

ANALYZING ITEMS USED IN DEVELOPING DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY MARKING RUBRICS: FOCUSING ON VOCABULARY USE

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ABSTRACT

Descriptive writing is an excellent language learning strategy to improve students' vocabulary and ultimately their language competence. Teachers have found that longer time is required to develop students' descriptive writing skills, and it gets more complex because there is not many appropriate, or rather standardized, guideline to help teachers teaching descriptive writing. Most commonly, teachers employ the five-paragraph-writing format to teach writing. It was found in this study that students focus on vocabulary in describing scenes, characters, plots, or settings. Consequently, it is the aim of this study to explore the criteria or items of the existing rubrics used in descriptive writing, and develop an exclusive one that emphasizes on vocabulary. 20 prominent rubrics for descriptive writing were gathered and analyzed. Summative content analysis method was employed for the analysis. The most frequent components used were listed down and integrated into a new rubric. The findings revealed that there are several components used to assess descriptive writing namely description, word choice, and vocabulary competence. This study also found that with a specific descriptive writing rubric, teachers are able to better prepare their lessons in teaching descriptive writing. The exclusive descriptive writing rubric also helps students to better learn and develop their vocabulary.

Keywords: Descriptive writing; Vocabulary learning; Writing rubrics

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the main components in language learning. Shanahan (2015) listed Common Core State Standards' writing includes argumentative, informational/explanatory, and narrative writing. Shanahan (2015) defines argumentative writings as the development of rational arguments that are generated arguing the writer's position or claim in a given text, usually with appropriate evidence. The expository structure of informational or explanatory writing seeks to improve reader's knowledge or assist readers in understanding a certain process, procedure, or concept. A narrative writing style can be applied for a wide range of tasks, such as for information, instructional, persuasive, or entertainment purposes.

However, apart from the Common Core State Standards, Melly (2006) revealed that there are five types of writing styles, each with different purpose, or objective. Expository writing serves to explain or inform while descriptive writing aims to show or describe. Persuasive writing can be employed to argue against or for an issue whereas creative writing is commonly used for writing fiction, poetry, drama, and autobiographies; and, narrative writing is used to convey a story.

Based on these existing writing rubrics, it is clear that they have the tendency to overlap one another. For example, while narrative writing may convey a particular story, it may turn out to be a creative writing as well. Thus, the grading rubric for all types of writing have been similar i.e., utilizing the five-paragraph marking rubric despite the fact that different type of writing style serves different writing purpose or objective.

It is crucial to keep in mind that a given style of writing demands a specific vocabulary usage or application, or word choice, in order to fulfil the objective or purpose of that particular piece of writing. As a result, it is thought that in order to improve students' writing abilities, a marking rubric tailored to a certain writing style is required. The main goal of this study was to concentrate on creating a marking scheme specifically for descriptive writing. The goal of this study is to investigate the criteria or items utilised in various forms of descriptive writing marking rubrics in order to construct a unique descriptive writing marking rubric.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Rivers (2018), writing is not straightforward as compared to the other language skills. It is complicated because it requires learners to display their competence in language use that includes words, sentence, grammar, to morphing those segments into written forms. As such, it can be assumed that for a learner to display good written work in a specific language, he must develop the cognitive abilities to distinguish certain segments of that language. Simply, Rivers (2018) asserted that writing is complicated because a writer must be able to recognise word use and sentence structure in order to produce well written piece of writing. Thus, it can be said that writing process involves not only the exploration of ideas but also the transformation or conversion of these ideas into readable texts. In the transformation of ideas into readable texts, there is a silent requirement of having the cognitive ability to utilize the nuanced segments of language and channel them into the written form.

Teaching writing skills involves some objectives and markers that learners are required to achieve. According to the National Education Department, BSNP (2006), the objective of teaching writing skills in Junior High School is to obtain a functional level of comprehension, whereby students can adequately communicate in verbal and written form to perform their daily activities. Students should also be able to write monologues, brief functional texts, and essays in the process, descriptive, recount, narrative, and report forms after they have reached this functional level. According to the National Education Department, BSNP (2006), employing proper grammar and a sufficient vocabulary to obtain a comfortable level of linguistic competence is another indicator of reaching the functional level. There are various ways to accomplish these goals. In teaching writing, there are two methods, according to Brookhart (2018). These methods either concentrate on the final outcome of the writing process or the actual writing process. According to Brookhart (2018), people who support a process approach to writing focus on the writing process. Teachers, however, should focus on the many phases of every piece as it progresses.

To accomplish the goals, certain writing strategies—including the process approach—are used. In essence, they are assisting pupils in comprehending the content and expressing themselves in a grammatically correct manner in English. A process approach in writing, according to Suastra and Menggo (2020), analyses the act of composing from a different perspective, putting as much emphasis on itself. The researchers made it clear that the process method also emphasises the operational stages involved in the initial and subsequent revisions of a piece of work. The types of

activities change from being language-focused to learner-centered in the process method, giving students more control over what they write and how they write it (Richards 2002).

However, there are other criticisms and criticisms of the process approach in the literature that has already been published. According to Sumekto and Setyawati (2018), the process-centered approach falls short of adequately preparing university-bound pupils to perform at the requisite level. For instance, law students are frequently forced to write in an argumentative style for their projects in order to allow them to utilise the process writing skills they have learned to present stronger arguments. Since they can complete their coursework and promote thinking skills appropriate for their level, it becomes sense that these children will become skilled language users.

Most significantly, it was also discovered that the process approach prioritises the writing process just as much as the final product. Pourdana and Asghari (2021) identified planned process writing exercises that were carried out in the classroom to boost the motivation of both the teacher and the students. These exercises included writing poetry and using a computer. To learn additional languages as effectively and at various levels of instruction, the above activities can be significantly adjusted. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that the process method can be developed by consistent writing exercises employing efficient activities that produce superior input and thus enhance students' writing abilities.

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study, 20 set of regular rubrics related to descriptive writing were gathered and analysed using the summative content analysis method. These rubrics were obtained from the global rubric bank that stores all rubrics used by English language teachers. These rubrics were carefully checked for 'suitability' and selected to be used in this study. A process known as the systematic literature review (SLR) was done to categorise the rubrics. According to Dewey and Drahota (2016) a SLR allows researchers to "identify, select and critically appraise literature in order to answer research questions". It involves clear methods to 1) perform a comprehensive literature search, 2) write a critical judgement of the individual studies gathered, and 3) integrate the valid studies using appropriate statistical techniques. As explained by Vlachopoulos and Makri (2017) in their study, the SLR in this study was done using the steps below:

- Formulate a research question
- Develop protocol
- Conduct literature search
- Select studies based on study quality
- Extract data and analyze, summarize and synthesize relevant studies
- Interpret results

Using these six steps, 20 rubrics were selected and analyzed. The assessment criteria that were included in the rubrics were listed down in a table. The more criteria that appeared from other studies, the more columns were created in the table below to see if the criteria appear in the other rubrics. Ticks were inserted into the table to be statistical calculated later.

Table 1 below presents the analysis of 20 rubrics that were studied. to construct a descriptive paragraph marking rubric that focuses on vocabulary use. The table shows the criteria that were used in each of the rubrics listed below and the most frequently used relevant criteria has been included in the descriptive paragraph marking rubric. The most recurring components that were used as assessment criteria, were listed down and integrated into an exclusive descriptive

writing rubric. In this study, it was found that these rubrics that were studied had their dominance but needed improvements. These rubrics featured non-descriptive components as its assessment criteria such as main topic, thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting details, evidence and creativity. This is certainly not wrong, however these rubrics portray very less importance to description and variety of vocabulary use, which is actually needed for descriptive writing.

Table 1: Analysis of Criteria Used in Descriptive Essay Marking Rubrics

Descriptive Writing Rubric	Criteria/Items										
	Content (Ideas/Style)	Task fulfilment	Language & Grammar	Mechanics / Conventions (capitalization, spelling & punctuation)	Main Topic/Thesis statement/s/supporting details	Vocabulary (Word choice/lexical items – verbs/nouns/adverb/adjectives)	Creative Presentation/ Creativity/ Interesting/	Descriptive language (metaphors/similes/collocations)	Overall organization (structure/transition/coherence/cohesion/logical/clarity)	Sentence fluency (simple, compound, complex)	Format
1 (IELTS Task 1)	X	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X	X	✓	✓	X
2 (IELTS Task 2)	X	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X	X	✓	X	X
3 (TOEFL – Independent Writing)	X	✓	✓	X	X	✓	X	✓	✓	X	X
4 (TOEFL – Integrated Writing)	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
5 (R1*)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X	✓	✓	X
6 (R2)	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	X	X	X	✓	X
7 (R3)	✓	X	X	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

8 (R4)	X	X	X	✓	✓	X	✓	X	✓	✓	X
9 (R5)	✓	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	X	✓	X	X
10 (R6)	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	X
11 (R7)	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	X
12 (R8)	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X	✓	✓	X
13 (R9)	X	X	✓	✓	X	X	✓	X	X	✓	X
14 (R10)	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X	✓	X
15 (R11)	X	X	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X	✓	✓	X
16 (R12)	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
17 (R13)	X	X	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X
18 (R14)	✓	X	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X
19 (R15)	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X	X
20 (R16)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X	✓	✓	X

R – Rubric* need more information

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 2 shows the number of occurrences of each item that were found in the 20 rubrics that were analysed. The summative content analysis method was used to analyse these rubrics.

Table 2: Descriptive Paragraph Marking Rubrics (Vocabulary Focused)

Criteria/Items	Reoccurrences in 20 Descriptive Writing Rubric
Content (Ideas/ style)	8
Task fulfillment/ achievement	6
Language & Grammar	16
Mechanics / Conventions (capitalization, spelling & punctuation)	17
Main Topic/Thesis statement/topic sentences/supporting details	11
Vocabulary (Word choice/lexical items – verbs/nouns/adverb/adjectives)	13
Creative Presentation/ Creativity/ Interesting/ Metaphors/similes/collocations	12
Overall organization (structure/transition/ coherence/cohesion/logical/clarity)	4
	15

Sentence fluency (simple, compound, complex)	14
Format	2

Table 2 presents the important criteria that are commonly used in a descriptive essay marking rubric. These criteria in the rubrics were categorised into 11 sections. Certain criteria with the same functions or description were labelled with different names, thus the researcher categorised these criteria in one suitable section. This includes content (ideas/ style), task fulfilment, language & grammar, mechanics (capitalization, spelling & punctuation), main topic/thesis statement/topic sentences/supporting details, vocabulary/word choice, creativity, descriptive language (metaphors/similes/collocations), organization, sentence fluency and format. The analysis on Table 2 shows the most frequent criteria that were used in international rubrics such as TOEFL, IELTS and other prominent ones in the rubrics' bank. The analysis shows that not much focus needs to be given to the format of descriptive writing. This is because descriptive writing does not involve any format that is commonly seen in letter writing and report writing. The analysis highly indicated that language, grammar, mechanics, creativity, sentence fluency and organization are the most common criteria in the descriptive essay writing rubric. However, there was also an indication that vocabulary usage that includes word choice such as verbs/ nouns/ adverb and adjectives, and descriptive language that includes metaphors/ similes and collocations were also used to assess descriptive writing.

Based on the findings that were gathered in this study, the following descriptive writing rubric template was developed. As seen in Table 3, this template can be used by teachers and lecturers to insert criteria descriptors that suit their students' level of study.

Table 3: A Descriptive Writing Rubric Template

Descriptive Writing Rubric Template					
CRITERIA 1 (C1)	SCORE				
	9-10 (Excellent)	7-8 (Good)	5-6 (Average)	3-4 (Weak)	1-2 (Poor)
Content/ Task Fulfilment					
CRITERIA 2 (C2)	9-10 (Excellent)	7-8 (Good)	5-6 (Average)	3-4 (Weak)	1-2 (Poor)
Language & Mechanics					
CRITERIA 3 (C3)	9-10 (Excellent)	7-8 (Good)	5-6 (Average)	3-4 (Weak)	1-2 (Poor)
Vocabulary/ Word Choice					
CRITERIA 4 (C4)	9-10 (Excellent)	7-8 (Good)	5-6 (Average)	3-4 (Weak)	1-2 (Poor)
Organization					

After thorough analysis, a descriptive writing rubric template was created to be used to assess the descriptive writing by teachers. This descriptive writing rubric template in Table 3 allows teachers to easily comprehend the criteria that would be looked at during marking. The template was improved several times to prevent any type of confusion and discrepancy while marking took place.

The descriptive writing rubric template is brief and comprehensive compared to other marking rubrics that focused too much on the content or mechanics of writing alone. This template was constructed after the researcher studied and considered several reliable and widely used descriptive essay marking rubrics, thus making this marking rubric highly consistent and valid. It was precisely constructed for the use of marking descriptive essays which focused mainly on vocabulary and word choice. There were four criteria that were assessed in the students' paragraph writing task. First was Criteria 1 (C1) which focused on content/ task fulfillment. The second criteria (C2) looked at the use of language and mechanics of writing. It concentrated on grammar use, spelling, capitalization and punctuation. Criteria 3 (C3) is an extremely unique feature that was inserted in this marking rubric. The researcher realized that there was a great need for students to use a good amount of descriptive words to write descriptively. As this study focused on vocabulary use through students' descriptive writings, the marking rubric was created to assess vocabulary use, which was not seen in other descriptive writing rubric. It was observed that most descriptive essay marking rubrics did not focus extensively on the use of vocabulary, making them not different from the common 6 trait or 5 paragraph essay marking rubric. Finally, Criteria 4 (C4) looked at the organization of the paragraph. It focused on sentence construction, coherence, flow of ideas and also the length of the paragraph. The suggested total marks for each essay was 40, where 10 marks were allocated for each criteria. The score range was categorized as Excellent (9-10 marks), Good (7-8 marks), Average (5-6 marks), Weak (3-4 marks) and Poor (1-2 marks).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a significant percentage of the studies considered it critical to use guidelines or rubrics to help students write different types of essays. It was crucial that each type of essays, has some distinguishment where there are requirements for styles of writing and use of certain word forms in the essays. As such, descriptive writing, which has been the focus of this study, requires the use of extensive vocabulary to write descriptively, compared to the other types of writing. It was also observed that teachers consider descriptive writing as a way to develop their student's language use. With the rubric that has been created as a template in this study, teachers no longer need to use the common five paragraph writing technique to teach descriptive writing. They would be able to emphasize on each of the items or criteria needed to write a descriptive essay, which doesn't take too much of class time, which was the primary concern of teaching different types of writing. The limitation of this study is certainly that it focused on descriptive writing alone. In future, it is hoped that rubrics for other types of writing are also developed to ease teachers teaching and simplify students learning, as they would know what it takes to complete these types of essays.

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