Printed Instructions in Students' Materials: A Study of Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT: *Teachers' verbal treatment of rubrics generally indicate that teachers override the rubric in a number of ways of students' preferred rubric access strategies revealed that reading the rubric themselves is a utilized strategy ranked after teacher paraphrase and teacher-generated examples. According to the author's past and current studies on rubrics, there is no guarantee that rubrics will be used or required in the way they were intended. Research focusing on materials writers and publishers suggests that the target audience of the rubric is neither clear nor universal, and that, sans rubrics, teachers can be quite innovative in their task interpretations. As part of an on-going examination of various aspects of textbook rubrics, the following study will examine the need for rubrics in student materials of graduate students. It further clarifies the definition and idea of teaching in the context of pedagogy. Finally, this study discusses about introduction, instrumentations, data collection procedures, discussions and conclusion.*

Keywords: ELT materials, printed instructions, rubrics, task, pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Instructional materials are the content or information conveyed within a course. These include the lectures, readings, textbooks, multimedia components, and other resources in a course. Informing students whether or not their response to an educational communication is correct helps them remember more information for a subsequent test (Anderson, Kulhavy, & Andre, 1971; Gilman, 1969; Meyer, 1960). From the materials writer at a global publishing house who creates the
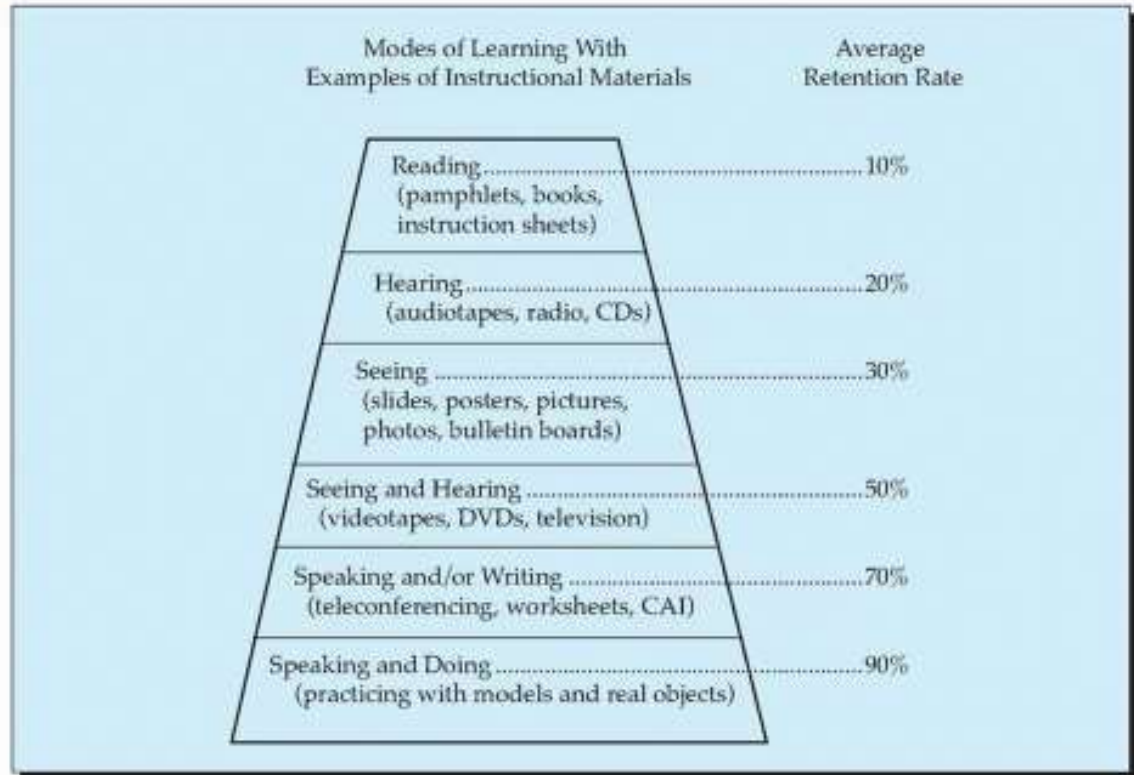
instructions, to the hard-working teacher who uses the instructions to prepare a worksheet for the classroom, the instruction, or rubric, reflects much more than a way to complete a task; it encapsulates aspects of teaching methodology, attitudes to classroom organization, and even theories about learning in general. Overall, the rubric is an element that requires much thought and consideration, not only for the writer at conception, but also at its "chalk-face"—its execution in the classroom. Let us, then, define what is meant by rubric, as it is by no means simply the written instruction. The rubric in ELT materials has previously been defined as "graphically-represented directions, written directions and instructional examples in the target language which are addressed to learners in materials with the aim to organize and focus the classroom and learners for learning purposes via specific learning tasks" (Bayne, 2006, p. 26). Consequently, a rubric for a written task is the evaluation and grading standards developed for an assignment, particularly a thorough assignment like a written assignment. So, a rubric enables a way for a student and a teacher to measure the standard of a body of work.

A trend of thought gives rubrics a back seat to instructional examples (teacher and written) and student initiative and experience with learning materials; there is a prevailing understanding that the absence of rubrics does not greatly, if at all, impact negatively on the ability of learners to complete certain pedagogical learning tasks, that rubrics are not always essential to the successful completion of certain tasks.

Despite their centrality in ELT materials, rubrics and related materials have been subject to very little mainstream examination and research. Among many suggested books on writing materials rubrics received no in-depth treatment of any kind, and are rarely, if at all, defined in any relevant glossaries. The few references to rubrics in literature are in passing or as an aside to other issues.

But rubrics in ELT textbooks and materials deserve not to be dismissed so easily, and if they are considered obscure and of minimal interest, it may be because we have grown too used to their presence without considering their impact. Ideally the 'two aspects of materials developments are interactive in that the theoretical studies inform are informed by the development and use of classroom materials (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 66). This research was carried out in order to establish whether rubrics are essential for training equipment due to a lack of data concerning the rubrics.

Kinds of Instructional Resources	
Print	Textbooks, pamphlets, handouts, study guides, manuals
Audio	Cassettes, microphone, podcast
Visual	Charts, real objects, photographs, transparencies
Audiovisual	Slides, tapes, films, filmstrips, television, video, multimedia
Electronic Interactive	Computers, graphing calculators, tablets

Modes of Learning With Examples of Instructional Materials	Average Retention Rate
Reading (pamphlets, books, instruction sheets)	10%
Hearing (audiotapes, radio, CDs)	20%
Seeing (slides, posters, pictures, photos, bulletin boards)	30%
Seeing and Hearing (videotapes, DVDs, television)	50%
Speaking and/or Writing (teleconferencing, worksheets, CAI)	70%
Speaking and Doing (practicing with models and real objects)	90%

Source: Adapted from National Training Laboratories (n.d). Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, 300 N. Lee Street, Suite 300, Alexandria, VA 22314. 1-800-777-5227.

THE STUDY

Participants

Two groups of learners at a four-year university in Saudi Arabia were involved in this study which was conducted over one thirteen-week semester. Both groups of learners shared many features: A majority of the students were second-year language majors (most of these being English majors); both groups shared commonalities in age (19-21 range), gender distribution (predominantly male), L2 ability, and, in many cases, previous courses taken in the institution.

Two groups were established. One group, the Original Rubric Group (ORG), maintained original, complete rubrics from the text, and the other, the Minus Rubric Group (MRG), completed tasks with all or most of the directional rubrics removed. However, the two groups rotated the ORG and

MRG roles at different stages of the study at a certain point in the study, both groups had rubrics removed from their materials. Two control groups were also used in part of the study.

Instrumentation

The *Unlock 1 Workbook* was used as the source of tasks for the study. Tasks related to the regular curriculum were targeted from several units in the text. Depending on the aim of each part of this study, the rubrics either retained their complete original form, or much of the information directing learners how to answer was removed. However, examples or model answers, as well as certain contextual items for some tasks, were retained. Copies of the class text workbook were prepared and modified (with the publisher's kind consent) because it was crucial that students not have access to the original content. The tasks were mostly compulsory parts of the regular course work, and the students were made aware that it was also being used for a study of classroom habits. Students had the option to be excluded from the study.

Procedure

Three related studies were conducted in order to address the question of the need for rubrics: Study 1 focused on lexical issues; Study 2 saw the removal of elements of the rubric; and Study 3 looked at the learners' ability to predict rubrics. We will deal with each of these studies in turn. For all parts of the study, both groups had to complete and turn in the materials within two weeks with the stipulation that they all work alone.

Study 1: Etymological Understanding

Study 1 was based on the speculation that, due to lexical issues, learners in a self-study situation often need to use other means to understand and successfully complete certain pedagogical learning tasks. This part of the study was conducted to establish that, in many cases, the lexicon of the instruction is often beyond the student. We could describe this as a kind of meta language used in rubrics, or 'rubric-ese'; a discourse analysis would likely reveal the recurrence of certain instructional or directive vocabulary, sentence structures, length, and so on. In this regard, students may need to stop checking the meaning of the section before completing the task, which would suggest that rubric-ese may inhibit understanding and slow completion of the task. This would be particularly pertinent when doing self-study.

Data Collection procedures

For this part of the study, only the ORG had rubric access. A vocabulary test was conducted after the tasks had been completed. This means that the MRG (and the control groups) had not seen

these words in context, whereas the ORG had seen them in the rubrics. A list of words from the selected tasks were distributed to the two groups of learners (ORG and MRG) and the two control groups. The latter were not taught by the author and did not use the same texts, but shared very similar backgrounds. The list included potentially difficult words from the target tasks (i.e., any that were not grammar items) and participants were asked to simply check the words they did not know. One weakness in this approach is that, if given in context, that is, in the 'broad' or 'narrow' task rubric, the students would perhaps extrapolate what they mean. To do this, however, would have compromised the rest of the study.

An analysis of the results of this lexical survey yielded a number of features. Firstly, the students shared the same difficulties with actual lexical items. Among the four groups, 12 out of 26 different words were identified as unknown, and there was roughly the same ranked level of difficulty with the same lexical items. The top five most difficult words were the same for all groups: *support*, *contest*, *absolutely*, *round*, and *aircraft*. Furthermore, within these top five words there was the same degree of difficulty regarding the ratio of students to certain lexical items; for example *support* was the most difficult item in all groups, *contest* the next most difficult, and *aircraft* the least difficult. When comparing only the target groups, the MRG students generally had more difficulties than the ORG students, establishing that learners do not always understand the lexicon of rubrics. Although, the MRG experienced more lexical difficulties than the ORG, the ORG ($N = 35$) students outnumbered the MRG ($N = 27$). We can speculate that the difference in results between MRG and ORG can be accounted for by the use of dictionaries and/or contextual clues in the 'broad' rubric and task itself.

Study 2: The Results of Rubric Exclusion

Study 2 compared the MRG and ORG to establish whether learners in a self-study situation can successfully complete certain pedagogical learning tasks without rubrics. The two groups were given the identical set of pedagogical tasks to complete in a self-study situation within the same time frame.
One aim of Study 2 was to confirm the findings of Study 1. Another aim of Study 2 is to see, then, if the lack of a rubric has an effect on the students' success. Additionally, if the rubric is helpful in explaining to the student what to do, those students without the rubric may have misinterpreted the task and completed it incorrectly unless they drew on other indicators.

Data Collection

A questionnaire was distributed and learners were instructed to read and complete it only *after* the tasks were finished. Twenty-six out of 35 of the ORG and 20 of 27 of the MRG returned completed forms. The questionnaire asked learners to indicate how they were able to complete the tasks given to them. They were given a choice of seven strategies based on past research and subsequent

research by the author. They are listed below (the last three are control items):
1. Referred to dictionary
2. Referred to example
3. Consulted friend
4. Guessed
5. Re-read/read instructions
6. Reviewed units
7. Used past experience
(8. No comments
9. Problems circled
10. No mistakes)

Participants were also asked to rank their top three strategies. Items eight and nine were used to record extraneous information and item ten was used to indicate their success in completing the tasks Based on the results of the survey, the students of the ORG, in equal numbers (12), used dictionaries or referred to the task example, and of these, seven used both. In all, 21 of 26 students who responded used a dictionary and/or the instructional example. Ten consulted a friend; however, of these, seven did so in conjunction with the use of the dictionary or studying the example. Only eight students ranked the strategies, and among those students, using examples and past experiences were the two most relied-upon strategies. The ORG showed no evidence of actual translations on their assignment sheet. The MRG relied on examples and guesswork (12/20 and 7/20 respectively) in the absence of a full rubric. Nonetheless, students in the ORG who did have the full range of the rubric similarly relied heavily on examples (12/26).

Interestingly, it was the ORG who were more likely to consult a peer about the task (10/26 as opposed to 5/20 for the MRG). Unfortunately, the survey did not ask what the consultation was about (rubric or completed task?). While no learners in the ORG indicated that they had a problem in completing the task, almost half (9/20) of the MRG did indicate this. Despite this, among the MRG there were no tasks that were completed incorrectly. The pedagogical task was completed with the same accuracy as the ORG. It could be said that the MRG answers even indicated a more meaningful thought process than the original task had required, which would indicate no need for a rubric.

The survey results confirmed that learners have to sometimes use a dictionary to understand rubrics, which accounts for the ORGs' slightly better results in Study 1. It also shows, however, that students also cross-reference or even bypass the rubric. Both groups relied on examples, guesswork, peer consultation, and contextual language cues to do the tasks. All participants answered the tasks correctly; among the MRG, who did not have rubrics, mistakes were not made in how to answer, but rather in the accuracy of the answer, and tasks left incomplete were the final ones, which suggests time constraints, rather than misunderstanding, as earlier identical tasks had

been completed successfully. It was interesting that one student who did not have a rubric not only correctly answered a match task, but also embellished it by adding her own answers. Overall, the results of Study 2 suggest that, with or without a 'narrow' (brief rubric) directional element of rubrics, students will draw on a variety of contextual hints to successfully complete tasks.

Study 3: Learners' Ideas about Rubrics

Study 1 confirmed that learners have issues with rubric-ese. Study 2 demonstrated that the lack of rubrics did not necessarily hinder the successful task completion. Study 3 sought to further confirm these findings by examining the ability of learners to predict the aim of tasks by having them write their own rubrics. Using tasks from Study 1 and Study 2, students we asked to write what the missing rubric might have been.

Data Collection

For Study 3, rubrics were removed from materials for all participants. As this was an activity that was not compulsory, participation was voluntary. Rubrics were removed from self-access materials, and students were required to complete the tasks as they perceived them and create the missing rubric.

Based on the returns, there was a very high rate of correct identification of the goal of the tasks. Except for two problematic items passed over by a majority of the learners, all students, with varying degrees of detail or grammatical accuracy, correctly added a functioning. Some examples are shown below:

Student-Created Rubrics

Sample One, original rubric: "Match the words on the left with their opposites on the right." Learner rubrics:

- "Each word has an antonym the other side. Please choose it."
- "Draw the opposite word."
- "Find a pair of words."
- "Opposite"

There were also isolated examples of a new task that fit the original task. In one or two cases, learners interpreted a different aim and completed the task with a rational, do-able rubric in mind. As can be seen somewhat in Sample One and more clearly in Sample Two below, there was frequent and accurate use of metalanguage or rubric-ese, lexicon, and structures common to written instructions found in ELT materials. The learner attempt was in some cases more 'complicated' than the original, as in Sample two.

Sample Two, original rubric: "Put the words in the correct column. Then add two more words of your own in each column." Learner rubrics:

- "Classify the following words into the same category."
- "Classify these words below into three categories."
- "Place the words which you think are suitable for each three categories."
- "Divide words in the below box into three categories."

Sample Three, original rubric: "Write the question." Learner rubric: "Please make an interrogative sentence to fit the answer."

The majority of the tasks were completed accurately. In two cases where the original rubric for preposition-practice tasks had indicated limitations ("Use each word only twice"), there were mistakes. However, this was not a reflection of their failure to grasp *how* to do the task, but rather a demonstration of a weakness in their understanding of grammar. In fact, it was a fairer test of the targeted skill; in the original rubric students could use a process of elimination rather than knowledge of correct grammatical usage. Those who opted to not write rubrics completed the tasks with the same degree of accuracy as those who wrote rubrics.

DISCUSSIONS

The outcomes of the three studies lend weight to the argument that a majority of rubrics, or at least parts of a broad rubric (a full rubric) are redundant as far as the learners are concerned, and the learners show a high degree of intuition, commonsense, and familiarity in dealing with the tasks. In some isolated cases, learners can even improve on the rubric. The importance of observing how language is actually used is also discussed by Kasper and Roever (2005) and Schmidt (2001) (cited in Tomlinson, B. (Ed.). (2011, P. 15). However, there could be three other interpretations and subsequent conclusions made of the results.

The first explanation is that in most cases rubrics are not needed, with instructional examples being sufficient. In most cases the learners can work out what to do (Study 2) based on the physical presentation of the task itself and hints about how to answer. While the survey of the MRG indicated that they had problems in answering because there were no rubrics, mistakes by the MRG were all but non-existent. Furthermore, learners could very accurately reconstruct in their mind and create a rubric that reflected the materials-writer's intention as expressed in the original rubric (Study 3). This is true with or without instructional examples. Having no rubric (or at least very limited or partial ones) would draw the learner into the task more, as they need to consider 1) how to do the task, and 2) the relationship with the overall goals of the unit, and encourage degrees of autonomy and innovation. This very much reflects Breen's (1989) suggestion that "Involving

learners in judging their chosen procedures and preferred ways of undertaking tasks can lead them to an accepting awareness of alternatives which can help them to be more adaptable when confronting future learning purposes and different content" (109).

The second explanation is that rubrics, as they are currently presented in materials, are not a problem as they are. Since learners can very accurately reproduce an appropriate rubric that is functional and, in many cases, can include a surprisingly high level of technical/metalanguage (Study 3), the rubric-ese I have suggested as a hindrance is clearly not. Despite their success rate, MRG learners indicated that having no rubric was a problem for them because having a rubric would remove doubt about what they needed to do (learners still do misunderstand even with rubrics). Therefore, we can stay with the status quo (rubrics that leave us and the students in no doubt about how to do the task).

The third possible explanation is that the case for or against certain elements of rubrics is neither confirmed nor conclusive. Rubrics should occasionally be included if the task is not clear. There are tasks for which rubrics can clarify and direct, particularly when the layout of the task does not suggest clearly what to do. This study dealt with materials for speaking skill practice. Materials for other skills may indeed require much more specific direction, particularly writing and reading.

CONCLUSION

The use of instructional materials shows a methodical approach to planning, carrying out, and using the entire learning and communication process as well as the use of both human and non-human resources to produce a more meaningful and effective education. The role of instructor input in the form of task explanations and adjustments is one topic purposefully left out of this set of research on rubrics, despite its critical importance to the dynamics between classroom materials, learners, and teachers. It is not uncommon for teachers to interpret (as in re-explain, not translate) or even modify what the rubric suggests. This is not to say at all we should refrain from such input; in fact, many materials writers expect it, and the different contexts in which texts are used demand it. Some writers even state that the rubric is for the teacher, or at least for both learners and teachers. Even so, students have cited explanations by the teacher as potentially confusing. Many trust their eyes more (reading a rubric) than their ears (hearing what the teachers say to do). Removing rubrics may level the field somewhat by allowing teachers to adapt a task and possibly for students to develop their own way of doing a task. A compromise between no rubrics and the current status quo could take a number of forms, such as removing certain elements of rubrics and relocating them, thus maintaining the original intent of the materials writer, but allowing the actual users to adapt as they see fit. A compromise between the two options—no rubrics and the status quo—could take a variety of shapes, such as the removal of some rubric components and their relocation, which would preserve the materials' original objective while allowing users to make changes as they see fit. Finally, for optimum impact, such resources must be properly chosen, organized,

developed, and used in a course. In order to maximize student learning, the planning and selection of instructional materials should address both the breadth and depth of content.

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