

## Teaching Note

# The Benefits of Omitting Rubrics for Oral Interpersonal Communication Assessment

*Kathryn Joy Carpenter, Universidad de la Sierra Sur*

**Key Words:** *rubric, assessment, oral communication*

I teach university students in Oaxaca, México, many of whom have had an education that has not prepared them for the university context. My students are low-income young adults from rural areas, studying to enter the professional world. Students are studying English to prepare them to take the TOEFL, one of their graduation requirements, and to prepare to use English in their professional lives or in graduate school. The classes they take are integrated skills classes, and students study English for the entirety of their programs. Students are earnest and excited to be in university, but many have struggles with language learning in particular, as they may have never learned a language in the classroom, and English may be their third language after their indigenous languages and Spanish. One of the ways I have tried to accommodate this population was to forgo the use of a rubric for an oral assessment, as I found that I was not able to express in the confines of a rubric chart what I wanted them to be able to do, and what I knew they could accomplish in terms of communication. Therefore, I decided to use a more holistic method to assess oral

midterm exams which generally are used to assess grammar and vocabulary. The benefits I experienced foregoing rubrics in interpersonal assessment were numerous:

### **Communicative ability**

When I dispensed with the rubric, I felt that I assessed actual communicative ability better, and that I focused more on the conversation and the way that my students were using language. For interpersonal communication, I argue that there are times when using rubrics stands in the way of assessment. Leung and Lewkowicz (2013) provide a perspective on the way that complex aspects of learner communication, including sociocultural communication, social communication, and participation in interaction, form part of what we call communicative competence, and say that, “it is highly unlikely that any language assessment framework can cover all possible contingent human meanings” (p. 411).

### **Emergent negotiation for meaning**

I have found that traditional rubric-based grading, which focuses explicitly

on the specific pieces of speech used (grammar, vocabulary, specific phrases, etc.), ignore students' ability to communicate through negotiation of meaning regardless of accuracy. Especially when English is used as an international language, interactional meaning-making can give way to contingent or unusual language forms (Leung and Lewkowicz, 2013, p. 411), the success of which must be accounted for in assessment. Co-constructed meaning-making cannot be graded on a rubric—it is emergent and conversation-specific.

### **Authenticity in language use and assessment**

Conversations with my students became more authentic without a rubric, with true reactions and responses from both of us. The focus of the assessment moved away from specific parts of language and accuracy/fluency and towards a more comprehensive perspective of what they were able to say. This focus on what students are either able or unable to communicate can make assessment more formative, with a focus on future goals for both the student and teacher: the goal of authentic assessment (Wiggins, 2011).

### **Teacher presence**

I was able to be truly present for the conversations and for my students, learning about and connecting one-on-one with them. According to the American Psychological Association, “students who have close, positive, and supportive relationships with their teachers will attain higher levels of achievement...” than those with less positive relationships (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, n.d.), a fact also supported

by intuition. Forgoing the rubric seemed to put less pressure on students—we *were just talking*—and they could lead the conversation with me as a participant rather than a judge.

### **Feedback**

Being more present in authentic conversation, I could give students real-time feedback in the form of my (mis)understanding, interest, and follow-up questions in addition to direct grammar and vocabulary correction. They could experiment with language and see immediately whether it had worked or not and make adjustments. For a review of the research on the controversial issue of feedback, including the type I used in this assessment, see Lyster, 2001; Ellis, 2009; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Li, 2010; Lochtman, 2002; Panova & Lyster, 2002; and Russell & Spada, 2006.

The downside of this approach is that it is harder to be objective without a rubric. An explicit focus on what is said rather than communication style is also necessary (for example, the assessor would not want to give a student a higher grade because they had a communication style that was more like their own, personally or culturally). In addition, forgoing a rubric cannot be applied to every evaluation scenario—it should be used where the benefits for authentic communication and assessment outweigh the potential loss of objectivity and focus on specific parts of language. A rubric could be omitted in my context because grammar, vocabulary, and specific function would be assessed elsewhere. Because rubrics are both used to evaluate and communicate expectations, I had to have

a conversation with students about expectations. If a teacher were to forgo a rubric, they would need to find an alternative way, as in my case, to communicate assessment criteria.

Ideas for what teachers can use to replace rubric-based grading for oral, one-on-one assessment are as follows:

- Pass/no pass assessment where students pass based on ability to be understood or not.
- Sliding-scale assessment with personalized feedback and no grade.
- Traditional holistic assessment where students are assigned a number overall, based on preset guidelines that the teacher can lay out (for an example of this for written assessment, see *Heinle and Heinle's Complete Guide to the TOEFL Test* by Rogers, 2001, p. 460).
- Self-assessment on how the interaction went, supported by perspective from the teacher.
- A score on a scale of understandability, where 1 is “unintelligible” and 10 is “no prohibitive breakdowns or struggles to communicate.” This is one of the methods that I have found to be successful.

What these have in common is that they do not focus on specific aspects of the language used, but keep a broader focus on how the student is able to communicate.

We know that the goal of language teaching should be producing students who are ready to communicate in the world, whatever other additional goals we may also have for them. As Atkinson (2002) put it, “People use language to act in and on their social worlds: to convey, construct, and perform, among other things, ideas, feelings, actions, identities, and simple (but crucial) passing acknowledgements of the existence of other human beings” (p. 526). Language is functional; that function is communication. For all the best practices and intentions that we language teachers may have, by focusing on specific parts of speech and functions in assessment, we can miss out on the emergent, functional, *communication* goal. Foregoing the rubric in assessment where the student is being evaluated on communication (using Leung and Lewkowicz’ characterization, as cited above) can provide an opening for more authentic evaluation in the form of conversation progression and reaction, with a focus on meaning-making rather than on set language.

## References

- Atkinson, D. (2002). Toward a sociocognitive approach to second language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(4), 525-545. DOI: 10.1111/1540-4781.00159
- Ellis, R. (2009). Corrective feedback and teacher development. *L2 Journal*, 1(1), 3-18. Retrieved from: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2504d6w3>

- Ellis, R., Loewen, S., and Erlam, R. (2006). Implicit and explicit corrective feedback and the acquisition of L2 grammar. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 28(2), 339-368. DOI: 10.1017/S0272263106060141
- Leung, C., and Lewkowicz, J. (2013). Language communication and communicative competence: A view from contemporary classrooms. *Language and Education*, 27(5), 398-414. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2012.707658>
- Li, S. (2010). The effectiveness of corrective feedback in SLA: A meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 60(2), 309-365. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00561.x
- Lochtman, K. (2002). Oral corrective feedback in the foreign language classroom: How it affects interaction in analytic foreign language teaching. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 37, 271-283. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355\(03\)00005-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355(03)00005-3)
- Lyster, R. (2001). Negotiation of form, recasts, and explicit correction in relation to error types and learner repair in immersion classrooms. *Language Learning*, 51(1), 265-301. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-1770.2001.tb00019.x
- Panova, I., and Lyster, R. (2002). Patterns of corrective feedback and uptake in an adult ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(4), 573-595. DOI: 10.2307/3588241
- Rimm-Kaufman, S., and Sandilos, L. (n.d.). Improving students' relationships with teachers to provide essential supports for learning. Accessed 2017. Retrieved from: [www.apa.org/education/k12/relationships.aspx](http://www.apa.org/education/k12/relationships.aspx)
- Rogers, B. (2001). *Heinle and Heinle's complete guide to the TOEFL test*. Boston, USA: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Russell, J., and Spada, N. (2006). The effectiveness of corrective feedback for the acquisition of L2 grammar. In J. M. Norris & L. Ortega (Eds.), *Synthesizing research on language learning and teaching* (133-164). Philadelphia: John Adams Publishing Co.
- Wiggins, G. (2011). Moving to modern assessments. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(7), 63. DOI: 10.1177/0031721711109200713

*Kathryn Carpenter is an EFL professor/researcher at the Universidad de la Sierra Sur in Oaxaca, Mexico. She holds a MA from the Language Teaching Specialization Linguistics program at the University of Oregon, and recently completed her graduate fellowship at the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS).*