Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies
Vol. 11, 4, 2017, 35–55

Co-constructing a rubric checklist with first year university students: A self-assessment tool

Sharita Bharuthram , University of the Western Cape
Mahmoud Patel, University of the Western Cape

This paper reports on a study in which students co-constructed a rubric checklist with their lecturer and which they used to assess themselves. Data were collected by means of a student questionnaire, tutor feedback, as well as tutors' and lecturers' observations to ascertain students' experiences and opinions of the design process and of using the tool to self-assess. The findings show that co-designing the rubric checklist with students increased their motivation and enhanced students' confidence in completing the task. In addition, students gained enormous benefits from using the rubric checklist as a self-assessment tool. Reflecting critically on the feedback received from students and tutors the authors argue that for enhanced student engagement in the teaching and learning process they should be involved as active participants in the assessment processes. In addition, students need to learn to assess the quality of their own work early in their academic career with continuous guided practice throughout their studies with the intention of making the practice of self-assessment a norm rather than an exception, thereby creating independent reflective learners.

Keywords: assessment, rubric, rubric checklist, self-assessment, higher education

1 Introduction

The changing context of higher education in South Africa and in other parts of the world has resulted in a call for academics to make their assessment practices more transparent for students. This means making students aware of the purposes of the assessment and the assessment criteria (Jonsson, 2014). One way of making students aware of the assessment criteria is through the use of rubrics. Hence, the authors of this paper had independently used a rubric for an argumentative essay that formed part of students' continuous assessment schedule. However, when reviewing the outcome the authors noted that despite elaborate discussions on the uses and benefits of rubrics and a detailed explanation of the argumentative essay rubric (herewith referred to as AER) many students did not make use of them. On reflection the authors decided to

Corresponding author's email: sbharuthram@uwc.ac.za
ISSN: 1457-9863
Publisher: Centre for Applied Language Studies
University of Jyväskylä

http://apples.jyu.fi
http://dx.doi.org/10.17011/apples/urn.201708073430

introduce a new tool i.e. a rubric checklist that could lead to more accountability on the part of the student. A checklist is similar to the rubric in that it lists the 'criteria or what counts' but it does not describe the 'levels of quality from excellent to poor' which is a defining characteristic of a rubric. In acknowledging this limitation of a checklist the designed rubric checklist (herewith referred to as AERC) was to be used in conjunction with the AER to re-inforce the rubric.

A literature search on rubrics and rubric checklists shows that the terms 'rubric' and 'rubric checklist' are sometimes used interchangeably. In this paper the rubric and the rubric checklist are used as separate but complementary tools. However, the focus of this paper is on the rubric checklist. The rubric checklist discussed in this research is different from most checklists in that it complements the rubric; it is a little more detailed than a general checklist as each criteria that is listed in the rubric is presented in the checklist and is broken down further; in completing the rubric checklist students provide evidence in their essay that show they have met a particular criterion by indicating exactly where it is located in the assignment; and it allows for self-assessment (refer to Appendices 1 & 2). Furthermore, guided by the research studies that suggest that student participation in using rubrics can be enhanced by involving them in its design, students were included in designing the rubric checklist (Andrade, 2001; Gezie, Khaja, Chang, Adamek & Johnsen, 2012; Stiggins, 1997).

In addition to providing transparency in assessment criteria, the rubric can also be used as a self-assessment tool. Wiggins (1998) argues that self-assessment is inseparable from any assessment that is aimed at improving learning and several research studies provide support for using the rubric as a self-assessment tool (Dochy, Segers & Sluijsmans, 2006; Sambell & McDowell, 1997). However, these studies are limited in the South Africa Higher Education context as reported by Bharuthram (2015) who found that many academics often overlook the value of the rubric as a self-assessment tool and use the rubric primarily to make their expectations clear and for grading purposes. Hence, self-assessment is explored further in this article.

Influenced by the constructivist notions of teaching and learning which emphasise the importance of the active involvement of learners in constructing knowledge for themselves with the learner at the forefront of learning, the overall aim of this research is to examine the use of the rubric checklist as a teaching and learning tool through student participation in its development (for detailed research questions, see section on Research methodology). The research is also guided by Biggs' (1996) notion of constructive alignment which emphasizes the "alignment between the objectives of a course and the targets for assessing student performance" (Biggs 1996, p. 347). Biggs (1996) further argues that testing should not only control the curriculum but it should also influence the teaching methods as well as the strategies students' use in achieving the outcomes. He refers to this as the 'backwash effect'.

This paper begins by firstly providing a brief literature review on rubrics and self-assessment. Next, the authors provide a description of the research context followed by the research process. Thereafter, the findings are presented, followed by a discussion and conclusion section which suggests some recommendations for further research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Understanding the rubric

The term rubric is not very clear in its definition and elicits different responses from educators (Dawson, 2015; Popham, 1997; Wenzlaff, Fager & Coleman, 1999). As such, the rubric is used by educators in several different ways (Hafner & Hafner, 2003, p. 1509). In its very basic form a rubric can be used for scoring purposes and is defined as a "scoring guide used to evaluate the quality of students' constructed responses" (Popham, 1997, p. 72). According to Hafner and Hafner (2003, p. 1509) "In educational literature and among the teaching and learning practitioners, the word 'rubric' is understood generally to connote a simple assessment tool that describes levels of performance on a particular task and is used to assess outcomes in a variety of performance-based contexts…". Similarly, in a review of rubric use in higher education, Reddy and Andrade (2010, p. 435) found that a rubric is commonly defined as a "document that articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing the criteria or what counts and describing levels of quality from excellent to poor". Despite these different definitions of the rubric and their uses, Morgan (1999) states that there is still some agreement on its content. Popham (1997, p. 72) suggests that a rubric must have 3 essential features: "evaluative criteria, quality definitions, and a scoring strategy". Jonsson and Svingby (2007) identified two main categories of rubrics: holistic and analytical. "In holistic scoring, the rater makes an overall judgement about the quality of performance, while in analytic scoring, the rater assigns a score to each of the dimensions being assessed in the task" (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007, p. 131-132). In addition, they found that rubrics can be further classified as being task specific or generic. Despite the uncertainty associated in defining the rubric and in its uses, the rubric has over the years been growing in popularity as an important assessment tool, more specifically, in the promotion of learning by providing transparency in assessments and in making assessment practices authentic.

In his seminal work on rubrics Popham (1997, p. 75) points out many flaws in the way some rubrics are designed and refers to them as being "instructionally fraudulent" and as having no educational impact. Many research studies have demonstrated that a rubric that is well designed has the potential to not only improve the quality of assessment but also to enhance teaching and learning in higher education. For example, Andrade and Du (2005) in their study on the use of rubrics report that their students responded positively as rubrics made the teacher's expectations clear; it helped identify strengths and weaknesses in their work, and having knowledge of the criteria in advance made grading fair. Hence, the authors concluded that rubrics can help students become more active learners and improve their performance. Similarly, Bolton (2006, p. 6) states that rubrics helped students to

> understand the link between learning objective and desired outcome by articulating required elements of a successful assignment; rubrics assist in the problem solving process as students attempt to determine what factors an instructor considers important. By providing a more objective

> evaluative format, rubrics help improve performance as they reduce uncertainty and ambiguity.

Some research studies focus specifically on improvements made to student writing when using a rubric (Andrade, 2000; Andrade & Du, 2005; Sundeen, 2014). Andrade (2000, p. 13) says that the purpose of the rubric is to "give students informative feedback about their works in progress and to give detailed evaluations of their final products" – indicating a strong link between teaching writing skills and the use of rubrics. According to Sundeen (2014, p. 78) when a rubric is used to improve writing, the different elements listed in the rubric should be taught to students prior to them receiving the rubric. Thereafter, in discussing the rubric the teacher goes through each listed criterion in order to reinforce what was learnt and to discuss the expectations of the task. Instruction provided in this way will afford students the opportunity to address any questions or misconceptions they may have about the writing task. When students understand the requirements of the task and the expectations of the teacher they are likely to be more engaged in learning (Huang, 2012).

Despite the numerous benefits of using the rubric it is not without criticism. One concern that researchers have is whether making the criteria explicit for students could actually stifle students' creativity (Mabry, 1999; Messick, 1996). Wiggins (1998) suggests that this could be avoided by providing students with a range of examples or 'anchors' to demonstrate that the same task could be performed in a number of ways; and also by not restricting the format or method in the rubric. Furthermore, Young (2009) says that students' creativity and imagination would be enhanced when they fully understand the expectations of the writing task. To this end, Sundeen (2014, p. 77) argues that "creating a framework that allows teachers and students to develop a dialogue about the writing expectations encourages young writers to explore their own creativity".

Not all studies have shown positive results when using a rubric. For example, Green and Bowser (2006) used a rubric to evaluate the master's thesis literature review of two groups of students – a group who used a rubric and a group with no exposure to the rubric. The authors found no significant differences in the scores of the two groups. However, Reddy and Andrade (2010) suggest that this contradictory finding may be due to the fact that the rubric was simply made available to students prior to the submission of their reviews. To this end, Andrade (2001) shows in her study conducted with middle school students that merely providing a rubric to students does not lead to better performance. She concludes that there must be deep engagement with students on the rubric even by using it as self and peer-assessment tools or by co-creating the rubric with students. Other international research studies conducted in higher education also supports the conclusions drawn by Andrade (2001) (Gezie et al., 2012; Stiggins, 1997). Involving students in developing the rubric also helps them become clearer about the skills they need to master and how they are progressing in relation to the expectations in the rubric. This invariably leads to greater confidence in their abilities (Stix, 1996). However, these research studies are limited in number in the higher education context and are almost non-existent in the South African context.

2.2 The rubric as a self-assessment tool

According to Egodawatle (2010) "one defining characteristic of independent learners is their ability to self-assess" and this can be facilitated by means of a rubric. This point is supported by other researchers who suggest that the rubric/rubric checklist can work well towards guiding self-assessment. For example, Jonsson (2014) found that using the rubric for self-assessment purposes could assist students in better understanding the criteria which may lead to reinforcement of their self-assessment practices.

Boud (1991, p. 5) defines self-assessment as "the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work, and making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards". However, Nulty (2011) argues that this would depend on a student's ability to be self-reflective. Self-assessment is a formative process but may also be summative (Boud & Falchikov, 1989). Hence, if self-assessment is done on drafts it can be viewed as a tool that informs revision and improvement and the accuracy of self-assessment will improve over time and is enhanced when students receive feedback on their self-assessment (Dochy et al., 2006). To this end, researchers point out that self-assessment does not only occur after completion of the final product but should happen throughout the completion of the task (Boud, 1995; Panadero, Alonso-Tapia & Reche, 2013). Sadler (2010) argues that merely providing students with feedback on their work will not develop high level evaluative skills. He suggests that students should be provided with appraisal experiences similar to those of their teachers and should be able to monitor what they are producing. Self-assessment could be seen as a strategy to develop students' evaluative skills.

Reddy and Andrade (2010) state that teaching students how to self-assess could result in greater engagement with the rubric resulting in deeper learning and better academic performance. Similarly, Zoller and Ben-Chaim (1997) assert that student motivation can be increased by making self-assessment an inherent part of the learning process while Longhurst and Norton (1997) argue that the accuracy of self-assessment is influenced by student motivation to self-assess**.** In a review of literature on self-assessment, Dochy et al. (2006, p. 337) found that research studies reported positively on the use of self-assessment in educational practice. They conclude

> Students who engage in self-assessment tend to score most highly on tests. Self-assessment, used in most cases to promote the learning of skills and abilities, leads to more reflection on one's own work, a higher standard of outcomes, responsibility for one's own learning and increasing understanding of problem-solving. (Dochy et al., 2006, p. 337)

According to Panadero et al. (2013, p. 2) many self-regulation theories consider self-assessment key to the self-regulation process. In other words, when students learn to "self-assess their learning using adequate criteria, they self-regulate with success" – meaning that they are able to monitor their own progress and make the necessary adjustments. However, they add that for adequate self-assessment to occur students need to internalise the criteria set for the

assessment task. Since internalisation is difficult, the rubric could be used as a good tool to assist students.

Nulty (2011) found that much of the studies on self-assessment in higher education focused on students in their 2nd year of studies and onwards. After reviewing the literature he concluded that the limited number of studies on self-assessment with first entry students results from the view that they are unable to make informed judgements. He argues that first year students should learn to self-assess at the very start of their degree programmes. Similarly, Boud (1995, p. 12) states that "the introduction [of student self-assessment] should be made at the earliest possible stage, and the skills practised thereafter, most desirably in a sequence of courses through the years of a program". Sher and Twigg (1991) reported that students felt that they were not adequately trained to self or peer-assess and therefore felt apprehensive. However, Nulty (2011, p. 502) argues that "students need to develop their understanding of the assessment criteria and to accumulate experience through practice so that they come to possess the knowledge (explicit or tacit) necessary for being able to make judgements using these criteria".

3 Contextualizing the study

The research reported in this paper was conducted at a historically disadvantaged higher education institution in South Africa. Currently in South Africa, the higher education sector is faced with many challenges that directly affect the teaching and learning process. Some of these challenges impact negatively on the throughput rates as students struggle to cope academically (Ngwenya, 2010; Ralfe & Baxen, 2012). Hence, many universities have support programmes to assist students. The English for Educational Development (EED) programme is one such support programme which aims to develop the disciplinary literacies that students require at university. The authors of this article co-ordinate and teach in the EED programme for two different faculties: Faculty of Law (EED-Law) and Community and Health Sciences Faculty (EED-CHS).

The EED-Law course is a year-long module while the EED-CHS course is a semester module that is offered in both semesters of an academic year. Both modules have in common the argumentative essay as an assessment type. The researchers, in recognition of the fact that an argumentative essay is not an easy task and is a big shift from the discursive/descriptive style of writing which is generally the focus in many secondary schools, have built into their lessons a number of incremental tasks that lead to the eventual writing of the argumentative essay. In addition, the process approach to writing is used whereby students go through the processes of brainstorming, mind mapping, reviewing and revising their work. During this process they submit a draft essay on which they receive detailed developmental and constructive feedback. However, despite the various scaffolds many students still find it difficult to write in an argumentative style, especially those students who come from schools that do not adequately prepare them for higher education.

Over the years a tool that has been used in both the above-mentioned modules to assist students in writing their essay is the argumentative essay rubric (AER). The AERs used in both programmes are very similar with slight

variations that accommodate the discipline specific needs. Both researchers use a holistic AER whereby a single score based on an overall impression of the students' performance is provided at the end of the essay. For the past few years, despite the lecturers explaining the AER to students, the researchers have independently observed that many students either do not make use of it or do not use it adequately and this is reflected in students' writing. In light of this, the researchers decided to jointly revisit the use of the rubric as a teaching and learning tool and compare and share their findings. Thus, it was decided to place greater emphasis on the use of the AER and to engage in lengthy discussions with students on its uses. In addition, the researchers co-designed with students an argumentative essay rubric checklist (AERC) that was to be used in conjunction with the AER. The purpose of the AERC was to provide students with a readily available tool that they could use to check that they had complied with the lecturer's expectations and a tool to assess and evaluate themselves or their peers if need be. It also served as a tool that gently forced students to refer to the AER (when looking at the different performance levels) and make conscious use of the AERC (when providing the necessary evidence).

4 The construction of the argumentative essay rubric checklist (AERC)

This section provides a brief discussion on the introduction of the AER to students and the method used by the lecturers to design the AERC in collaboration with students. It must be noted that while the actual processes used by the two researchers may not be identical, they were very similar and is summed up below.

4.1 Student introduction to the AER

After the completion of lectures on how to write the argumentative essay, the concept and purpose of a rubric was discussed with students. Students were then given the AER which the researchers had previously constructed and modified. Each performance area and category was discussed at length with examples provided for each to aid in understanding.

4.2 Student participation in the AERC

The lecturer explained the concept of the AERC, in particular, that it should be based on the AER and that each criteria that was listed on the AER should be further broken down according to the lecturer's expectations; the AERC should have a column to indicate where the expectation was met in their essay; and it should be a tool that could be used by students to assess themselves and their peers. To provide further clarity, the lecturer used the 'Introduction' as an example and asked students to list some of the features/characteristics of a good introduction. From the feedback received a final list on the features/characteristics of a good introduction was compiled. This information was then included at the beginning of the AERC. Students were then placed in groups and worked in a similar manner in their respective groups on the other criteria as listed in the AER. This was followed by a class discussion and a final breakdown of each criterion was decided on. Using the feedback received from students and the decisions made

in class, the final AERC was prepared by the lecturer and handed out to students. The lecturer briefly went over the AERC once again stressing the AERC as an important and useful self-assessment tool that should be used in conjunction with the AER. At this stage the lecturer also showed students how to use the AERC to assess themselves and they were encouraged to do so throughout the writing process. Of note is that a 'general' section was included in the rubric checklist which made provisions for students to assess their work as either excellent, good or poor and to provide explanations for their assessment. They were also required to give themselves a mark. While the student views on self-assessment are discussed in this paper, the actual ratings and grading by students are not discussed but will be reported on in a forthcoming article.

5 Research methodology

The overall aim of this research is to examine the use of the rubric checklist as a teaching and learning tool through student participation in its development. The key questions addressed in the research are:

- What are students' and lecturers' experiences and opinions about the value of co-constructing the rubric checklist?
- What are students' experiences and opinions on using the rubric checklist as a self-assessment tool?

The two EED modules (i.e. EED-CHS and EED-Law) formed the case study that is reported on in this paper. While there are some variations in the offerings of these programmes the overall aim of the research in both programmes was the same and therefore the data will be reported on holistically.

5.1 Research design

A qualitative research design was used to achieve the research aim. Qualitative research was found suitable because it allows for the examination of opinions, beliefs as and emotions of people in a particular setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) which is in keeping with the aims of this research (i.e. to learn more about students' and lecturers' experiences on co-constructing the rubric checklist and using it as a self-assessment tool.

5.2 Participants

5.2.1 Students

A total of 680 students participated in this research. The participants in both the EED-CHS and EED-Law groups were first entry university students and therefore considered novice writers. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. Both groups consisted of English First Language and English Second Language learners.

The duration of the programmes differ. The EED-CHS course is a semester module that is offered in two successive semesters, and therefore data was collected over each semester of the academic year 2014. A total of 150 CHS

students participated in the research. In each semester students had 2 lectures and 1 tutorial per week. The lectures were given by one of the authors. As part of the continuous assessment mark students write an argumentative essay in the second term of each semester and this is when the AER and AERC were used.

The EED-Law course is a year-long module and data was collected at the end of the 2nd semester of 2014. There were 530 law students who participated in this research. The students were divided into 3 lecture groups. Each group had 2 lectures and 1 tutorial per week. One of the authors lectured 2 groups while the 3rd group was lectured by a contract staff member. During the course of the year these students write 3 argumentative essays. The AER and AERC were used for 2 of the essays, one written in Term 2 and the other in Term 4.

5.2.2 Tutors

Altogether there were a total of 10 tutor participants. Four of these tutors worked across both programmes and are considered Senior Tutors as they had been tutoring across the University for a number of years.

5.3 Materials

In both programmes, data were collected by means of a student questionnaire; tutor feedback; and through tutor and lecturer observations. The questionnaire consisted of both open and closed questions (Appendix 3) which students completed during a lecture period after they had received their final essays. Informed consent was obtained from students to participate in the study; they had the option to remain anonymous; and they could withdraw their participation at any time during the research. Furthermore, they were assured that their names would not be revealed in any of the data. The tutors were asked to monitor the students' essays during marking and to pay particular focus on whether students had made use of the rubric checklist and to what extent. They were also encouraged to record their observations. Tutor feedback on the checklist was provided in the form of a reflective piece and ongoing evaluation of the course. In addition, the lecturers made notes of their observations during the co-designing of the AERC.

5.4 Data analysis

The responses to the closed questions were counted and recorded while the responses to the open-ended questions for each student group were initially analysed separately by the two researchers who for each question grouped students' responses into the broad categories (design, use and self-assessment) and further into subcategories according to the research aims. Thereafter, the researchers discussed their findings and reached consensus on the commonalities and differences in student responses. Similar methods were used by other researchers **(**Taraban, Rynaerson & Kerr, 2000). Since the tutor feedback on the AERC consisted of about 3 to 5 sentences at the most the researchers analysed their own tutor responses and then after a discussion made a holistic summary of all the tutor responses. In addition, each researcher discussed the observations and field notes made by tutors in their respective course meetings. Thereafter, the researchers compared their notes and a final record of the tutor observations was made.

6 Findings

6.1 Co-designing the rubric checklist

Majority of the students reported that their contribution to the AERC was important and they expressed their appreciation for being included in the design process. The positive responses focused mostly on obtaining clarity of the lecturers' expectations of the task which in turn made them feel more confident and less anxious. Similar positive findings were evidenced in a study conducted by Stix (1996), who found that students who were involved in co-creating the rubric were clearer about the skills they needed to master and were able to monitor their own progress. Hence, students felt more confident to tackle the task at hand.

Furthermore, in designing the AERC students had to work closely with the AER and this helped to further enhance their understanding of the AER as illustrated in the following quotes "The checklist made me look at the rubric and I understood it [rubric] better"; "it [rubric checklist] forced me to look at the rubric" – a sentiment expressed by many students. Hence, one may conclude that the construction of the AERC served to re-inforce the AER and the requirements of the assessment task. The group work during the design stages of the AERC was positively reported on as it helped students clarify doubts they may have had about the requirements of the task and it helped them think critically as they listened and engaged in discussions. The lecturers observed that students engaged in healthy discussions as they decided what to add to each category in the rubric checklist. They recorded that students referred constantly to the AER and some of them even consulted their lecture notes for additional information and or clarity of information. The lecturers also reported that at times they had to recap certain points discussed in the lectures (e.g. providing further explanation on refuting a claim).

Some students were conflicted in their opinions on co-designing the rubric checklist stating that while they were happy to be involved in the process they found it challenging mostly because of their unfamiliarity with such a task as illustrated in the following quote "I was happy to be part of the design but I was not sure of exact things to include. It was the first time I was doing this". To this end the lecturers observed that some students did not fully participate in the design of the AERC. They also noted that within this group were students who had been previously identified (earlier on in their courses) as having limited language proficiency and hence these students were not able to gain maximum benefit from this experience.

6.2 The usefulness of the rubric checklist

Almost all students reported that they made use of the AERC and found it clear and easy to use. Majority of them spoke about using it during their writing as a 'guideline' because it "gives me direction on what to do" and "what to focus on" or as a 'plan' to "ensure that all requirements were met". Another student wrote "I used the rubric checklist to help me check the structure of my essay. The numerous points in the rubric checklist provided me the opportunity to check and confirm if I had the necessary requirements which would enable me to have an essay of good quality". Some students reported that the rubric checklist

helped them with prior writing i.e. during the data collection phase. For example a student stated that she used the rubric after she had "…collected all the relevant information that I [she] was going to use for the essay. It helped me in choosing which information should I include or omit in the essay. Without it my essay would have contained a lot of information which can be confusing and end up being irrelevant". A large percentage of students reported using the rubric checklist only after they had completed writing their essay in order to "improve on my essay by checking what I have neglected to include in my final draft" and "make adjustments and corrections where necessary". Only a few responses focused on the technical requirements listed on the rubric checklist, i.e. the length of the essay and line spacing.

Of concern is that some students reported that they looked at wherever they had to provide proof in the AERC and then ensured that they incorporated it in their assignment. For example, one student said "I used the checklist to see where proof was needed and I included it [proof] in my essay". This concern has also been cited in the literature (Andrade, 2007/2008; Wilson, 2006), mainly that students will present only what is required by the lecturer and nothing more and could result in 'cookie-cutter' products. However, it must be noted that students who are novices need all the support they can get and the AERC serves as a tool to induct students to the conventions of writing in their disciplines.

Overall, all the lecturers and tutors concurred (on the basis of their observations when marking the essays) that student assignments were better presented and more structured compared to previous years. This finding was more evident with the law students who write 3 argumentative essays during the course of the year. A vast improvement was noted in the second and third assignments when the AER and AERC were used. Although other researchers also reported that rubrics helped to improve students writing (Andrade, 2000; Andrade & Du, 2005) the results of the current study need to be used cautiously because there could be other factors that contributed to improvement. For example, students were now in the second semester and were more settled into university life; were also more focused on improving their mid-year mark; and were more experienced in terms of using the AER and AERC.

The tutors reported positively on both the AER and AERC, viewing both as important tools for teaching and for learning. Some tutor responses included "it provided some form of feedback that should help students with the learning process as well as help lecturers/tutors refine their teaching or even marking skills, for example, identifying common errors, strengths and weaknesses relating to the argumentative essay". The tutors also reported that apart from the technical requirements, there was more adherence to fulfilling the other requirements of writing the argumentative essay. For example, making a claim and providing support for the claim or consideration of the counter-arguments and this resulted in an overall improvement in the quality of the essays received.

6.3 The rubric checklist and self-assessment

Interestingly while many of the students reported that the AERC was an important self-assessment tool, approximately 30% indicated that they did not use the AERC to self-assess. However, some of their responses provided to the questions to address the value of the AERC on students learning showed that

many of these students (i.e. of the 30%) did indeed use the AERC as a self-assessment tool as illustrated in the following quote "it [the rubric checklist] was extremely helpful because it indicates what is required to make an overall good essay. It helped me because it made me aware of the deficiencies in my essay". Yet, they seemed unaware of doing so. One could infer that these students were still unsure of what it means to self-assess; did not know how to self-assess; or were not able to use their self-generated feedback to revise or improve their work and therefore felt that they did not self-assess. Orsmond and Merry (1996) (as cited in Jonsson & Svingby, 2007, p. 132) argue that "students might not find the qualities in their work even if they know what to look for, since they have a less developed sense of how to interpret criteria".

Many students reported that providing proof of meeting a particular standard was quite tedious. However, they acknowledged that it was very beneficial as in instances where they noted that they had not fulfilled a particular requirement (i.e. could not provide the relevant evidence in the AERC) they were able to revise their work accordingly. The tutors concurred with students as they reported that many students used the rubric checklist to monitor their own progress and make improvements to their essay. Hence, the tutors viewed the rubric checklist as an important self-assessment tool. This is consistent with the findings of Thomas, Martin and Pleasants (2011) who argue that apart from academic socialisation, i.e. making the rules and conventions explicit for students, development in self-assessment skills could also assist students in monitoring their own learning and become judges of their own performances rather than relying on the teacher.

7 Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study show that the students' participation as co-designers of the AERC and the use of the AERC as a self-assessment tool had benefits for both the lecturers and the students. It assisted the lecturers in not only providing transparency of the assessment task but also provided them with a sense of students' understanding of the different components involved in the writing of an argumentative essay. Hence, they were able to recapitulate on certain points. The students' participation as co-designers helped them understand the task better thereby increasing their confidence which enhanced their motivation to complete the task. It also led to greater student investment in the task as observed by the lecturers and tutors through the improvement in the quality of student essays as well as their engaged participation during the group discussions. Similar findings were presented in a study by Skillings and Ferrel (2000) who reported that when students are involved in co-designing the rubric they tend to display deeper levels of thinking. Furthermore, they begin to learn to identify standards and criteria and what is considered good quality. Consequently, they begin to internalise the qualities of a good writing piece or end product. However, for students to internalise the qualities of a good writing piece they need continued guided practice on how to appraise (Sadler, 2010).

Many research studies show that a rubric has the potential to serve multiple functions (Gezie et al., 2012; Howell, 2011). As discussed in the findings students used the AERC in different ways. Some students used it to determine

the relevancy of the information they collected; others used it to check whether they had met the requirements of the task; and some of them used the AERC as a tool throughout the various stages of the essay writing process to the eventual completion of the essay. This process served as scaffolds – a process that is essential to novice writers. Although some students were not aware that they used the AERC as a self-assessment tool, majority of them viewed the AERC as a very effective self-assessment tool indicating that they were able to monitor their progress throughout the writing process and use the feedback from their self-assessment to revise their work. However, for maximum benefit for both the lecturer and the student, students need guided and sustained practice thus enabling them to become more confident assessors of their own work, even post-graduation as is articulated by Sadler (2010).

There are two concerns emanating from the findings. The first relates to the limited impact that this intervention had on students with poor language proficiency who were clearly not able to articulate their thoughts and ideas and therefore not able to fully participate in the co-designing of the rubric. In this regard, higher education institutions need to have in place additional measures to ensure that such students are given the necessary assistance to adequately function at the level they are expected to so that they don't feel disadvantaged in any way. The second concern is that for many students this was their first engagement in such a task, more specifically, in working together with the lecturer to create a resource to assess their own performance. To support students in this regard, the authors acknowledge that exemplars of rubrics and checklists should be given to students for perusal so that they would have an idea of what they are working towards. This point is highlighted by Sadler (2013, p. 62) who argues that "for students to develop a concept of quality, they need to see as extensive a range of quality as possible, and also to see and appreciate how quite different works can be legitimately judged to be of about the same quality". In addition, in order to develop students' expertise in undertaking such tasks, wherever possible, it should be something that happens consistently in the course and even across other programmes. In this way students will begin to learn what constitutes quality and begin to develop a critical perspective of their own work. Furthermore, as Sadler (2009, p. 178) articulates "[t]o simply reach for a rubric or construct a scoring key each time a complex work has to be appraised is both impractical and artificial in life outside academe". Providing students early on in their studies with guided practice in setting levels of performance will induct them into evaluating quality which will hold them in good stead in their final years of study and subsequent working life thereby promoting reflective practitioners who will be more inclined toward becoming lifelong learners.

Finally, in light of the above findings and the view as expressed by Boud (1991, p. 1) that "[t]he development of skills in self-assessment lies at the core of higher education" the authors recommend that these skills should be considered an important part of the curriculum at all levels and that professional development programmes for academics should focus more on self-assessment. The authors also recommend further research in the form of quantitative studies on the use of rubrics/rubric checklists by comparing the performance of students who participated as co-designers of the assessment criteria with those who were not involved as co-designers. Lastly, longitudinal studies could be

carried out to assess the development of self-assessment skills spanning over the duration of a degree programme, whereby self-assessment is included as an ongoing component of the degree.

References

Andrade, H. (2000). Using rubrics to promote thinking and learning. *Educational Leadership, 57*(5), 13–18.

Andrade, H. (2001). The effects of instructional rubrics on learning to write. *Current Issues in Education, 4*(4), 1–28.

Andrade, H. (2007/2008). Self-assessment through rubrics. *Educational Leadership, 65*(4), 60–63.

Andrade, H., & Du, Y. (2005). Student perspectives on rubric-referenced assessment. *Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation, 10*(5), 1–11.

Bharuthram, S. (2015). Lecturers' perceptions: the value of assessment rubrics for informing teaching practice and curriculum review and development. *Africa Education Review, 12*(13), 415–428.

Biggs, J.B. 1996. Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment. *Higher Education, 32*(3), 347–364.

Bolton, F.C. (2006). Rubrics and adult learners: andragogy and assessment. *Assessment Update, 18*(3), 5–6.

Boud, D. (1991). *Implementing student self-assessment*. 3rd ed. Campbell Town: The Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA).

Boud, D. (1995). *Enhancing learning through self-assessment*. London: Kogan Page.

Boud, D., & Falchikov, N. (1989). Quantitative studies of self-assessment in higher education: a critical analysis of findings. *Higher Education, 18*(5), 529–549.

Dawson, P. (2015). Assessment rubrics: towards clearer and more replicable design, research and practice. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 42*(3), 347-360.

Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (1998). Introduction: entering the field of qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research: theories and issues* (pp. 1-34). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dochy, F., Segers, M., & Sluijsmans, D. (2006). The use of self-, peer and co-assessment in higher education: A review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 24(3), 331–350.

Egodawatle, G. (2010). A rubric to self-assess and peer-assess mathematical problem solving tasks of college students. *Acta Didactica Napocensia, 3*(1), 75–88.

Gezie, A., Khaja, K., Chang, V.N., Adamek, M.E., & Johnsen, M.B. (2012). Rubrics as a tool for learning and assessment: What do Baccalaureate students think? *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 32*(4), 421–437.

Green, R., & Bowser, M. (2006). Observations from the field: sharing a literature review rubric. *Journal of Library Administration, 45*(1–2), 185–202.

Hafner, J.C., & Hafner, P.M. (2003). Quantitative analysis of the rubric as an assessment tool: an empirical study of student peer-group rating. *International Journal of Science Education, 25*(12), 1509–1528.

Howell, R.J. (2011). Exploring the impact of grading rubrics on academic performance: Findings from a quasi-experimental, pre-post evaluation. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, 22*(2), 31–49.

Haung, S.C. (2012). Like a bell responding to a striker. Instruction contingent on assessment. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique, 11*(4), 99-119.

Jonsson, A. (2014). Rubrics as a way of providing transparency in assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 39*(7), 840-852.

Jonsson, A., & Svingby, G. (2007). The use of scoring rubrics: reliability, validity and educational consequences. *Educational Research Review, 2*(2), 130–144.

Longhurst, N., & Norton, L.S. (1997). Self-assessment in course work essays. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 23*(4), 319–330.

Mabry, L. (1999). Writing to the rubric: lingering effects of standardized traditional testing on direct writing assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan, 80*(9), 673–679.

Messick, S. (1996). Validity of performance assessments. In G. Phillips (Ed.), *Technical issues in large-scale performance* (pp. 1–18). Washington, DC: National Centre for Education Statistics.

Morgan, B. (1999). Portfolios in a pre-service teacher field-based program: evolution of a rubric for performance assessment. *Education, 19*(3), 416–426.

Ngwenya, T. (2010).Correlating first-year law students' profile with the language demands of their content subjects. *Per Linguam, 26*(1), 74–99.

Nulty, D.D. (2011). Peer and self-assessment in the first year of university. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 36*(5), 493–507.

Panadero, E., Alonso-Tapia, J., & Reche, E. (2013). Rubics vs self-assessment scripts effect on self-regulation performance and self-efficacy in pre-service teachers. *Studies in Educational Management, 39*(3), 125-132.

Popham, W.J. (1997). What's wrong – and what's right – with rubrics. *Educational Leadership, 55*(2), 72–75.

Ralfe, S., & Baxen, J. (2012*). "I don't like reading": The reading histories, identities and practices of first-year Bachelor of Education students*. Conference presentation, HELTASA, Stellenbosch University, 28–30 November 2012.

Reddy, Y.M., & Andrade, H. (2010). A review of rubric use in higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 35*(4), 435–448.

Sadler, D.R. (2009). Indeterminacy in the use of preset criteria for assessment and grading. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 34*(2), 159–179.

Sadler, D.R. (2010). Beyond feedback: developing student capability in complex appraisal. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 35*(5), 535–550.

Sadler, D.R. (2013). Opening up feedback: teaching learners to see. In S. Merry, M. Price, D. Carless & M. Taras (Eds.), *Reconceptualising feedback in Higher Education: developing dialogue with students* (pp. 54–63). London: Routledge.

Sambell, K., & McDowell, L. (1997). The value of self- and peer assessment to the developing lifelong learner. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving student learning – improving students as learners* (pp. 56–66). Oxford, Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

Sher, W.D., & Twigg, D.R. (1991). Peer assessment – a construction 'Tool'? In S. Brown (Ed.), *Peer Assessment in Practice* (pp. 87–105). Birmingham: Staff & Educational Development Association.

Skillings, M.J., & Ferrel, R. (2000). Student-generated rubrics: bringing students into the assessment process. *Reading Teacher, 53*(6), 452–455.

Stiggins, R. (1997). *Student-centred classroom assessment*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Stix, A. (1996). Creating rubrics through negotiable contracting. Paper presented at the annual conference of the National Middle School Association, Baltimore, M.D, November 1996.

Sundeen, T. H. (2014). Instructional rubrics: effects of presentation options on writing quality. *Assessing Writing, 21*, 74–88.

Taraban, R., Rynaerson, K., & Kerr, M. 2000. College students' academic performance and self-reports of comprehension strategy use. *Reading Psychology, 21*(4), 283–308.

Thomas, G., Martin, D., & Pleasants, K. (2011). Using self- and peer-assessment to enhance students' future-learning in higher education. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 8*(1), Article 5.

Wenzlaff, T.L., Fager, J.J. & Coleman, M.J. (1999). What is a rubric? Do practitioners and literature agree? *Contemporary Education, 70*(4), 44–85.

Wiggins, G. (1998). *Educative assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wilson, M. (2006). *Rethinking rubrics in writing assessment*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Young, L. (2009). Imagine creating rubrics that develop creativity. *English Journal, 99*(2), 74–79.

Zoller, Z. & Ben-Chaim, D. (1997). *Student self-assessment in HOCS science examinations: is it compatible with that of teachers?* Paper presented at the meeting of European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction, Athens, Greece.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Argumentative Essay Rubric (AER)

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
INTRODUCTION	introduction missing and/or not developed; no attempt to engage reader; background details unclear & random collection of information; problem not stated; no point of view presented; no essay outline	introduction exists but unclear; unfocused background information; states argument but not very focused; own view not stated; does attempt to outline essay for reader	introduction exists but not well developed; background information unclear; does not attempt to create interest; states argument but unclear; own view unclear; vague outline of essay	introduction exists but does not adequately explain the background of the problem; attempts to create interest; states argument but unclear; states own view but not very clear; some attempt to outline essay for reader	a satisfactory introduction; contains some background information; creates some interest; develops a clearly stated position using sufficient details; attempts to outline essay for reader	introduction well developed & engages the reader; contains detailed background information & both sides of the argument; own position clearly presented; outlines essay for reader
ARGUMENT	doesn't say what argument or claim is / or little to no control of reasoning & overall argument	main claim may not be clear; sub-claims unclear, confused or unfocused; poor reasoning; very limited control of argument	main claim clear but sub-claims under-developed, unclear, confused or unfocused; some faulty reasoning & loss of control of argument	main claim clear but some sub-claims under-developed unclear, confused or unfocused; generally well-reasoned	main claim & sub-claims clear; well-reasoned and persuasive; good control of overall argument	main claim clearly stated & 2 or 3 relevant linked sub-claims; fully-developed argument, expressed with clarity, precision and impact; faultless and insightful reasoning; full control of overall argument

SUPPORT/ EVIDENCE	poor or questionable support and/or little to no research & sources not acknowledged at all	some support; some research but sources not adequately acknowledged (i.e. either in-text citation or reference list missing)	some support; some research & some sources acknowledged through citing and reference list	substantial appropriate support; good research & sources acknowledged through formal citing and consistent reference list	a variety of substantial appropriate support; excellent research & sources acknowledged through citing and consistent reference list	a variety of substantial & convincing support provided; outstanding research & sources acknowledged through citing and consistent reference list
COUNTER-ARGUMENT	counter-claim merely hinted at or no counter argument	counter-claim not integrated into argument; unsuccessful attempt to concede and/or refute	counter-claim partly integrated into argument; attempt made to concede and/or refute	counter-claim integrated into argument; partially effective concession and/or refutation	counter-claim integrated into argument; generally effective concession and/or refutation	full control of counter-argument: counter-claim fully integrated into argument; wholly convincing concession and/or refutation
STRUCTURE: COHERENCE & COHESION	essay poorly structured; ideas lack development; signposting faulty or absent	essay structure only partly logical in sequence; some ideas adequately developed; signposting generally faulty	essay mostly logically sequenced and most ideas adequately developed; some use of signposting	essay generally logically sequenced and ideas well-developed; effective use of signposting with minor flaws	essay well-organised & logically sequenced; ideas well-developed; mostly effective use of signposting	whole essay well-organised & logically sequenced and ideas fully developed; effective use of signposting; all information seamlessly integrated into whole; effective intro & conc.

LANGUAGE & REGISTER	serious and frequent problems in language use & sentence structure interfere with meaning; text incoherent to error-riddled; no control of register	occasional major errors or frequent minor errors in grammar or sentence structure detract from the overall impression; poor control of register	some minor language errors; register generally appropriate with minor flaws	good control of language; register appropriate; may be a few minor flaws	very good control of language; use of appropriate register; wide variety of words and sentence structures; no more than one or two minor flaws	superior control of language; use of appropriate register throughout essay; extensive variety of words and range of sentence structures; precise expression
ESSAY WRITING PROCESS	No draft(s) submitted. Minimal attempt to rework draft as per tutor feedback.	Some attempt to rework draft assignment taking into account tutor feedback.			Most of the tutor feedback on draft assignment considered and appropriate changes made.	All tutor feedback considered. Vast improvement to assignment.
TOTAL	**100**					

*Adapted from University of Johannesburg, Academic Development Unit, South Africa.

Appendix 2: Argumentative Essay Rubric Checklist (AERC)

	YES	**NO**	**PROOF**
1. INTRODUCTION:			**Para/Line:**
a) Did you introduce the topic?			
b) Did you give a general background?			
c) Did you state both sides of the argument?			
d) Did you state your opinion on the topic (Your position)?			
e) Did you provide the reader with an outline of your essay?			
2. DEVELOPMENT OF CLAIMS/ARGUMENT			
a) Do you have one main claim per paragraph?			
b) Are your claims clearly stated?			
c) Do you provide evidence to support your claims by using any of the following: - facts			
- regulation/s			
- statistics			
- research			
- direct quotation			
- legislation			
- Constitution,1996			
- Policy			
d) Are you using the referencing method taught to you?			
3. DEVELOPMENT OF COUNTER-ARGUMENTS			
a) Do you have any counter-arguments?			
b) Are your counter-arguments integrated into your discussion?			
c) Do your counter-arguments strengthen or reduce the credibility of your claim?			
d) Use of the counter-argument: Do you - merely acknowledge possible counter-arguments?			
- acknowledge the counter-argument and make a concession?			
- simply refute the counter-argument?			
4. CONCLUSION			
a) Did you summarise the main points?			
b) Did you make any suggestions?			
c) Do you make a call for further action or further research?			
d) Did you restate your initial position (initial claim/ point of view)?			
5. LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS			
a) Are your sentences short and clear?			
b) Did you use formal language?			
c) Did you make use of contractions?			
d) Do you have any emotional responses?			
e) Are your points presented in an organized manner?			
f) Do your sentences flow smoothly from one idea to the next?			
6. ATTENTION TO DIRECTIONS			
a) Is your essay typed?			
b) Do you use Times New Roman 12 pt font?			

c) Do you use double line spacing?			
d) Is your essay between 1400 to 1600 words in length?			
e) Did you provide a word count?			
7. GENERAL			
a) Having complied with the above criteria, rate the quality of your essay? (Please tick your choice) excellent good poor			
b) Provide a reason(s) for your assessment.			
c) What percentage score would you give your essay?			

Appendix 3: Student Questionnaire

English for Educational Development

Dear Student,

Below are a set of questions related to the Argumentative Essay Rubric Checklist. Kindly answer the questions in full and as honestly as possible. Thank you.

Name and Surname (Optional):……

Discipline: ……

1	Do you feel your contribution to the checklist design was important? Explain fully.
2	Do you have any suggestions on the process that was followed in designing the checklist? Please explain.
3	Did you find the rubric checklist helpful? Please explain.
4	Do you think it is a good idea to have a rubric checklist for every major essay? Please explain.
5	Does the rubric checklist provide you with clear directions on the assessment task? Please elaborate.
6	Do you feel the rubric checklist gives you confidence in writing your essay? Please explain.
7	In what way did you make use of the rubric checklist? Explain.
8	Does the rubric checklist provide you with clear directions on the assessment task? Explain.
9	In what ways would you suggest we improve the rubric checklist?
10	How do you feel about assessing your own work? Please explain fully.
11	Was the mark allocated to you very different from the mark given by the tutor? Explain

Received August 31, 2016
Revision received February 20, 2017
Accepted July 4, 2017