

Chapter 11

Knowledge of Language in Rubric Design: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Rubrics have become popular tools for assessment and instruction in higher education. However, language choice and rubric efficacy is a topic that has been largely overlooked in the literature and teacher professional development. Composing an effective rubric—particularly for instructional and formative contexts—is a complex task that requires teachers to think about the implications of their linguistic choices for students' awareness of what and how they learn. In this chapter, the author offers a review of current research and guidance on effective rubric language. Second, this chapter uses the theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to explain how SFL-informed training in rubric design can foreground language considerations to enhance teachers' capacities in effective rubric design. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that developing teachers' knowledge about language and in turn their academic and assessment literacy, is key to developing both types of literacy in students.

INTRODUCTION

Rubrics are possibly the most common means of communicating assessment expectations and criteria to students (Balan & Jönsson, 2018). The term “rubric” is often used to refer to any grading criteria. In this chapter, the term rubric refers more narrowly to a specific assessment tool presented as a matrix, which provides scaled levels of achievement for a set of assessment criteria with descriptions of various levels of the quality of performance (Allen & Tanner, 2006). This type of rubric is known as an analytic rubric (Dawson, 2017). Rubrics are used across all levels of teaching for both summative and formative

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purposes (Panadero & Jönsson, 2020) and are considered valuable assessment tools and instructional tools (Jönsson & Panadero, 2017; Reddy & Andrade, 2010). By making the purpose of the task, the criteria, and performance expectations more explicit, rubrics enhance the transparency of assessment (Panadero & Jönsson, 2013), and develop students' abilities in self-assessment and evaluative judgement (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Rubrics therefore play a key role in developing students' understanding of the process of assessment, its purpose, how it fits into their learning trajectory, and in developing their ability to judge their own work and identify means of improvement—known as assessment literacy (Chan & Luo, 2021b). Rubrics have found widespread support amongst teachers because they are a suitable vehicle for coordinating grading and comments between assessors, a time-efficient means of grading, and a sustainable and useful platform for providing feedback (Chan & Luo, 2021a).

Despite these benefits, rubrics' ability to enhance transparency of assessment has been questioned. It has been argued that teachers often take transparency for granted as students have limited understanding of rubric language, even describing it as a confusing, and thus perceive rubrics to be less helpful in clarifying aspects of assessment than teachers do (Bell et al., 2013; Fang & Wang, 2011; Li & Lindsey, 2015). Rubrics may not guarantee transparency because criteria remain opaque and valued knowledge remains implicit (Tierney & Simon, 2004). Therefore, rubrics may condition students to comply with stated criteria and standards without developing their autonomy and skills in evaluative judgement (Torrance, 2007). While the factors contributing to the efficacy of rubrics have been a topic of much research (see Panadero and Jönsson (2013, 2020) for a review), the accessibility of rubric language has emerged as a key consideration in the utility of rubrics as assessment and instructional tools (Andrade, 2001; Li & Lindsey, 2015). Empirical studies concur that rubrics can provide numerous benefits to students and staff in both assessment and supporting teaching and learning, provided they use appropriate language (Brookhart & Chen, 2015; Panadero & Jönsson, 2013, 2020). However, teachers often receive limited training and support in language and rubric development. Developing effective rubrics for assessment and instruction purposes requires that teachers understand pedagogy and assessment in their subject as well as the impact of their language choices for the users and utility of the rubric. Therefore, it is important that we support the development of teachers' knowledge of language via training and professional development.

This chapter pursues two objectives. First, an overview of current research and guidance on effective rubric language is offered. This guidance is grouped into four themes: articulating explicit criteria, pitfalls of evaluative language, precise definitions of quality and pitfalls in the pursuit of objectivity. In each theme the implications for rubric design and effectiveness are explored. Second, this chapter uses the theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to explain how SFL-informed training in rubric design can foreground language considerations to enhance teachers' capacities in effective rubric design. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that developing teachers' knowledge about language and their academic and assessment literacy is key to developing both types of literacy in students. SFL offers an actionable means of achieving these outcomes. Rubric developers might take a more informed approach to word choice in the rubrics they construct, and institutional policy makers might afford language greater prominence in rubric design training and guidance.

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