

CHECKLISTS AND RUBRICS: DO THEY REALLY PROMOTE LEARNING?

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Abstract

Discussions regarding benefits of and concerns about checklists and rubrics are not novel. But most papers highlight their positive effect on students' learning. This paper challenges this view: it looks at students' perception of instructional and scoring checklists and rubrics which is leaning more towards rejecting them. The paper relies on two surveys of third-year students about the English course in Research skills. The author outlines the main problems that students identified concerning checklists and rubrics and offers possible reasons for students' mostly negative attitude to them (proving which of these cause that reaction is the next step in the research). The author's speculations are partly confirmed by students' comments to open-ended questions: unwillingness to comply with the criteria as they stifle creativity in writing essays, a too 'mechanistic' and impersonal way of assessment, too many criteria for one activity, too much of scoring with the help of checklists and rubrics. The paper also covers possible solutions to the problems, one of which has already been implemented with a mixed result: incorporating in the checklists and rubrics students' suggestions and/or improvements relying on students' comments that are fit suitable.

Keywords: checklist, rubric, assessment, negative reaction.

1 INTRODUCTION

Discussions of benefits of and concerns about checklists and rubrics are not novel.

Grading an exam that tests knowledge and skills is sometimes called by students 'the impression grading', which means that the instructor gives the grade that he/she feels the student deserves based on the impression he/she produced on the instructor. And that makes such grading subjective, unreliable and unfair. Checklists and rubrics can remedy that. When designing those, the instructor formulates standards for levels of achievement and thus makes them clear and explicit for students.

Checklists and rubrics also remove the conventional 'black box' approach to assessment. This approach results in students failing their assignments and feeling confused and disappointed as there are no guides as to what their instructor expects of them. Breaking the assignment down in a checklist or a rubric explains what components their assignment has to have. Thus, checklists and rubrics will direct students' work, help them to assess their achievement and improve the quality of their work.

Therefore, checklists and rubrics help to focus students' endeavours and provide structure for them. Instructional rubrics keep instructors fair and unbiased in their grading [1].

Checklists and rubrics are beneficial not only for students, they help the instructor to learn more intimately what he/she is teaching and what he/she expects his/her students to accomplish. Scoring guides should be regarded as 'work in progress' as with each evaluation, the instructor will inevitably adjust the criteria so that students could produce better assignments.

Researchers show preference for rubrics ([1], [3]). The difference between checklists and rubrics lies in the fact that checklists provide criteria for the assignment and do not describe desirable qualities and common mistakes in student work. Rubrics include more extensive definition and description of the criteria of quality that characterize each level of achievement. Students appreciate such descriptions as they are quite informative regarding not only the overall quality of their work, but also offer insights into positive and negative features of the paper, therefore encouraging and helping students to analyze, learn, and eventually produce high quality work.

Concerns regarding checklists and rubrics are voiced in [2] and [9]. These can be divided into two groups.

The first one covers issues that instructors have to deal with. Students sometimes fail to read the whole rubric (all the levels and requirements). The reason for this is that students are striving to accomplish the task to receive a high grade, thus they read the criteria descriptions only for the two

top levels and they do not see the value of wasting their time on examining the criteria for the lower levels. H. Andrade [2] points out the benefit of doing this: to avoid common pitfalls in student work. Another concern here is students' rather formulaic approach to meeting the requirements. Students may see no or little connection between the quality of their work and their instructor's expectations. One explanation of this state of affairs is that students perceive their teacher's expectations unusual or they do not understand why they need to complete this task, how it will further their learning.

Students' criticisms of rubrics and checklists comprise the second group. Students are critical of them because checklists and rubrics stifle creativity and the number of criteria may be too overwhelming and difficult to remember, especially for oral activities. A. Wilson and A.J. Onwuegbuzie [9] offer solutions to the first problem, and J. Fluckiger [4] knows how to overcome the second.

Some of these concerns will be dealt with in more detail in the subsequent section 'Results and 'Discussion.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The paper relies on two surveys conducted among third-year students that are majoring in one of the following: World Economics, International Relations or Oriental Studies. These students have been having English classes since their first year in the university, the instruction was focused on preparing them to pass a similar to IELTS exam. The third-year English course is compulsory. And as the English course for the first two years is optional, by their third year, students have different degree of mastering the English language.

2.2 Procedures

Third-year students have been doing the course which is called Research Skills or RS. In the course, students start with doing some research on one topic of their choosing to write a factual paragraph, then proceed to collecting a larger body of evidence for another topic and presenting it in class. They also write an essay in which they provide arguments to support one point of view on the matter and refute the other. Another essay that they write implies that they are looking for logical fallacies in the wording in the assignment and make recommendations how to avoid them. Throughout the course, students are assisted with academic writing tips (difference between formal and informal styles, connectors, how to be emphatic, language structures how to compare and contrast, a list of logical fallacies, etc.).

Students have been exposed to checklists and rubrics for the following activities from the very beginning of the course: a) writing a factual paragraph; b) delivering one-minute and three-minute talks on the topic offered; c) making individual and pair presentations; d) writing argument and argumentative essays; e) participating in debates.

The checklist for the first written assignment (writing a factual paragraph) was explained to students thoroughly. As checklists for other written assignments have similar sections, only new criteria in these checklists were discussed with students. In one case, due to lack of time in class, the students received the checklist via email with the request to study it and ask questions if there are any regarding the criteria in it.

At the end of the first term, students were to complete an official survey (conducted by the university) regarding their courses and professors that teach them. Because of some comments from it, the algorithm of working with checklists was changed: one time, the professor attempted to alter the checklist by incorporating students' suggestions that she found suitable.

At the end of the academic year, students were asked to complete an anonymous survey that also included open-end questions. 47 students majoring in one of the following: World Economics, International Relations and Oriental Studies – agreed to take part in it. Appendix A includes the extracts from this survey that are related to checklists and rubrics. The extracts are in Russian, the English translation is also provided.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section contains students' responses from the second anonymous survey. These are not all the responses, but only those that concern checklists and rubrics. The number next to the translation of students' response indicates the number of this quote in Russian in Appendix A.

For some students, the elements of the Research Skills course that facilitated mastering it (Questions 2 and 6) include 'checklists' (2), 'strict assessment of presentations'¹ (3), 'the criteria and guidelines how to meet them' (5), 'clearly defined criteria in the checklist' (6), 'clear assessment criteria and clear requirements' (7), 'multiple criteria when developing a talk' (21).

However, when asked what students have learned in the course (Questions 1 and 2), responses feature 'following absurd criteria' (1) and 'meeting the criteria' (4). Thus, students indicate that they take away a skill of following criteria from this course and as it will be seen from other responses, they do not find it as a positive outcome. Students believe that the following components of the course should be excluded (Questions 3 and 5): checklists (8), 'too much emphasis on mechanics when writing or speaking' (10), 'too strict criteria to assess presentations and written assignments' (11), 'mechanistic assignments that require to follow a sample' (16), 'discussing criteria for a useless written assignment in class' (17), 'mechanics' (18), (19), 'requirements and criteria' (20). The question about improving the course (Question 4) brought about the following answers: 'shift from following the format to writing a research paper' (12), 'to assess language skills, not the ability to follow the criteria' (13), 'to simplify presentation assessment criteria as there are too many of those' (14), 'to clarify the criteria for presentations and written assignments as they were not explained correctly' (15).

As can be seen from the answers, the negative reaction to checklists and rubrics prevails over the positive one.

While some students found the criteria in checklists and rubrics clear, the others were struggling with them. One reason for that could be the instructor's explanation that might have confused the students. Another one is one of the concerns described above: students' unwillingness to read the whole rubric or checklist. In this case, when failing to meet the criteria, students tend to blame the wording of these criteria. This claim can be substantiated with students' comments in private conversations ('not-for-the-record' talks with their instructor) when they admitted that they had not seen that criterion as they had not read the whole rubric or checklist.

To make checklists and rubrics clear to students, the instructor may opt for co-creating them with students. After analyzing samples of student work of various quality, students brainstorm criteria for their own assignment and then draft a checklist or rubric. In this way, students feel that their opinion is valued, they are aware of and fully understand the criteria they will be assessed against. When co-creating a rubric, students become more focused on and honest with assessment. They shift from "what is my grade?" to "what have I learned?". R. Stiggins [7] argues that 'involving students as partners in assessment is the single best way to improve student learning achievement'.

Co-creating may not involve developing the whole rubric from scratch. It may involve amending the existing one as it was done by third-year students for one of the checklists. After completing the task and receiving the checklists back with the instructor's notes, students made suggestions how to improve the checklist. The instructor found some of these suggestions reasonable and incorporated in the checklist in question.

To familiarize students with the criteria in checklists and rubrics, the teacher should introduce self- and peer assessment prior to final submission of the paper or presentation delivery. The upsides of this technique are discussed in [1], [3], [4]. In addition to improving assessment skills, students see other ways of doing the assignment and because of that understand it better.

However, peer assessment and self-assessment may not be truthful. With these kinds of assessment, students usually take it to one of the extremes: all is good, or all is bad. In the former case, the critique is not helpful at all, with the latter one, it may be cruel and insensitive. Motives for this behavior are the following: assessing effort rather than the performance, laziness (a peer assessor is not thorough with assessment), wish to stay on good terms with their peers.

Several studies have shown that peer assessment is accepted and valued by students ([6], [8]). However, other studies demonstrate that students are concerned about its validity ([5]) and usefulness.

¹ The presentation was assessed with the help of a multiple-point rubric.

One way to remedy that is to link their peer or self-assessment with that of the instructor's. When students know that their grade depends on how accurate they are at grading themselves or their groupmates, they start paying more attention to the criteria and to assessment.

This method was tried at the end of the first term with a mixed result. Some students complained that they had to monitor their peers' compliance with too many criteria. It led to voicing their concern with remembering too many criteria when performing the task which only adds to the anxiety that everyone experiences before making a presentation. But most students appreciated the opportunity to step into the instructor's shoes and the difficulty of assessment.

Single-point rubric [4] could be the solution to students complaining that there are too many criteria to grasp at the same time. And it takes less time to create a single-point rubric. With a single-point rubric, only one level is described which is proficient. In the column in the table students have to provide evidence to illustrate that they have met the criteria.

While some students saw the benefit of checklists and rubrics as they provide the insight into what the final product (a paper, a presentation) should look like, a bigger number of students regard them as a tool to formalize and standardize their thinking.

Stifling creativity is students' main concern. One solution to it is offered by J. Fluckiger [4]: a single-point rubric. The table contains criteria for the proficient level and two columns. One of them is used if a student goes beyond the offered level, thus ensuring that creativity is not hindered.

Another criticism is related to ignoring content when assessing the final product and paying too much attention to mechanics. This is a misconception. As content is only one of the elements that is assessed, the others being language and organization, and students usually making many mistakes in English vocabulary and grammar as it is not their native language, they fail to notice the points they are awarded or not for the content.

To draw students' attention to strengths and weaknesses of their work, the instructor may use instructional rubrics as they facilitate providing feedback and they allow for "individualized and constructive critique in a manageable timeframe" [2]. Providing feedback could also be useful to dispel the myth that once the assignment is submitted, checked and graded, the instructor moves on towards the next target without analyzing the outcomes of achieving this one. It would remove the illusion of a mechanistic approach to grading written assignments.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Whether or not checklists and rubrics promote learning depends on many factors, some of which have been outlined above.

Checklists and rubrics will not promote learning if students regard them only as a tool 'to give the instructor what he/she wants', if they do not see the value of outlining some rules of the game and if they believe that checklists and rubrics are there to limit them.

Factors that facilitate students' acceptance of checklists and rubrics include students' involvement in co-creating them, providing fewer criteria and room for going beyond the predetermined level, involving them in self- and peer assessment, providing feedback with the help of checklists and rubrics (not only assigning points or a grade).

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APPENDIX A

(Students' spelling and wording are kept unchanged)

1. Узнали ли вы что-либо новое или научились ли чему-то новому? Если да, то, пожалуйста, поясните.	1. Have you learned anything new? If yes, please, specify.
(1) Нет, кроме соблюдения абсурдных критериев	(1) No, except for following absurd criteria
2. Какие (от одного до трех) конкретные особенности курса особенно помогли освоить курс?	2. Which course elements (up to three) helped to master the course most?
(2) чек-листы	(2) checklists
(3) Строгий контроль презентаций	(3) Strict assessment of presentations
(4) Получить хорошую оценку за курс помогает то, что он устроен максимально шаблонно. Например, когда рассказываешь презентацию, преподаватель не обращает внимания на содержание твоего выступления, а лишь проверяет, соответствует ли оно критериям. Это было, когда мы пришли на 1 курс, там же и выучили наизусть этот шаблон. На 3 курсе хотелось бы чего-то серьезного и исследовательского!, как это заявлено в названии дисциплины.	(4) It is easy to get a good grade for the course as mechanics are important. For example, when you are making a presentation, the professor does not pay attention to the content, he/she only checks whether it meets the criteria. We had it when we were first-year students, we learned the presentation routine then already. In the third year, we would like to see something more challenging and related to research! as it is declared in the title of the subject.
(5) Конструктивная критика всех аспектов выполнения заданий, наличие критериев и рекомендация их выполнения.	(5) Constructive critique for performing all assignment elements, criteria and guidelines how to meet them.
(6) Четко изложенные критерии оценивания в формате чек листа, которые однако, без обсуждения в классе, могут смутить	(6) Clearly defined criteria in the checklist, although they may be confusing without discussing them in class.
(7) Наличие четких критериев оценивания и ясность требований к студентам, возможность обратной связи, конструктивная критика со стороны преподавателей.	(7) Clear assessment criteria and clear requirements, feedback availability, professors' constructive critique.

3. Что показалось лишним или уже хорошо знакомым?	3. What seemed familiar and which elements should be excluded?
(8) чек-листы	(8) checklists
(9) Лексика, формализация всего и странные задания	(9) Vocabulary, a lot of emphasis on mechanics (when writing or speaking ²) and strange assignments
(10) Чрезмерный акцент на формальностях в оформлении письменных работ/презентаций – лишнее	(10) Excessive emphasis on mechanics in writing and making presentations – unnecessary
(11) Paragraph был знаком; излишне строгие критерии к оцениванию презентаций и письменных работ (checklist), иногда создавалось ощущение, что мы не эссе пишем, а пытаемся выполнить все пункты в чек-листе	(11) Writing a paragraph was very familiar; too strict criteria to assess presentations and written assignments (checklist), sometimes it looked as if we are not writing an essay, but we are trying to meet all the criteria in the checklist.
4. Какие (от одного до трех) конкретные элементы курса можно улучшить?	4. Which course elements (up to three) can be improved?
(12) Сместить акцент с шаблонов на исследование. В курсе мне бы хотелось приобрести полезные навыки для исследовательской деятельности - как правильно искать или читать научную литературу на английском языке, например. Или лайфхаки, как сделать свой текст более "английским" (но это нам преимущественно рассказывают на Political Studies). Вместо этого мы пишем эссе, в котором можно сослаться на выдуманных авторов, лишь бы соблюсти структуру.	(12) Shift the focus from following the format to writing a research paper. I would like to develop skills that are useful for research – for example, how to search for and read scientific literature in English. Or life hacks how to make your text more 'English' (we are being taught that in Political Studies). Instead of this, we are writing essays, in which we have to make references to fictitious authors just to meet the criteria.
(13) Оценивать знание языка, а не выполнение критериев и формализм	(13) To assess language skills, not the ability to follow the criteria, not just mechanisms
(14) Упростить требования к презентациям, слишком много критериев	(14) To simplify presentation assessment criteria, there are too many of those
(15) Требования к выполнению работы изложены не четко, во время презентаций появляются какие-то новые требования. Как писать эссе - непонятно, так как требования не были изложены, объяснение было некорректно.	(15) Criteria are not clear; when you are already presenting, new criteria emerge. It is not clear how to write an essay as the requirements were not stated, the criteria were explained incorrectly.
5. Чем бы вы предпочли заниматься меньше на занятиях и в домашних заданиях (с точки зрения полезности и интереса для вас)?	5. What would you prefer doing less in class and as home assignments (in terms of usefulness and interest for you)?
(16) Меньше шаблонных механических заданий (как на паре, так и в виде д/з), которые еще и не принимаются без чеклиста (это вообще бред)!!! От них только тупеешь и унываешь	(16) Fewer mechanistic assignments that require to follow a sample (in class as well as home assignments), that are not accepted without the checklist (it is insane)!!! You get dumber and more upset because of them.
(17) Обсуждением критериев каких-то грядущих ненужных работ на парах.	(17) Discussing criteria for a useless written assignment in class
(18) Формальное оформление работ	(18) Mechanics
(19) Оформлением работ	(19) Mechanics
(20) Меньше установок, критериев. Хочется чувствовать легкость и интерес в изучении языка	Fewer requirements and criteria. I want to enjoy learning the foreign language.
6. Какие виды домашней работы вам кажутся наиболее полезными?	6. Which home assignments do you consider to be most useful?
(21) Разработка устных сообщений по многочисленным критериям	(21) Developing a talk in accordance with multiple criteria

² Added by the author for clarification