speaking and writing, and to their assessment. This is so because a lack in these skills immediately affects the message one is trying to communicate (Yurekli & Ustunluoglu, 2007).

Traditionally, educators have kept assessment criteria of productive skills to themselves. Teachers tended not to articulate what counted when they gave grades on a certain essay or project. They often expect students to know what makes a good presentation or piece of writing (Andrade, 2000). However, according to Yurekli and Ustunluoglu (2007) studies indicate that students are as important as graders in the assessment process. Stiggins (2001) argues that students are “the key assessment users” (p.17) and should be able to use assessments in ways that are similar to the teacher’s use of assessment. To inform students about the assessment process and to enable them to succeed, teachers mostly prefer using rubrics as a tool to communicate expectations for an assignment, provide focused feedback on work in progress, and to grade students’ performance (Andrade, 2000; Goodrich, 1997).
In fact, writing has been the focus of attention in English Language Teaching world for years and has engaged several researchers, particularly in terms of assessment. Literature indicates that the assessment process for writing is intricate and may cause some problems (Yurekli & Ustunluoglu, 2007). Besides, there is a debate among educators concerning the use of rubrics to assess students’ writing performance. Proponents of rubrics argue that rubrics allow teachers to make fair and objective judgments on students’ work, to focus instruction, and to reliably track student progress over time (Stevens & Levi, 2005; Peat, 2006). They also argue that rubrics have the potential to help students make judgments about the quality of their own work and are teaching tools that support student learning and the development of sophisticated thinking skills (Andrade, 2000; Andrade, Du & Wang, 2008; Cohen, Lotan, Scarloss, Schultz & Abram, 2002).

Critics, on the other hand, claim that although compliance with the rubric tends to produce higher scores and more reliability in scoring, it produces 'vacuous' writing. In other words, rubrics are assessment tools that standardize students’ writing and work against creative self-expression, which is the essence of skillful writing (Mabry, 1999; Kohn, 2006; Wilson, 2007). Due to the grader and student impact in writing assessment and because the use of rubrics is controversial in writing classrooms, it is worth to examine students’ and teachers’ perspectives on the use of rubrics to assess writing performance in Lebanese elementary classrooms.

**1.2 - Purpose of the Study**

Throughout an extensive literature review about the impact of using rubrics on the teaching-learning process in the writing classroom, I found very few studies that
investigated the use of rubrics in Lebanese classrooms. The current study intended to examine the viewpoints of Lebanese students and teachers regarding the use rubrics in elementary writing classrooms. Specifically, it aimed to investigate the perceived benefits and challenges, if any, of using rubrics to assess students’ writing. It also aimed to examine the participants’ attitudes toward using rubrics in the writing classroom. I hope that the findings of the study would be a motive that encourages teachers to use rubrics throughout the teaching-learning process in the writing classroom.

1.3 - Research Questions

In order to explore students’ and teachers’ perspectives on the use of rubrics in a third grade writing classroom, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do rubrics influence the classroom practices and students’ learning in the writing classroom?

2. What are the students’ and teachers’ attitudes toward using rubrics in the writing classroom?

1.4 - Significance of the Study

The study aims to shed the light on an instrument that would positively impact students’ and teachers’ performance in the writing classroom if used appropriately. It would spotlight ways that elementary teachers could implement to improve their instruction in the writing classroom and consequently enhance their students’ writing performance. As students become better writers, they would be better knowledge seekers and more confident individuals, who could effectively communicate in their societies (Gammill, 2006).
1.5 - Research Setting

The study is conducted at School X, which is run by a religious and educational organization. The school was founded in 1980 and is located in Beirut. The school contains a student population of 8,000 students in total. It contains a day care center, and a spacious pre-school building. Next to the pre-school building is the elementary, middle and high school building. In the year 2002 this building was repaired thoroughly, and it was renewed. The classes, playgrounds, theater, activity rooms, and the labs were reequipped according to the highest levels of up-to-date aids and apparatus.

This private school implements the Lebanese educational system and cultivates a lively and stimulating atmosphere of learning in its community. It seeks to ensure a teaching environment built on modern active basis. This in turn aims to stimulate the learner, to develop a responsible, creative, integrally skillful personality with a lifelong education. The faculty sets standards of excellence and dedication in the field of education. It believes that that the age requirements have differed completely from the previous one. It assures that students acquire the basic skills that enable them “to learn how to learn” believing that what is needed now in the work place is not knowledge and information, but the ability to deal with these bits of information.

School X cares to develop the students’ skills in the three languages, Arabic, English and French in all stages. In order to better develop the students’ language skills in English, School X uses American book series like Macmillan/McGraw Hill. The school’s teachers believe that the Lebanese thematic books are not enough to cover the students’
needs. The English series of Macmillan/McGraw Hill (Bear, Dole, Echevarria, Hasbrouck, Paris, Shanahan, & Tinajero, 2007) has more varieties in it. It helps English teachers by providing lesson models and extra activities that are developmentally appropriate. Some of those activities involve writing models, rubrics and creative writing prompts that teachers could use to help students develop their writing skills in an optimal manner. Besides, it provides helpful tips that guide students and teachers throughout the teaching-learning process.

1.6 - Operational Definitions

Rubrics are descriptive scoring plans that are developed by teachers, or students and teachers or other evaluators to guide the examination of the products or processes of students’ efforts (Moskal, 2000). A rubric offers specific criteria for describing student performance at different levels of proficiency for a certain task (Burns, Roe, & Smith, 2002). It is usually used with a somewhat complex assignment, such as a long-term project, an essay, or a research paper. Its purposes are to provide students informative feedback about a task that is in progress and to give detailed appraisals of their final products. Although the format of an instructional rubric can differ, all rubrics have two elements in common. They have a list of criteria, or what matters in a performance task, and they have gradations of quality, with descriptions of strong, adequate and problematic student work (Andrade, 2000).

Classroom practices refer to teacher and student behaviors in the classroom in addition to the teacher/student relationship and interaction. More specifically, the teacher's classroom behavior involves activities a teacher might do to get ready to interact with
students and to guide students throughout the learning process. On the other hand, the student’s behavior includes all of the actions a student would make in the classroom and most importantly the amount of time students are actively involved in the learning process. The teacher's classroom behavior has a direct impact on student behavior which, in turn, is most directly related to measures of student achievement (Huitt, 2003).

1.7 - Conclusion

This chapter presented an introduction to the topic I intend to investigate. It pointed out the need for conducting the study, the purpose of the study, its significance, and the research questions to be considered and the research setting. The following chapter provides a review of related literature concerning the use of rubrics in the writing classroom.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 - Introduction

In today’s world, knowledge is generated, shaped and communicated so fast that it has become a fundamental priority and a basic attribute of prosperous societies (Sert, 2008). It is commonly believed that traditional teacher-centered education does not adequately provide individuals with skills to deal with the changing needs of our world. In this educational setting, where the simple recitation of knowledge is not considered as meaningful, constructivist approach that permits the reformulation and reconstruction of knowledge is progressively gaining more popularity in many countries (Sert, 2008). This model of learning calls for authentic performance based assessments in classrooms including the language arts classrooms (Cox, 2002).

Performance assessment requires a student to perform a task or make up his or her own response (Linn & Gronlund, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Brualdi, 2002). Therefore, they are well-suited for evaluating complex learning outcomes such as critical thinking, communication and problem solving skills (Perlman, 2002). In contrast to most traditional forms of testing, performance-based assessments don’t have clear-cut right or wrong answers. Rather, there are degrees to which a person is successful or not. For this reason, teachers should assess performance in a way that will permit them to consider those varying degrees. This can be accomplished by creating rubrics (Brualdi, 2002). In fact the use of rubrics as tools of assessment of student performance is more popular nowadays than ever in both the K-12 and college classrooms (Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010).
Although several educators believe that rubrics are useful, some critics have recently expressed several concerns about their usage. This chapter includes four sections that review the literature related to the use of rubrics in the writing classrooms. The first section deals with the theoretical framework that supports the use of rubrics. The second section sheds the light on the two main types of rubrics. The third section discusses the positive effects of rubrics on students and teachers. The fourth section focuses on the debate on using rubrics in the writing classroom.

2.2 - Theoretical Framework

Authentic performance-based assessment methods, such as rubrics, were developed as pedagogical strategies that translate constructivist assumptions. A constructivist philosophy supports the conception that students must construct their own knowledge through interaction, exploration, and experience (Chick, 2004). Several theorists contributed to the development of the constructivist theory of learning (Snowman & Biehler, 2000; Sert, 2008).

According to Beilin (1992), Piaget’s most enduring contribution was that learners construct their own knowledge instead of having reality imprinted on their brains. Bruner (1990) describes learning as an active process through which the learners construct new knowledge by finding ways to relate the lesson content to existing knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) attributes a special role to the social environment in the cognitive development of the child, thus shifting the focus from cognitive aspect of learning to social context. According to this perspective, knowledge is not simply communicated by the teacher, but it is constructed in the process of social interaction.
Accordingly, constructivist learning environment is learner-centered, which is mainly based on problem-solving and hands-on activities that call for active engagement of cognitive processes (Sert, 2008). Teachers in constructivist classrooms encourage students to think and analyze, understand and apply, and create and develop their own knowledge. They design rich and meaningful learning contexts that endorse thoughtfulness, reflection, and critical thinking. They also integrate authentic activities and assessment into instruction (Snowman & Biehler, 2000).

Another theoretical framework that manifests itself in the design of this study is the literature on self-monitoring and writing. Research on self-monitoring and writing explains that novice writers have trouble identifying the problems with their writing as well as procedures for improving it and that the use of checklists can improve students' writing (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1985). Similarly, research on self-regulated learning and feedback proposes that learning improves when feedback (a) directs learners to monitor their learning and (b) illustrates to learners how to attain learning objectives (Hawk & Shah, 2008).

2.3 - Types of Rubrics

Two general types of rubrics-holistic and analytic- are generally used to assess student products and performances (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). A holistic rubric offers descriptions of different levels of overall performance. It gives a single score or rating for a product or performance. On the other hand, an analytic rubric breaks up a product or performance into discrete dimensions and judges each separately. Consequently, a separate score is provided for each trait (Linn & Gronlund, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). For
example, a prevalent analytic rubric for writing focuses on six traits: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions. A student’s writing is evaluated according to the performance level on each trait (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Although a holistic rubric is a suitable scoring tool when an overall impression is required, they do not provide students with the specific feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of their performance that is offered by analytic rubrics (Linn & Gronlund, 2000). Thus, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) recommend that educators who wish to assess students’ understanding should use analytic rubrics. They believe that a single score unwittingly misleads the learner, parent, and others into the quality of performance. For instance, two persuasive essays may be considered unsatisfactory, but their errors are quite different. One paper is mechanically flawed but full of wonderful arguments. Another paper is clearly written and grammatically correct, but includes shallow reasoning and an unsupported conclusion. Thus, Wiggins and McTighe emphasize that there are always idiosyncratic criteria at work in performance, especially when understanding is a target. Thus, assessors should try to compromise between appropriately varied criteria and practicability.

East (2009) also contends that holistic scoring can be problematic. He explains that despite the provision of a scale that describes the characteristics of an essay at each level, raters will still assess essays in different ways. Although training may aid to bring raters to a short-term agreement on how to interpret the different levels of a rubric, raters will never be in total agreement on scores. Furthermore, many writings, if re-scored by the same raters, might well receive somewhat different scores. Thus, the author proposes that the use
of an analytic rubric will deal with the potential limitation of holistic scoring. An analytic scale is able to justify varying aspects of performance more sensitively, and the resultant scoring is therefore potentially more reliable and objective than holistic scoring. Thus, raters will approach the task of rating in a more consistent manner when using a shared set of analytical criteria.

2.4 - Positive Effects of Rubrics

Rubrics present meaningful feedback for students and have the potential to become an effective part of the teaching and learning process. In fact, there are many reasons to use rubrics. In this section I will shed the light on practical, pedagogical and impartial reasons for using rubrics (Stevens & Levi, 2005).

2.4.1 - Fairness and Objectivity

According to Stergar (2005), rubrics tend to be more objective and fair than single letter grades because the criteria are set and communicated to students before the start of a project. Students know what is expected and hence, endeavor for mastery. They know that the teacher’s grading is fair and consistent. In addition, Peat (2006) argues that in assessing written work, a certain level of judgment and subjectivity is employed. Thus, one of the main benefits of using a rubric with specific scoring criteria is the objectivity it brings to the mission of rating student performance. As Moskal (2000) points out, by developing a pre-defined plan for the evaluation process, the subjectivity that is entailed in evaluating an essay becomes more objective.
2.4.2 - Tracking Students’ Progress

Teachers can not easily track students’ progress and help students on specific ongoing problems if assessments are exclusively based on numbers and letter grades that are found in grade books. However, the use of rubrics makes it feasible for teachers to keep a complete detailed record of each student’s progress. The detailed feedback on the rubric is useful for analyzing accurately where students’ strengths and weaknesses lie. Thus, a quick look at several rubrics can provide detailed information about the dimensions in which a student’s work is progressing and is not progressing. In this way, teachers can easily find out whether a student’s work is actually improving over time (Stevens & Levi, 2005).

Murphy (2009) also suggests that rubrics can help educators know whether English Language Learners are making progress. To meet this purpose, educators should start by establishing a baseline of a student’s ability in each of the four strands of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. By establishing a baseline, teachers can adjust instruction in each strand to provide the needed support and track a student’s progress. Afterwards, teachers should design rubrics for each language strand based on performance expectations from the state’s ESL proficiency standards. They should use dates to specify when behavior is observed. This will document the student’s proficiency level as well as inform the next steps for instruction in a specific strand.

2.4.3 - Impact on Teaching

Rubrics showing students’ development over time can permit us to have a clearer vision of teaching weaknesses and strengths. If, for example, the majority of students in a
class are showing a pattern of problems concerning inadequate use of examples, this can be identified and explained to students. Thus, rubrics can be a wonderful mean to deal with class problems without singling out any specific student or group of students (Stevens & Levi, 2005).

Dunbar, Brooks, and Kubichka-Miller (2006) report that the use of rubrics allowed teachers to find out students’ weaknesses in oral skills in public speaking courses and hence reconsider their teaching practices. The study’s results indicate that the success in teaching even the most basic oral communication skills is limited in the studied classrooms. Although the students did extremely well at some competencies, some of the most basic skills have not been attained. Overall, the fact that students were rated unsatisfactory in five out of eight competency areas that were described in the rubric is cause for panic. Thus, teachers should make changes in the way they teach the basic public speaking course by re-examining both the content of the course and the way in which it is delivered.

On the other hand, Stergar (2005) points out that rubrics help teachers stay focused on the process of learning. When teachers set the criteria prior to the instruction, they are more likely to sustain focus on the criteria throughout instruction. Besides, teachers can act as facilitators, tutors and guides when students are aware of where they are going and what they are striving for. Not to mention that the teacher can use the rubric to conduct student conferences and set goals for the next learning step. In this way, rubrics can be used to advance student performance, confirm a well done job, or design corrective measures that encourage mastery level work.
Peat (2006) also affirms in his study that the teacher who used rubrics to assess students’ performance on literature review papers reported that her style of teaching changed. In general, the teacher focused more on providing meaningful and constructive feedback to the students, not only through the use of the rubric but also in her written comments throughout their papers. She also has found that, in class, she provided more detailed verbal instructions on the expectations of performance as well as the reasons for using literature review assignments. She has also tried to relate the purpose of the research proposal to their overall understanding of research.

2.4.4 - Providing Feedback

Stevens and Levi (2005) report that feedback is most effective when it is extensively detailed and when description of the highest level of achievement is provided. As a matter of fact, rubrics fulfill both demands. They offer students more useful feedback about strengths and areas that need improvement than traditional forms of assessment do (Andrade, 2000). A single score is restricted in the feedback it can provide to students. For example, a student who gets a 70 out of a 100 may not know how to improve his/her performance on the next assignment (Moskal, 2000). With a single score, students are often left with a lack of clarity on the specific cause of drop in points or how to improve. In contrast, well-written instructional rubrics can provide clearness and equity to the process, can provide the student useful feedback, and can precisely indicate performance expectations using a variety of categories that focus on specific criteria. Thus, they assist students in better understanding how the instructor scores their papers (Andrade, 2000; Peat, 2006).
Speck (2002) also contends that professors should make evaluative criteria clear at the outset of a writing task. However, he thinks that it is essential for professors to involve students in establishing evaluative criteria. Thus, as a university professor, the author waits until the first draft of a project is due to engage students in revising the rubric that he administers at the onset of the assignment. He explains that he asks students to help him modify the rubric for three reasons. First, he wants students to consider what really matters when their writing undergoes summative evaluation. Second, he wants students to feel ownership for the criteria. He wants them to have a say in how their writing will be assessed. Third, he believes that students like to be treated as adults who are able to add value to the class and who have the power to make decisions that directly affect their grade. In this way, students can meet the expectations of summative evaluation and make use of the rubric from the beginning.

2.4.5 - Promoting Thinking and Learning

Because of the rubric format, students may draw their own conclusions about strengths and weaknesses in their work, and this self discovery is one of the favorable outcomes of using rubrics. Rubrics can help in developing the students’ self-assessment and self-improvement skills because they encourage them to think critically about their own learning. Used in combination with good academic advising, rubrics can play a primary role in helping students develop a more scholarly form of critical thinking. Discussing the rubric before the students start doing an assignment is one of the greatest ways that promote scholarly critical thinking. By passing out the rubric in advance and dedicating time for discussing the rubric’s components, teachers make implicit
expectations explicit. In discussing the rubric, educators and students will be developing elements of critical thinking and the criteria by which the work will be graded (Stevens & Levi, 2005). Several studies have shown that effective use of rubrics promote students’ learning and thinking.

Skillings and Ferrell (2000) report on a successful collaborative effort in the development and design of rubrics with second and third grade students. The involvement of the students started with the introduction of teacher-generated rubrics used for assessment and instruction, however with careful guidance, the students were encouraged to perceive rubrics critically and to generate components of their own. As the process continued, the students presumed more control in the rubric design and development. The process of working out and implementing student-generated rubrics assisted students in developing critical thinking and metacognitive skills.

Andrade (2000) also agrees that educators can boost student learning when they go beyond the most basic application of rubrics. By including students in designing rubrics, by looking for and including thinking-criteria, and by involving students in serious self and peer assessment, the use of rubrics will have a powerful effect on the students’ learning.

Andrade, Du, and Wang (2008) also investigate the impact of reading a model written assignment, coming up with a list of criteria for the assignment, and self-assessing according to a rubric, on elementary school students’ scores for a written assignment. The treatment involved using a sample paper to scaffold the process of making a list of criteria for an effective story or essay, delivering a written rubric, and using the rubric to self-assess first drafts. The comparison condition comprised generating a list of criteria for an
effective story or essay, and reviewing first drafts. Results show that having students use model papers to generate criteria for a writing assignment and using a rubric to self-assess first drafts is positively related to the quality of writing. The treatment has a statistically significant, positive correlation with third and fourth grade students’ essay scores.

Cohen, Lotan, Scarloss, Schultz, and Abram (2002) also support the belief that rubrics and self-assessment can promote learning. Results of the study show that students who were informed of the evaluation criteria for written essays and were encouraged to self-assess their work, had higher-quality discussions and better group products than students who worked without knowing the criteria.

Furthermore, Andrade and Du (2005) support the statement that rubrics provide a learning advantage. Undergraduate students who participated in their qualitative study report that they actively utilized rubrics to support their learning and academic performance. They used rubrics to plan the structure of an assignment, check their work, and direct or reflect on feedback from others. They said that using rubrics aided them to concentrate their efforts, produce work of higher quality, earn better grades, and feel less anxious about an assignment.

On the other hand, Andrade, Buff, Terry, Erano, and Paolino (2009) report on a successful attempt to teach writing by making improvements in the assessment of writing in the classroom. Their work aimed to improve students’ writing skills and scores. In order to achieve their aim, the researchers collaborated with the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers of English and social studies and set three assessment goals. The first is to make assessment processes clear to students via rubrics. The second is to provide frequent,
meaningful feedback to students about the quality of their work through teacher, peer, and self-assessment. The third is to use the assessments to examine the strengths and weaknesses in students' work and to plan instruction. The study’s results show that students' writing and their ability to self-assess had considerably improved. Teachers realized consistent progress in the products and processes of students' writing. Most of the students were constantly gaining a score of three or four on all criteria on the rubric. In grades six and eight, the scores for all students demonstrated improvement by seven and 15%, respectively. Subgroup scores also increased.

2.5 - Debate on Using Rubrics

Despite their numerous advantages, rubrics—specifically writing rubrics—have come under some criticism recently, some of it is reasonable, but much of it is not. Mabry (1999) points out that rubrics are designed to be used as scoring guidelines, but they also function as tools that control what is taught and valued. Because consensus among scorers is more easily attained with respect to matters such as spelling and organization, these are the features that are mainly favored in a rubricized classroom. Mabry (1999) and Kohn (2006) believe that although compliance with the rubric tends to produce higher scores and more reliability in scoring, it produces 'vacuous' writing.

In response to these arguments, Andrade (2006) explains that this is not a new problem caused by rubrics; it is a persistent, age-old problem that emphasizes conventions over content. Too many writing rubrics focus solely on low-level skills and knowledge, possibly because some teachers believe that the qualities of good writing cannot be portrayed in a rubric. Thus, she encourages teachers to embrace in rubrics sophisticated
criteria such as voice and tone, making connections, taking risks, considering other perspectives and raising questions. Spandel (2006) also agrees that the real problem with existing writing assessment does not lie with rubrics yet with what we highly value. Rubrics are not pushing us to value low-level skills. Instead, it is our own discourage and our reluctance to embrace the complication of truly good quality writing. We do not frequently credit design or voice or thinking because these things can practically never be assessed in a quick, assessment-at-a-glance manner. Thus, the recognition of such qualities requires time and shrewd perceptive reading. It demands a belief that such qualities are just as important as spelling. Once we fully believe in that, our rubrics will endorse our beliefs.

Spandel (2006) adds that like any instructional tool or method, rubrics can be misused. She explains that rubrics are not all the same. Some are unclearly written and are more accusatory than helpful. Some emphasize a prescribed approach to writing or stress on mechanics at the expense of content. However, good rubrics always embrace what we most deeply value.

On the other hand, Wilson (2007) complains that rubrics, and their list of general comments, are clumsy in theory and in practice. They are tools of standardization that tear at the basis of the rhetorical heart of writing, which is creative self-expression. They reduce student essays and our responses to a standardized exercise that is purposeless. She further explains that the standardized criteria in rubrics don't depict the essence of students' writing. The feedback they provide to students is still generic because they aren't given in reaction to the students' actual work. Instead of emerging from the transaction between an
individual reader and text, the feedback provided by a rubric gave rise to bypassing that interaction easy.

However, Spandel (2006) responds that it is unreasonable to imagine that we are somehow ruled by the rubrics we design. Rubrics cannot impede our understanding of writing. They document what we know at present, but they cannot prohibit exploration of new ideas. In fact, rubrics help us surmount randomness, flat-out bias and inconsistency. They do not, however, require teachers to desert individuality or stop responding on a personal level. Besides, Turley and Gallagher (2008) explicate that it is true that evaluative criteria are idiosyncratic to each piece of writing. But in high school and college classrooms, we also need to develop writing communities in which we acquire shared vocabulary for talking about and evaluating pieces of writing.

Kohn (2006) insists that students should not be handed out rubrics, even when their teachers use them to think about criteria by which they’ll assess students’ work. However, Andrade (2006) believes that it is dishonest and disrespectful to hold back one's expectations. She advises Kohn to review the extensive body of research on student self-assessment, which shows the positive effects of formative self-assessment on student attitudes and achievement. In addition she highlights that ongoing and constructive feedback and comments on students’ work has proved to be beneficial and agreeable to students.

As a matter of fact, Turley and Gallagher (2008) believe that the debate on the uses of rubrics has been structured in limited ways. It makes little sense to reject or accept a tool without careful attention to how, why, by whom, and in what contexts it is utilized. They
propose a set of questions that can aid us to assess the value of rubrics or any instructional tool. The questions are: (1) What is the tool used for? (2) In what context is it utilized? (3) Who makes decisions? (4) What ideological agenda guides those decisions? The authors believe that these questions provide an approach for making judgments about the uses of rubrics. They also declare that any educational tool becomes less instructionally helpful and more potentially harmful to educational integrity if it is not developed within the classroom context. Hence, a rubric that is created in this manner does not substitute engaged response. Rather, it is a tool for rendering more of it. While the language of the rubric corresponds to a consensus of the values of a certain group of writers, it also launches conversation. It is a place to start, and certainly not a place to end.

Gilmore (2007) also proposed the following six guidelines that extend the conversation about the ways rubrics work or do not work. First, rubrics should be tools that focus teacher commentary, and not substitute it. Second, rubrics should be used according to a certain pedagogy that has not yet been fully investigated. Third, students should be involved in creating the rubrics. Fourth, rubrics should be varied and flexible in order to adjust to the needs of the students. Fifth, rubrics should encourage and reward the writing process as well as the final product. Finally, the positive effects of using rubrics should not be ignored, and also they should not be used as justifications that validate the tool’s existence.

2.6 - Conclusion

These findings from the literature review imply that rubrics that are thoughtfully crafted and used with prudence and understanding can be among the most useful
instructional and assessment tools. They offer useful insights that permit us to go deep inside performance (Spandel, 2006). They blur the distinction between learning and assessment and serve purposes of learning as well as evaluation. They monitor students’ learning as well as teacher’s teaching practices. They promote critical thinking skills and show evidence of learning and effective teaching. In this way, they become powerful tools that allow students and teachers to determine their strengths as well as the weaknesses that need to be worked out. They permit us to monitor the students’ learning and development in an authentic manner. Hence, we should not abandon rubrics. Let’s make them better by ensuring that they embrace what we really value. Let’s also create them in ways that leave space for thinking and opportunities for reflection (Spandel, 2006).

The following chapter presents a description of the methodology used in conducting the research study. The chapter specifies the research design, the sample, and the instruments used in carrying out the study.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 - Introduction

This chapter is divided into two main sections. Section one describes the involved participants as well as the research design employed in the study. Section two presents the instruments used to collect data.

3.2 - Participants

The researcher, a direct participant in the study, chose the participants from School X. They consist of an elementary English teacher and 21 third graders who learn English as a second language. The participant teacher has taught English for grades three and four for five years and has an experience in using rubrics to assess the students’ writing performance. On the other hand, the students are from the same section and are of mixed abilities. They speak Arabic as their first language, and they learn English as a second one. The sampling was purposive and convenient (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Cohen et al. (2011) explain that a convenience sample may be the opted sampling strategy for a case study or a set of case studies. Besides, the sample is purposive because it has been chosen for a specific purpose which is the previous experience in using rubrics. The names of the teacher, students and school participating in the study are not revealed. Bell (2005) stated that anonymity and confidentiality are an essential part of ethical considerations in any research.
3.3 - Research Design

The research design used in this study is a case study. A case study typically involves the observation of a single entity such as an individual, a class, a situation, a school or even a community (Burns, 2000; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010). Cohen et al. (2011) further explain that a case study focuses on individuals or groups and aim to understand their perceptions of events. It provides a comprehensive description of participants’ lived experiences, thoughts and feelings about a situation. Thus, the researcher in this study investigated students’ and teachers’ perspectives on using rubrics in the writing classroom in a particular class that is situated in one of the schools in Beirut, Lebanon.

There are three main types of case studies; intrinsic, instrumental and collective case studies (Cohen et al., 2011; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010). In an intrinsic case study, the researcher is mainly interested in understanding a particular individual or situation (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010). In terms of their outcomes, case studies can be exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. Descriptive case studies provide narrative accounts of the participants’ perspectives (Cohen et al., 2011). In this study, the researcher conducted an intrinsic case study that is descriptive in nature. The researcher used various methods to describe the particulars of the case and hence provide detailed narrative descriptions of what is going on in the writing classroom. Collected data was then analyzed to investigate the effects of using rubrics on students’ and teachers’ attitudes and performance in the writing classroom.
3.4 - Instrumentation

A case study involves the examination of a case or phenomenon in its real life authentic context usually employing several forms of data. They are descriptive and thorough, with a narrow focus, blending subjective and objective data (Cohen et al., 2011). The three methods used to collect data in this study are classroom observations, an in-depth interview and a questionnaire.

3.4.1 - Classroom Observation

The first method of data collection took the form of classroom observations. The researcher observed the classroom practices that took place during four writing sessions in the third grade classroom. The distinguishing feature of observation as research process is that it provides an investigator the opportunity to collect “live” data from naturally occurring social situations rather than solely depending on second hand accounts. You do not need to ask people about their personal views or attitudes; instead, you observe what they do and listen to what they say (Cohen et al., 2011; Robson, 2002).

According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2010), classroom observation may be classified as participant or non-participant depending on the role that a researcher takes. In this study, the researcher followed the participant observation in which the observer played the role of participant-as-observer (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010). The researcher had an active role in the action that is being observed, but she also made clear that she is doing a research. Cohen et al. (2011) explain that participant observation is especially useful in studying small groups, for events and processes that last for a short period of time or for activities that could be observed as is the case in this research study.
Observational methods may also be classified as structured, semi-structured and unstructured observation (Cohen et al., 2011). The researcher followed a semi-structured observation in which data was gathered to explain certain practices such as the students’ and teachers’ actions and interactions throughout the observed writing sessions.

Observations were recorded in the form of quick key words and symbols during observations and then more detailed descriptions were written fully as soon as feasible afterwards. Robson (2002) presented several tips to avoid observational biases in participant observation. Thus, the researcher followed these tips and tried to start with an open mind, made a conscious effort to distribute the attention evenly among the students, and wrote field notes in a narrative report promptly.

### 3.4.2 - Questionnaire

Participant observation is often used with other types of data collection to elicit the participants’ definitions and thoughts in accounting for situations and behaviors (Cohen et al., 2011). For this reason, the researcher designed and administered a questionnaire that would provide additional insight into the participants’ attitudes and experiences in using rubrics. The questionnaire was directly administered to the participating students at the same time and in the same place, the classroom. The main advantage of this approach is that it provides high response rate that is often close to 100 percent (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010).

The questionnaire consists of nine close-ended questions and a single question that combines both open-ended and close-ended formats. Close-ended questions are useful because they can yield to frequencies of response and permit comparisons to be made.
across groups in the sample. However, they do not enable participants to add any remarks and explanations (Cohen et al., 2011). For this reason, the researcher included a question that uses both open and close-ended formats to clarify the participants’ attitudes towards using rubrics in the writing classroom. Burns (2000) explains that open ended questions allow the respondents to justify and clarify their choices and responses. They avoid the limitations of pre-set choices of response.

The concepts of the questions were clear and did not necessitate any form of explanation upon administration. They matched the objectives and the variables allotted for the study, and they did not require more than five to seven minutes to be completed. In addition, the questionnaire provided the structure desired for the respondents to answer their own questionnaire by allowing them to review fully their own relevant experience and arrive at almost accurate responses.

According to Cohen et al. (2011) a closed and structured questionnaire needs to be piloted and refined so that the final version contains a complete range of possible responses. That’s why; the researcher piloted the items of the questionnaire upon constructing them on the participating students. Then, she did some changes in unclear choices and in the wording of some questions in order to clarify ambiguities and make questions clearly understood by the respondents (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010).

**3.4.3 - In-depth Interview**

For the purpose of this study, the researcher planned to interview English coordinators at school X. However, they refused to participate due to overwork. Thus, the researcher conducted a 20-minute in-depth interview with an English teacher who uses
rubrics in the writing classroom. An in-depth interview is a conversation between informants and researchers and focuses on the informants’ perception of their experiences (Burns, 2000). Cohen et al. (2011) propose that open-ended questions are flexible and permit the interviewer to probe so that he/she may go into more depth. Hence, the researcher prepared for the interview eight open-ended questions that target the same variables that are the focus of the research. They reveal the rationale for using rubrics, the positive impacts of using rubrics and the challenges faced upon using rubrics in the writing classroom. The interview was then transcribed to ensure accuracy.

A major advantage of this form of interview is that it provides greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection. A disadvantage, on the other hand, is that it is disposed to subjectivity and bias on the part of the interviewer (Cohen et al., 2011). Besides, interviewing is time consuming. All interviews entail careful preparation, making arrangements to visit, obtaining necessary permissions and transcribing tapes (Robson, 2002).

3.5 - Ethical Considerations

Before starting the research, the researcher secured the verbal consent of the school principal who gave total freedom to conduct the study on rubrics. She also informed the principal and the English coordinator about the nature and the purpose of the study. The participants involved were also informed about the study carried out. The researcher attained the participants’ verbal consent without being offered any incentive for that is unethical (Cohen et al., 2011). In addition, the name of the school was not disclosed, and the names of the students were not mentioned for anonymity. The researcher respected the
right of any individual to refuse to participate in the study or to withdraw from participating at any time (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010).

3.6 - Validity and Reliability

Cohen et al. (2011) highlight several steps that researchers can take to warrant validity and reliability in qualitative research. Hence, the researcher followed these steps to ensure the validity and reliability of this study. First, the research was conducted in a natural setting, a third grade writing classroom, to ensure its fidelity (Cohen et al., 2011). Second, triangulation or the use of more than one method of data collection is used to record multiple perceptions of the researched topic (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010; Cohen et al., 2011). To ensure triangulation, multiple methods of data collection were used: an interview with an English teacher, a questionnaire, and classroom observations were carried out by the researcher herself. Third, the researcher provided thick and accurate descriptions of accounts and required aspects. Fourth, the researcher tried to avoid personal biases while collecting data and interpreting research findings. She tried to compare her findings and interpretations with literature, and she made sure to receive feedback from the research’s advisor. Finally, the researcher checked for representativeness by avoiding unsupported generalizations of the findings.

3.7- Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the three modes of data collection and identified how each one should be dealt with. The next chapter depicts how the data is analyzed and highlights the findings of the study.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

4.1 - Introduction

The data collection instruments have provided adequate data to answer the research questions of the study:

3. To what extent do rubrics influence the classroom practices and students’ learning in the writing classroom?

4. What are the students’ and teachers’ attitudes toward using rubrics in the writing classroom?

Both quantitative and qualitative data are presented in the chapter.

4.2 - Analysis of the questionnaire

A questionnaire was given to the participating students to survey their attitudes and experiences in using rubrics in the writing classroom. The students answered all the questions and submitted the questionnaires to the researcher. The researcher calculated the percentage of students who responded to the choices of each question and represented the numbers in tables. Every table summarizes data collected from questions that target a common theme. In sum, the questions were grouped into the following four themes; the students’ use of rubrics, the instructional means that guided the students’ performance, the rubric’s effect on students’ performance and the students’ attitudes and feelings upon using rubrics.
TABLE 4.1
The Students’ Use of Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you use the rubric?</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the teacher explain the rubric before using it?</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you read the rubric before writing your paragraph?</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you read the rubric after writing your paragraph?</td>
<td>90.5%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data displayed in table 1 shows the students’ use of rubric in the writing classroom. The majority of the students (85.7%) reported that they used the rubric. However, all the students (100%) declared that the teacher explained the rubric before using it. This shows that there is a discrepancy in the results of questions 1 and 2. On the other hand, 85.7% of the students used the rubric before writing the paragraph whereas 90.5% of them used it after writing the paragraph. The results show that all the students were informed about the rubric’s criteria and the majority of them used the rubric as they wrote their paragraphs.

TABLE 4.2
The Instructional Means that Affected Students’ Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What helped you know what to do in the writing task?</th>
<th>19.1%</th>
<th>14.3%</th>
<th>66.6%</th>
<th>-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the rubric</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the rubric and the teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 reveals the instructional means that assisted students in developing their paragraphs. The results show that more than half the students (66.6%) reported that the teacher and the rubric instructed them about what to do in the writing task. 19.1% of the
students declared that the rubric solely helped them know what to do, whereas 14.3% stated that the teacher was the only one who helped them in the writing task. Hence, most of the students assert that the rubric and the teacher are essential means that guide them in the writing task.

**TABLE 4.3**
**Rubric’s Effect on Students’ Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Somehow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did the rubric help you in improving your writing?</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the rubric stop you from writing new ideas?</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 demonstrates the rubric’s effect on students’ performance. It is evident that the rubric generally assisted the majority of students in improving their writing paragraphs. The combined percentage of students who totally and partially affirmed the rubric’s help amounts to 80.9%.

On the other hand, 28.5% of the students asserted that the rubric stopped them from writing new ideas. However, slightly more than half the students (52.4%) totally disagreed with the former group and 19.1% partially disagreed. In general, the majority of the students do not consider rubrics as tools that impede one’s self expression of ideas.

**TABLE 4.4**
**Students’ Attitudes and Feelings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Somehow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you still worry about your grade after using the rubric?</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you like to be graded?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with a rubric</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with a grade and a rubric</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with a grade only</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Would you like to use the rubric? | Yes | No | Somehow |
--- | --- | --- | ---
81% | 9.5% | 9.5% |

Would you like to use the rubric in the writing classroom? Why?

**Student 1:** Yes because it helps me very much.
**Student 2:** Yes because it helps me to make it well.
**Student 3:** Somehow because in sometimes it helps me in writing.
**Student 4:** Yes because it helps me very much.
**Student 5:** Yes because it was useful to me when I was writing.
**Student 6:** Yes because maybe it would help in some ways.
**Student 7:** Yes because it helped me write.
**Student 8:** Yes, I like to use the rubric because it helps me.
**Student 10:** Yes because it gives me ideas!
**Student 11:** Yes, I want to use the rubric because it helps us with new ideas.
**Student 12:** Yes because it helps me.
**Student 13:** Yes because it helps me while I am writing the paragraph.
**Student 14:** Yes because it helps me take a high grade and not to do mistakes.
**Student 15:** Somehow because it made me afraid.
**Student 16:** Yes because it gives us a good idea and it tells us good things.
**Student 17:** Yes it helped me in sometimes.
**Student 18:** Yes because it helped me to correct my work.
**Student 19:** Yes because it is so fun and I love it.
**Student 20:** No because I don’t always want to read it because I feel I am still small.
**Student 21:** No because it is hard for me.

Table 4 spotlights the students’ attitudes and feelings upon using rubrics. It also presents the students’ justifications of their personal likings regarding the use of rubrics.

The results show that the majority of students are to a certain degree still worried about their grades despite the use of rubrics. This is because a total of 76.2% of students who still have worries are equally distributed among those who have complete and partial worries.
However, 23.8% which is approximately one fourth of the students assure that they are not worried about their grades. Thus, it is evident that the use of rubric diminished the students’ worry about their grade.

On the other hand, the majority of the students (71.4%) prefer to be graded with a grade and a rubric, very few (4.8%) would like to be graded with rubrics only, and the remaining percentage of students (23.8%) would prefer grades only. Impressively, in the last question, 81% of students completely assure that they like to use rubrics. The remaining 19% of students is equally distributed among students who wouldn’t and would somehow like to use rubrics. Thus, on the whole, a great majority of students support the use of a rubric. Surprisingly, the overall percentage of students (90.5%) who would and would somehow like to use a rubric outnumbered a total of 76.2% of students who prefer to be graded with a rubric only and with a rubric and a grade simultaneously. This shows that there is discrepancy in the students’ responses. However, when students were asked to justify their choice about using rubrics the majority of the students explained that they would like to use a rubric because it helps them write and correct their mistakes. Only three out of 21 students explained that the rubric is difficult and not appropriate for their age group. Thus, the students’ justification validate the students’ responses to the last close-ended question; which means that they’d like to be graded using a rubric.

4.2.1 - Discussion

Some results that are related to the students’ use of rubrics are invalid because 14.3% of students acknowledged that they didn’t use rubrics whereas all the students concur that the teacher explained the rubric before using it. Hence, the responses of the
students who declared that they did not use the rubric are invalid. Besides, most of the students admitted that both the rubric and the teacher helped them know what to do in the writing task. These findings show that simply handing out a rubric without explicitly explaining and discussing the expectations and criteria to the students is not enough to guide students, and consequently, to induce improvement in the students’ performance. These results concur with previous studies that stress the importance of explaining the assessment criteria at the onset of a writing task (Speck, 2002; Andrade, 2005).

The results also show that the majority of students checked the rubric after writing their paragraphs. The students also clarified that the rubric helps them improve their writing performance. This shows that the rubric provided the students with helpful feedback that allowed them to identify their strengths and weaknesses; a finding that reaffirms the results of previous studies (Saddler & Andrade, 2004; Andrade, 2000; Peat, 2006). Besides, the results show that the students were involved in the process of self-assessment and hence, were developing self-regulation skills; a finding that corresponds with previous studies that consider rubrics to be powerful self-assessment tools that promote learning and help in developing the skills of self-assessment and self-improvement (Stevens & Levi, 2005; Saddler & Andrade, 2004; Andrade, 2008).

On the other hand, the majority of the students do not consider rubrics as tools that impede the students’ self expression of ideas. This finding refutes the claims of Wilson (2007) who considers rubrics as lists of criteria that standardize the students’ writings and hence, do not permit them to creatively express their ideas. Consequently, the students’
responses were in accordance with the assertion of Spandel (2006) who thinks that rubrics are not tools that prohibit the exploration of new ideas.

Finally, the study’s results reveal that the use of rubrics has diminished the students’ anxiety about the grades that they will earn on their writing performance. A possible explanation for this finding is that the rubric conveys the criteria that the students’ evaluation will be based on. Therefore, the students’ knowledge about the teacher’s expectations makes them feel that the grading is consistent and is more objective as Stergar (2005) and Peat (2006) assert.

4.3 - Classroom Observation

The researcher observed the classroom practices that took place during four writing sessions in the third grade classroom that she teaches. The teacher’s main objective was to guide students to write a how-to-paragraph about cooking vegetable soup. During the first period, the students defined a how-to-paragraph and then identified its features using a sample how-to-paragraph that was distributed to the students. Students took turns reading the paragraph and were asked several questions to find out and describe the parts and features of a how-to-paragraph. As the students answered the questions, the teacher displayed the features, one by one, on the overhead projector. She also encouraged the students to mark these features on the model that they have. The teacher also asked students to tell about the grammar and mechanics of an excellent paragraph. Afterwards, the teacher presented the rubric of the how-to-paragraph using the overhead projector. Students read the gradations of quality, and the teacher provided the necessary
explanations. Throughout this period the students were effectively interacting and getting involved in the teaching-learning process.

The teacher started the second period by refreshing the students’ memories about the features of a how-to-paragraph using the model they already discussed before. Next, the teacher provided some time for students to carefully read the rubric they discussed in the previous session. When the students finished reading the rubric, they helped the teacher compose a how-to-paragraph. The teacher asked her students to read the rubric’s description of an excellent paragraph and to compose the paragraph accordingly. The teacher provided scaffolds to guide the students as they developed the paragraph. The students also used their prior-knowledge in the composition of the paragraph. In this way, the students thought about the content and organization of an excellent paragraph. It is worth to note that the students were generally involved and motivated to participate in this activity. Towards the end of the period, the teacher used the over head projector to display a model of a good and another of a poor how-to-paragraph. The students used the rubric’s criteria to assess the examples of good and poor work. They directly identified the mistakes and provided the necessary corrections. They were so thrilled and highly involved throughout the activity. They used the rubric’s criteria to assess each sample paragraph in a professional way.

During the third period, the teacher encouraged her students to use the rubric to compose their own how-to-paragraphs. The teacher monitored the students as they wrote. However, she realized that a good number of students had some difficulties remembering the steps of cooking the food. Thus, she did a micro-teaching to remind them of the steps
in the correct order. Then, she told the students to revise their work and use the rubric to check their paragraphs. The students followed the teacher’s directions and started revising their work. However, most of the students did not finish their writing paragraphs.

During the fourth period, the teacher started by asking her students some questions to review the features of a how-to-paragraph. Then, she displayed pictures that depict the steps of making the food they should write about. Students used the pictures to tell the steps in the correct order using sequence words. Later, the teacher requested her students to use the rubric and the pictures to finish and revise their how-to-paragraphs. The teacher monitored the students as they revised their work. She repeatedly encouraged her students to look at the rubric to revise their work. She conferred with students who needed help. During the conferences, the teacher guided her students to think logically about the content of their paragraphs and to use the rubric and picture cues to develop their paragraphs. Throughout monitoring the students’ work, the teacher realized that the majority of the students were easily guided and were able to understand the teacher’s feedback. It is clear that the expectations were clear to them.

4.3.1 - Discussion

The teacher’s anecdotal records mainly focus on the impact of rubrics on the teaching-learning process. The teacher made the rubric’s criteria clear to her students throughout the writing process in several ways. This in turn helped in clarifying the teacher’s expectations to students and in developing their motivation and understanding of the task’s goal; a finding that was assured by previous studies (Andrade, 2005; Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008; Peat, 2006). In addition, discussing the rubric before doing a writing
assignment and continually encouraging students to check their work using rubrics, helps in developing the students’ critical thinking and self-assessment skills (Andrade, 2008; Steven & Levi, 2005).

On the other hand, the teacher did not have difficulty in monitoring the students’ work as she conferred with them; this is because the rubric helped in developing a writing community that has shared vocabulary. Thus, the rubric was a tool that launched conversation between the teacher and students as Turley and Gallagher (2008) asserted. The results also show that the rubric helped the teacher focus her instruction on certain expectations and objectives as Andrade (2005) highlighted.

4.4 - Interview Results

My interviewee started the interview by defining rubrics. She stated that a rubric is a tool used for grading. She explained that students are usually more used to single number grades without having feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of their writing paragraphs. Hence, she thinks that introducing rubrics to elementary students is an important thing that offers the necessary feedback to students. When asked about the rationale for using rubrics, my interviewee clarified that rubrics provide fairness to the grading. She further explained that rubrics provide detailed feedback to students about the strengths and weaknesses that they have to work on. She also clarified that a rubric simplifies the grading process to the student and to the teacher by permitting teachers to identify students’ weakness and subsequently provide adequate support and guidance. On the other hand, my interviewee asserted that rubrics motivate students. They enhance the
students’ self confidence as they self evaluate their work. Consequently, they permit students to discover their weaknesses and try to improve their performance.

Hence, my interviewee believes that rubrics help in improving students’ writing by identifying weaknesses in the writing paragraphs; however she thinks that there are other ways of improving writing. She asserted that students who read a lot and listen to the teacher’s explanation in class do well on their writing paragraphs. Besides, she does not solely depend on rubrics to help students improve their work. She tends to go through the students’ work, confer with the students and then provide the appropriate support that improves the students’ writing skills and abilities. In this respect, my interviewee provided an account of a case in which she used the rubric as an instructional tool. She explained that one student used to write using shallow ideas in her writings. In an attempt to overcome this problem, my interviewee advised this student to read and summarize what she reads in order to get ideas about different topics. Besides, she personally assisted this student by providing her with a list of journal topics and brainstorming ideas with her before writing about each topic.

When the researcher asked her interviewee about the effect of rubrics on her teaching performance, she responded that rubrics set basic criteria that she communicates and explains to students using sample paragraphs and checklists. She stated that a “rubric is like a recipe for a dish that tells you what to do”. However, she warned that one should be cautious about including writing criteria that limit the students’ creativity and self expression. Thus, she stressed that the rubric’s criteria should not be very limited in order to let the students express their ideas freely.
As for the other challenges in using rubrics, my interviewee clarified that it is stressful and time consuming to correct a piece of writing using rubrics. This is so because the teacher has to decide upon the rating that suits the writing paragraph. For this reason, she believes that most teachers tend to use the holistic grades instead of rubrics to assess the students’ writing performance. However, my interviewee clarified that teachers will get used to rubric’s grading system with time. Another challenge that she mentioned is that it takes time to explain the rubric’s criteria for the first time. But once the students understand the six writing traits (ideas, organization, word choice, voice, fluency, and conventions) that most rubrics emphasize, students will be able to use the rubric easily.

At the end of the interview, the researcher asked the interviewee whether she would personally use a rubric if she had to teach in a school where she is not obliged to use it. My interviewee responded that she doesn’t mind using it since it has advantages, and it really helps students in getting feedback on where their weakness is. Due to the effectiveness of rubrics, my interviewee asserted that the departments that are concerned with teaching English should impose the use of rubrics in all classrooms starting from grade one till grade 12.

4.4.1 - Discussion

Throughout the interview, several points were highlighted about the effects of rubrics on the teaching-learning process. The interviewee emphasized that unlike single point grading, rubrics offer feedback to students that help them identify the strengths and weaknesses of the writing performance (Andrade, 2000; Peat, 2006). They also provide fairness to the grading as Stergar (2005) asserted. In addition, my interviewee
acknowledged that rubrics enhance the students’ motivation and self confidence as they self evaluate their work; a finding that echoes previous studies (Andrade, 2000; Andrade & Du, 2005).

My interviewee also assured that rubrics help teachers identify the students’ weaknesses and consequently guide them to obtain the necessary support. This finding is also supported by earlier studies (Dunbar, Brooks, & Kubichka-Miller, 2006; Stevens & Levi, 2005). However, as Spandel (2006) and Wilson (2008) emphasized, my interviewee stated that teachers should use rubrics and at the same time work with students on personal level through conferences in order to help them develop their writing skills.

On the other hand, my interviewee argued that rubrics set basic criteria that are explained to students throughout the writing process. Therefore, the teachers’ instruction is focused for it is guided by the rubric’s criteria as Andrade (2005) and Gilmore (2007) concur. However, my interviewee explains that these criteria should not limit the students’ self-expression. Hence, my interviewee is against the use of rubrics that emphasize a prescribed approach as Spandel (2006) contended.

Although my interviewee is in favor of using rubrics as instructional and assessment tools, she believes that grading students’ writings using rubrics is time-consuming. This shows that upon using rubrics, teachers are no more putting grades subjectively. Instead, they are thoroughly thinking about the criteria that describe a piece of writing. Hence, the subjectivity that is entailed in evaluating the students’ writing becomes more objective (Moskal, 2000; Stergar, 2005; Gilmore, 2007).
4.5 - Conclusion

The analysis of the collected data showed that rubrics are effective instructional and assessment tools that can positively affect the students’ writing performance. The questionnaire portrayed the students’ preference of rubrics because they have positive effects on their learning. The interview highlighted the advantages and challenges of using rubrics. The classroom observation mostly portrayed the impact of rubrics on the teacher’s and students’ classroom practices. The next chapter will conclude the study and recommend further studies that could be done in the future regarding using rubrics.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 - Introduction

The study focuses on the impact of using rubrics on the teaching-learning process in the writing classroom. Specifically, it investigates the perceived benefits and challenges of using rubrics to assess students’ writing. It also examines the participants’ attitudes toward using rubrics in the writing classroom. The study’s results demonstrate that teachers and students support the use of rubrics in the writing classroom.

5.2 - Conclusions

Teachers believe that rubrics positively impact their students’ learning and their teaching practices. They consider them as tools that focus instruction on desired learning outcomes and help in clarifying the expectations of high quality work to students. They also provide detailed feedback about the students’ strengths and weaknesses. Consequently, they allow teachers to provide the appropriate interventions that compensate for the students’ weaknesses. Rubrics also enhance the students’ learning because they develop the students’ self-reflection and self-assessment skills (Andrade, 2005).

The teachers’ and students’ responses assure that rubrics do not replace the teacher’s role. Teachers should provide students with writing models and continuous guidance which assist in developing the students’ writing skills. In addition, they believe that rubrics’ criteria may not limit the students’ expression of new ideas if they are well constructed. This shows that rubrics can benefit students and teachers alike.
They also serve as instructional and assessment tools in the writing classroom (Fitzgerald, 2007).

5.3 - Recommendations

The results of this study should motivate English Language teachers to use rubrics in the writing classrooms. They should be confident that rubrics can be effective and can be used by teachers and students as instructional tools that improve the students’ writing performance. However, it is recommended that teachers use rubrics which include criteria that do not limit the students’ self-expression. Besides, the rubrics’ criteria should be aligned with respectable and reasonable standards and with the curriculum taught to students (Andrade, 2005). In addition, rubrics should not be prescriptive and should stress the content as well as the mechanics of the language. They should be created in ways that leave space for thinking and opportunities for reflection (Spandel, 2006). Besides, they should not replace the teacher’s instruction and interaction with students on personal level (Andrade 2005). Hence, teachers should pay careful attention to how, why, by whom, and in what contexts a rubric is utilized (Turley & Gallagher, 2008). Furthermore, the Language Arts curricula especially the Lebanese Curricula have to be reformed to encourage the use of rubrics in the writing classrooms.

5.4 - Limitations of the Study

Although the study aims at examining the impact of rubrics on the teaching-learning practices in the writing classroom, its results cannot be generalized due to the small number of participants. The study was conducted in one class that consisted of 21 students; hence, the sample might not be representative of the target population of the
Lebanese English Language Learners in elementary classrooms. Unfortunately, the researcher was also not able to conduct interviews with coordinators in order to collect and analyze more data about the impact of using rubrics in writing classrooms.

Another major limitation is that the study was conducted over a few days; a comprehensive study should be done to reveal the effects on the long term. On the other hand, the study did not include the parents’ voice concerning the implementation of rubrics in writing classrooms. Questionnaires or interviews should have been addressed to parents to examine their perspectives about using rubrics. Despite of these limitations, the researcher believes that the study is a base that captures the researchers’ awareness and drives them to conduct further research studies about the impact of using rubrics in Lebanese contexts.

5.5 – **Recommended Future Research**

Further research should investigate the effect of using rubrics on the teaching-learning process in the writing classroom by conducting an experimental research design that consists of experimental and control groups. This would allow researchers to compare and contrast teachers’ performance and students’ learning with and without using rubrics.

Finally, although the study highlights the students’ attitudes toward rubrics, another study that would extensively explore the effect of using rubrics on teachers’ and students’ self-esteem and motivation would provide a deeper picture about the effect of using rubrics in the writing classrooms.
References


Appendix I

Student Questionnaire

Using Rubrics in the Writing Classroom

Dear students, you were asked to use the rubric upon writing a paragraph. Please answer the following questions about your use of rubric in the writing classroom.

1. Did you use the rubric?

   a- Yes  
   b- No

2. Did the teacher explain the rubric before using it?

   a- Yes  
   b- No

3. Did you read the rubric before writing your paragraph?

   a- Yes  
   b- No

4. What helped you know what to do in the writing task? (You can circle more than one answer.)

   a- the rubric

   b- the teacher

   c- the friends

5. Did the rubric help you in improving your writing?

   a- Yes  
   b- No  
   c- Somehow
6. Did the rubric stop you from writing new ideas?
   a- Yes  
   b- No  
   c- Somehow

7. Did you check the rubric after writing your paragraph?
   a- Yes  
   b- No

8. Do you still worry about your grade after using the rubric?
   a- Yes  
   b- No  
   c- Somehow

9. How would you like to be graded? (Choose one answer.)
   a- with a rubric  
   b- with a grade and a rubric  
   c- with a grade only

10. Would you like to use the rubric?
    a- Yes  
    b- No  
    c- Somehow

Why?________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Thank You
Appendix II

**Observation Records**

I observed the classroom practices that took place during four writing sessions in the third grade classroom that I teach. During the first two periods, the teacher enriched the students’ background knowledge about the topic they will write about and the paragraph’s format. During the other two periods, the teacher monitored the students as they composed their paragraphs.

The teacher started the first period by telling students that they will write a how-to-paragraph, but before writing it they should learn about it. Thus, the teacher wrote two questions that will be answered on the right side of the board. The questions were: “What is a how-to-paragraph? How do we write a how-to-paragraph?” Next, the teacher told students to read the title and predict what a how-to-paragraph might be. The teacher used the students’ logical guesses to scaffold them to the meaning of a how-to-paragraph. Then, the teacher distributed a sample of a how-to-paragraph told students to read it to find out how it is written. Students took turns reading the paragraph and then were asked several questions to find out and describe the parts and features of a how-to-paragraph. As the students answered the questions, the teacher displayed the features one by one on the overhead projector. The teacher also encouraged the students to mark these features in the model that they have. The teacher also asked students to tell about the mechanics of an excellent paragraph. Afterwards, the teacher told the students that they will use a rubric to write this paragraph as they did in the previous time. The teacher presented the rubric of the how-to-paragraph on the overhead projector. She asked students to read the gradations of quality, and she provided the necessary explanations. At the end of the period, the teacher told students to retell the important feature of a how-to-paragraph.

The teacher started the second period by writing the classroom activities on the right side of the board. During this period, students will review the features of a how-to-paragraph and then write a how-to-paragraph as a whole group. In order to refresh the students’ memories about the features of a how-to-paragraph, the teacher commanded her students to reread the model they discussed before and then tell the characteristics.
Afterwards, the teacher provided some time for students to read carefully the rubric they discussed in the previous session. She explained that after this activity, they will help the teacher compose a how-to-paragraph. The teacher explained that they will write a how-to-paragraph about making vegetable soup because they’ve read about it in the reading story. After that, the teacher asked her students to read the description of the parts of an excellent paragraph one-by-one and to compose the paragraph accordingly. The teacher provided scaffolds to guide the students as they developed the paragraph. The students also used their prior-knowledge and the rubric’s description of an excellent paragraph to participate in the composition of the paragraph. In this way, the students thought about the content and organization of an excellent paragraph. Afterwards, the students took turns to read the composed paragraph. Towards the end of the period, the teacher displayed on the overhead projector a model of a good and another of a poor how-to-paragraph. The students used the rubric’s criteria to assess the examples of good and poor work. They directly identified the mistakes and provided the necessary corrections.

During the third period, the teacher encouraged her students to use the rubric to compose their own how-to-paragraphs. The teacher monitored the students as they wrote. She noticed that some students are using the rubric while writing. She also noted that all the students started writing their paragraphs in the right way. However, she realized that a good number of students had some difficulties remembering all the steps of cooking the food. Thus, she told all the students to stop writing and pay attention to listen to her explanation. She re-explained the steps of cooking the food and wrote the key words of each step on the board. She told students to read the steps and then erased them. Then she told students to revise their work. She also encouraged the students who finished their work to use the rubric to check their paragraphs. The period ended but some students did not finish their work. The teacher told their students that they will complete their work in another period.

During the fourth period, the teacher at first asked her students some questions to review the features of a how-to-paragraph. Then, she displayed pictures that depict the steps of making the food they should write about. Students ordered the pictures in the correct way using sequence words and complete sentences. Later, the teacher encouraged
her students to use the rubric and the pictures to write and revise their how-to-paragraphs. The teacher monitored the students as they revised their work. She conferred with students who need help and encouraged them to look at the pictures to remember the steps they should write about. She also encouraged her students to look at the rubric to revise their work.
Appendix III

Transcription of the interview

I conducted the in-depth interview with an English Language teacher who teaches upper elementary classes at a school in Beirut. She has taught for five years and has and has an experience in using rubrics to assess the students’ writing performance. Since the topic of my research is about the use of rubrics in the writing classroom, I thought that this teacher would be suitable candidate whom I can benefit from her experience with rubrics.

After developing an appropriate rapport with the teacher, I explained the purpose of my interview to the teacher. Afterwards, I initiated the interview by asking her the first question about rubrics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning of Symbol</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>START</td>
<td>Beginning of transcript</td>
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<tr>
<td>END</td>
<td>End of transcript</td>
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<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>period</td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>question</td>
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<td>#</td>
<td>Pause between words</td>
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<tr>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>interruption</td>
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<tr>
<td>(---)</td>
<td>Silence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*I</td>
<td>Investigator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*R</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
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</table>
I: Just # uh, I’m gonna start with the first question, “Why do you use rubrics to assess students’ writing?”
R: First of all if we wanna define rubrics, a rubric is a tool # and it’s a tool used to, uh, # you know for grading . You know usually students are #more #used to you know simple grading process like they have a piece of writing, they have a holistic like, uh, you took 13 so (---)+/.
I: A grade, just a grade
R: A holistic grade and you know the student here comes and says what’s wrong with my writing? 13, why? Is it the grammar? The mechanics? Is it the spelling? Is it the sentences? And then he just comes up with a thing, uh, # and says it is the whole thing. And I think # elementary students, are still # hard to them to understand holistic, so introducing for them rubrics is an important thing because what’s its importance? First of all # it kind of provides fairness to the grading. It’s like when you’re making a pizza. When you eat a pizza, there are ingredients. They are details. So when you detail the grading for the students, they would know #. They would have good feedback like, uh, what’s the problem? The body? I don’t have good grading in the body; that means I have to work on the body; that means I have to give more examples. So the rubric somehow gives a detailed feedback to the student on knowing where’s the weakness and where’s the strength so that they can improve it for later on. So, I think its importance is just that it fives fairness feedback and # it simplifies the grading process to the student and to the teacher as well in some ways. The teacher would know what the student’s weakness is so that she would help in improving this. Uh, (---) also, rubrics motivate students. It provides them with self confidence as they self evaluate. They discover their weaknesses and try to improve their performance.
I: So # “Do you think that rubrics help in improving students’ writing? Please explain.”
R: It’s not the most important because in the end, it’s you’re assessing the student’s writing. It gives feedback but it [yeaneh] giving it feedback, you’d know the weakness so you’d improve it. So, it’s more like a feedback # you know, you know, it does help, but, uh, (---)+/.
I: It depends on how you use it?
R: Exactly, there are other ways of improving writing, but it just gives an evaluation or you know where’s your weakness in your writing (---)+/.
I: So it just # guides the students?
R: It does help in one way or another. (---)+/.
I: So, “how do rubrics affect your teaching performance?”
R: Uh (---) how do they affect? Well, it just guides the students,# and when you’re guiding them, uh #, you can do so when you know their weakness. You provide them with a model to help them and you’d explain the criteria. And this also helps the students’ performance. They will know where they are and where they will be and (---)+/.
I: So it helps you by providing models to the students and? (---)+/.
R: That’s true because modeling writing # To improve writing honestly regarding the ideas you have in mind, regarding how much you read # Students do need modeling. I mean if it’s not a model in class, at least from the reading book and now the reading books that we use, they do have models. Sometimes they are good and sometimes they are, uh #, you know # could be better. And these models are based on rubrics. I mean the book that I use has the model, the topic, a rubric, and it has a checklist. I usually inform my students that this writing checklist we are focusing on # uh # related to the topic of course, # like you have the ideas, content, organization, word choice, voice, sentence. The writing checklist matches the topic and the rubric itself. Like here we have the rubric from 4 to 3 if it suits the content, organization, the voice, word choice (---)+/.
I: So there is description that describes every gradation.
R: Yeah, and I think this would be beneficial if uh #this is used from early age [yeaneh] from grade 1 till grade 2 because this needs practice, needs training. The more it is used, students would use it flexibly, easily (---)+/.
I: Uh, so you explain the model based on the criteria that are present in the rubric?
R: That’s true, if you wanna compare it, it’s like a recipe or uh # or a dish you know for a meal. So rubric is like a recipe, you have to do this and this and that, and if you do this and
this and that # you’ll have this grade. This gets us to the # negative point. Are we limiting
the students’ creativity? +/.

I: Aha, this is one of the questions that I included, “Do you feel that rubrics restrict the
students’ creativity and self expression? Why?”

R: Well, you know, it depends on the criteria that the teacher provides. If she really limited
them like you need 2 details for this or if she really limited the criteria of the rubric, in
other words, you’re limiting the students’ creativity. But, if you’re leaving it open # you’re
giving the students more options to write freely and you # he or she will be evaluated
according to that. So I think it depend son the criteria of the rubric.

I: Aha, that’s interesting, nice! Uh # “Do you solely depend on the rubrics’ assessment
criteria to assess the students’ writing? If no, what other ways do you use to communicate
your expectations?”

R: # uh # you know, when it comes to writing, meaning you have a topic, you have a
process, you have evaluation. Uh # well, I really depend on the rubric as a whole # rubric
is a feedback, but I don’t only depend on it.

I: So what other ways do you use to communicate your expectations?

R: You know, I tend to go through the students’ work, I mean (---)+/.

I: You confer with them?

R: Yeah, indeed, indeed. There should be communication going on between. Honestly,
honestly, based on what I’ve seen through writing, I noticed that students, who really read
a lot, listen to what I’ve explained in class, they really do well. I directly give good grades
and it matches the rubric. You just you know, you feel that they are listening and reading.
And I notice this, student who doesn’t read much, who doesn’t follow up, who doesn’t take
it seriously, you know (---) +/.

I: Uh, so you use the rubric, you evaluate the students’ performance, how do rubrics affect
your teaching performance later on not only # during instruction?

R: I’ll give you a case. I dealt with a student uh # she has a # writing problems, and I had
to help her in writing. I looked at her writing paragraph, and I looked at the rubric, I
noticed that most of the grades # I mean the weakness was in the body; that she was able to
write a topic sentence, and she was able to write a concluding sentence, but the body is
somehow cheap, or # not suitable or too vague, too general. I understood that since the problem is in the body; that means that the student has to write more and read more. So I took this weakness and I informed the student that she should read a lot, and she should summarize, and she should retell. And I advised her also to write journal topics, and # usually the journal topics, I’d discuss it with her. I focus a lot on the # brainstorming, the preplanning, like we choose a topic; what can we write about this, what can you write about that. Uh # we do preplanning together and tell her just later on you go and # write this paragraph.

I: So you gave her some tips to improve her writing.

R: Exactly, so here what I’m saying is that the rubric helped me in identifying the problem that she has in writing, the weakness, and I was able to work on this weakness by giving her extra work. So that’s my point in this example.

I: Uh, very good, nice, now “What are the challenges that you face upon using rubrics in the writing classroom?”

R: Ah (---) honestly challenges # It takes a lot of time to correct the piece of writing because you have to be really uh # you tend to think; does it fit the 2 or the 3? Like the student did this, did he include a topic sentence? Yeah, he did include a topic sentence, but the topic sentence has so and so. You tend to have stressful and time consuming when it comes to the grading # process. Maybe through time, the teacher will get used to it, but it’s really time consuming regarding # the correction. I think that’s one of the disadvantages in rubrics. That’s why teachers tend to use the holistic grade; okay this one deserves a 90, this one deserves an 80, an A or a B or a C based on holistic because rubric takes time in correcting and identifying which grade is suitable to which criteria listed in the rubric. # Also to explain the criteria for the first time, it takes time, but once they get used to it, the student will understand because in other words, you have general stable points in writing like you have the ideas, organization, word choice, voice, you have fluency, you have the conventions. All of these they are stable; once you explain them, they’ll know. Just the criteria change from one type of writing to another. (---) +/.

I: Now # “If you were to teach in another school where you are not obliged to use rubrics, would you personally use them to assess students’ writing? Why?”
R: Frankly speaking (---) uh # honestly # it depends on the situation. I don’t mind since it has advantages and it really helps students in getting feedback on where is their weakness. Though it’s time consuming to me, I can provide an assistant, but I would use it # I think you know this should be a process that goes on in all departments that they would be teaching English. It should be started in schools from grade 1 till grade 12 because it is effective. So yeah (---) +/.

I: Okay, thanks a lot

R: You’re welcomed.