THE EFFECT OF USING INSTRUCTIONAL RUBRICS ON EFL STUDENTS' WRITING PERFORMANCE: A HIGH SCHOOL CASE IN THE MEKONG DELTA OF VIETNAM

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Abstract:

Teaching EFL writing has been one of the most trending research fields recently. Among the techniques being tested, using instructional rubrics has drawn much attention from researchers and teachers. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of using rubrics in enhancing students' writing skill and the students' attitudes towards this technique. The study used the experimental research design. The participants were thirty English-majored eleventh-grade students (N=30) in a high school in Can Tho City, Viet Nam. The main research tools included two guiding rubrics, one writing pre-test, two writing post-tests, and a questionnaire. Holistic and analytic rubrics were used in the teaching of writing skill to the participants to help them understand the targets for learning and the standards of quality for their writing work. Data from the pre- and post-writing tests indicated significant changes in students' writing performance after using both holistic and analytic rubrics. Besides, the results of the questionnaire revealed learners' positive perceptions of this technique. It could be suggested that high school teachers should take into account the use of rubrics in teaching writing for EFL students.

Keywords: instructional rubrics, writing skill, Vietnamese high school

1. Introduction

In the Vietnamese educational system, English is the most popular language to be learnt in all levels starting from primary, secondary, to high schools and tertiary education. As a requirement from the Ministry of Education and Training of Viet Nam, students must have an ability to communicate in English successfully; that is, they are expected to master the four competences of English – listening, speaking, reading, and writing,

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among which writing has every so often been considered as the most challenging cognitive activity for learners because it requires the learners to have control over various factors (Nunan, 1989). Similarly, according to Maghsoudi and Haririan (2013), this skill *"stimulates thinking, compels students to concentrate and organize their ideas, and cultivates their ability to summarize, analyze, and criticize"* (p.60). More importantly, a review of the literature confirms the importance of writing skill in fostering other learning experiences, by recording, assimilating, and reformulating knowledge as well as developing and working through learners' own ideas (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Therefore, language learners need to be supported most with learning and practicing the writing skill. Among a number of ways of teaching writing skill, employing rubrics for instructional purposes has become more common than ever before (Mahmoudi & Buğra, 2020).

Rubrics regularly serve as a tool for grading students' assignments; however, in the recent years, rubrics have been used as an instructional tool in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning (Stiggins, 2001; Andrade & Saddler, 2004). Research has proved that using rubrics can help develop students' writing skill. Firstly, rubrics can help students develop and improve their critical thinking skills (Andrade, 2000). Raising students' awareness about rubrics for writing can give them a powerful aid to comprehension of the institution's as well as teachers' expectations and will ultimately booster their writing to a great extent (Maghsoudi & Haririan, 2013). It can also equip learners with an effective means to check their own writing performance and identify their strengths and weaknesses in writing skill, which results in high quality writing performances and better grades (Silva, 2014).

However, the application of rubrics as a teaching tool has not been common in the context of high schools in Vietnam, and learners are assumed to learn writing skills through imitating and manipulating models provided by the teacher. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the extent to which rubric instruction enhances learners' writing performance and to investigate learners' perceptions of this instructional tool. It attempted to find out the answers to the two following questions:

1) To what extent does using instructional rubrics enhance students' English writing performance?
2) What are students' perceptions of the use of rubrics in English writing practice?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rubrics

According to Popham (1997), a rubric is a scoring guide, or a set of criteria, which is used as a means of standardizing the assessment of students' compositions. In the definition of Moskal (2000), *"rubrics are descriptive scoring schemes that are developed by teachers or other evaluators to guide the analysis of the products or process of students' efforts"* (p.22). Correspondingly, rubrics are regarded by Mertler (2001) as scoring guides with criteria for particular predicted performance, which are employed to grade students' work or assess performance. In this manner, rubrics are often presented in table format, typically

encompassing four essential features (Stevens & Levi, 2013). The first feature is a description of the task which students are required to perform; the second is a scale (and scoring) describing achievement levels (e.g., exceed expectation, meets expectation, doesn't meet expectation); the third one is evaluative criteria (i.e., the components/ dimensions students are to attend to in fulfilling the work); and the fourth feature is quality definitions (or performance descriptor) for those criteria at specific achievement levels.

As Turley and Gallaghers (2008) stated, rubrics at the outset were only tools for administrators and investigators to evaluate and demonstrate the efficiency of a school system for the purpose of making comparisons and rankings among schools in a country without informing the students (Arter, 2000; Turley & Gallaghers, 2008). Nevertheless, when the 'process approach' method was more commonly applied in the writing class, rubrics gradually became a useful device to give students feedback on their writing products compared to the criteria as well as shed light on what they can do to enhance their writing skill. In other words, students can use the description of what is expected at each level or category in a scoring rubric to improve their future performance. The strong link between teaching writing skill and the use of rubrics is highlighted by Andrade (2000) – *"rubrics are also teaching tools that support student learning and the development of sophisticated thinking skills"* (p.13). Thus, not only teachers can use rubrics when marking, but students can use these ones when planning their work as well (Dawson, 2015).

Rubrics can be classified as holistic and analytic (Brookhart, 2013). Holistic rubrics are those which describe the work by taking all things into account at once, thus helping to establish an overall evaluation about the quality of the work, whereas analytic rubrics depict the work on each individual criterion. One example for holistic rubrics is the terms and grades regularly used at colleges and universities (e.g., A represents "excellent"; B – "good", while F means "failed"). It can be seen that this weighted judgement by the assessor considers all the criteria simultaneously; hence, holistic. Rather than an integrated judgement as in holistic rubrics, the rating scale in an analytic rubric is applied to various dimensions or components of the product or process separately. This way of assessing allows a careful interpretation of the work; that means the work could be excellent on one dimension, but on one or more others it might be average or poor. Accordingly, if teachers need to evaluate students' work in detail and give them specific feedback on their performance as well, an analytic rubric seems a better choice. A popular example for analytic rubrics is those used by instructors to grade students' writing performance in terms of organisation, content or ideas, mechanics (i.e., spelling, punctuation, and grammar), and style (Brown, Irving & Keegan, 2014).

In 1981, Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey constructed the first analytic scoring rubric – the English as a Second Language (ESL) Composition Profile – with five different grading aspects of writing quality, each with a different weight: content (30 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points), and mechanics (5 points). Other common analytic scales were the Test in English for Educational Purposes designed by Weir (1990) and the Michigan Writing Assessment

Scoring Guide by Hamp-Lyons (1991). Another preferred analytic rubric was designed based on Bachman and Pamer's (1996) model of communicative language ability. In these authors' approach, writing ability is characterized with *knowledge schemata* (knowledge of the topic), *strategic competence* (strategies for content development), *rhetorical knowledge* (strategies for producing cohesive supporting arguments), *grammatical competence*, and *knowledge of vocabulary and register*. This knowledge also informs their analytic scoring rubric. The current study employed the notion of Bachman and Pamer's (1996) model; hence, the study participants' writing assignments were assessed based on these five characteristics.

According to Mertler (2001) (citing Airasian, 2000 & 2001), *"prior to designing a specific rubric, a teacher must decide whether the performance or product will be scored holistically or analytically"* (p.2). That means before constructing a rubric, teachers should determine how they would like the results to be interpreted. In case they desire to see a general, summative score, a holistic rubric is suitable. Meanwhile, if formative feedback is required, an analytic rubric, which can help accumulate a profile of particular student strengths and weaknesses, is more desirable. More importantly, the process of teaching writing in the EFL setting has recently been the combination of assessment and instruction and rubrics have been considered quite efficient tools for this purpose (Turgut & Kayaoğlu, 2015). The following section will discuss the use of rubrics as an instructional tool in teaching writing.

2.2. Benefits of instructional rubrics in writing classrooms

Most EFL students find writing skills challenging and usually face difficulties in learning writing. According to Blankenship and Wilson (2009), as writing skills develop gradually, EFL students should be given opportunities to practice writing, receive feedback, and rewrite so that they can enhance the skills as well as understand the writing material. Also, the role of a teacher in writing classes has changed significantly over the years – he/she is now being required to not only simply evaluate his/her students' writing but also communicate with them about what needs to improve in order to help them boost their performance and increase their comprehension of the material. Rubrics, as Andrade (2000) comments, can help the teacher meet this requirement because these tools are designed with the aim of supporting students' understanding of mechanical and material expectations before doing their writing assignments. In fact, a number of researchers agree that through writing rubrics EFL students can comprehend key points to achieve course and program goals (Mansilla *et al.*, 2009; Teater, 2011; Peterson & Gustafson, 2013). The literature on the use of rubrics in writing classes indicates four major benefits, including the increase of assessment objectivity, peer and self-assessment, saved time, and the use of rubrics as instructional tools (Goodrich, 1997; Andrade, 2000; Moskal, 2000; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). Firstly, objectivity in assessing students' work is increased when employing rubrics. Goodrich (1997) specifies that by using rubrics teachers can justify grades and make the students apprehend the expectations of the assignments, thus agreeing with the grades given by their teachers. Besides, Andrade (2000) and Moskal

(2000) affirm that the subjectivity in grading students' assignment can be reduced and become more objective if the teacher designs a pre-defined scheme with concise and easy-to-understand characteristics for the evaluation process. Furthermore, according to Jonsson and Svingby (2007), rubrics are supposed not only to help foster the assessment objectivity but to augment the reliability of scoring across students' assignments and among different raters as well. Accordingly, rubrics can provide higher degree of objectivity, fairness and consistency.

The second benefit of rubric practice in writing classes is its support in self- and peer-assessment (Goodrich, 1997; Wolf & Stevens, 2007; Reddy & Andrade, 2010; Lovorn & Rezaei, 2011; Stevens & Levi, 2013). According to these researchers, when students get involved in the assessment process and are informed about the expectations of the course and program, they will be increasingly able to pinpoint and resolve problems in their own and their peers' work, resulting in becoming better writers. In other words, a rubric's scales, criteria and specific questions which students use to evaluate their own or others' assignments strongly impact the enhancement of work quality. In addition, Andrade (2000) states that students who use rubrics can gain more comprehension of the content and seem to internalize the criteria as well as be able to exploit these in generating new material even when they don't have the criteria in front of them. In fact, it is advised that teachers share the rubrics with students and make them apply the criteria into their writing assignments because by doing so students will write better essays and are also included into self-assessment process (Soles, 2001).

The third benefit is that rubrics save time when grading (Goodrich, 1997; Stevens & Levi, 2013). According to Stevens and Levi (2013), although the first few rubrics require substantial time constructing, it is worth doing so because when used, rubrics will reduce grading time as well as offer students' substantive feedback, and can also impact teachers' classroom preparation and instruction. The authors explain that when teachers first design rubrics, they have to concentrate on the content of the material and the teaching techniques; in other words, they will focus on depicting clear expectations, and giving significant assignments and helpful feedback. This reflection is then brought into classroom teaching, which helps teachers communicate not only their knowledge and expectations for each assignment but also what students are expected to achieve through completing all the assigned work. Moreover, Goodrich (1997) proclaims that this benefit of rubrics results from their characteristic that they reduce the uncertainty and their detailed descriptions for achievement levels allow the teacher simply circling whatever categories applied instead of writing out long comments. More than this, the consequence of saving time grading is students can receive the grades and comments the very next class period while their memory of the assignment is still fresh, and so more learning will be likely to happen (Stevens & Levi, 2013).

Finally, rubrics have recently been acknowledged to serve the purpose of learning in addition to that of assessment (Andrade, 2000; Moskal, 2000; Andrade & Saddler, 2004). As confirmed in Andrade and Saddler's (2004) study, rubrics can increase students' metacognition and encourage them to think critically about the quality of their

assignments; thereby, students are able to set goals for their work. Besides, together with the benefit of fostering content learning as previously mentioned, instructional rubrics help develop students' writing skills as well as critical thinking skills (Andrade, 2000). Obviously, rubrics are efficient in assessing students' work, teaching in class and enhancing student learning because rubrics help teachers spend less time grading, be more aware of teaching styles and methods, clearly convey their objectives and expectations and provide timely, informative feedbacks to students, which effectively supports the process of studying writing skills. Hence, it can be concluded that rubrics are not just simply an assessment tool but a potential instructional tool as well.

To put it briefly, instructional rubrics are easy-to-use tools, which allow teachers to clarify their expectations and instructional purposes, to provide constructive feedback to students as well as support students' learning and develop their writing skills and self-regulation. In the present study, both holistic and analytic rubrics are constructed based on Bachman and Pamer's (1996) model of communicative language ability and used as instructional tools in writing classrooms.

2.3. Implementation of instructional rubrics in writing classrooms

Research has shown that rubrics have been regularly used in the instruction of writing and have had great effects on learners' writing performance (Turgut & Kayaoğlu, 2015; Becker, 2016; Wang, 2016; Mahmoudi & Buğra, 2020; Trinh, 2020).

In their quasi-experimental research, Turgut and Kayaoğlu (2015) explored the effect of using instructional rubrics on students' writing performance in English as a foreign language. Sixteen students in the experimental group were asked to use a rubric which contained a clear set of criteria for good writing to write two different essays while twenty-two students in the control group were required to write the same essay types without rubrics. The results revealed that the experimental group outstripped the control group in essay writing as they could produce better writing pieces, and that with the help of rubrics while writing students could realize the qualities of good writing and as such they could select appropriate strategies to achieve these in their own products. Turgut and Kayaoğlu (2015) concluded that students *would be able to produce better pieces of writing in English when the teaching approach emphasized writing as a process rather than writing as a product after having internalized the rubric"* (p. 56). Wang (2016) conducted their study to examine students' perceptions of rubric use in self-assessment in EFL context and the factors controlling its effectiveness. The study was designed as a classroom-based inquiry with the participation of eighty Chinese university students. The research instruments included reflective journals and six case study informants' retrospective interviews. The findings showed that the participants believed in the contributions of rubrics to increasing their self-regulation, self-monitoring and self-reflection. Besides, the students informed that both within-rubric and rubric-user factors did have impacts on the efficacy of rubrics in their self-assessment.

Also in 2016, Becker carried out a classroom-based study with the pre-/post-test, control-group design to determine whether or not developing and/or applying a rubric

could impact writing performance of ninety-six ESL adult learners of an intensive English program in the United States. The participants were divided into four groups – the first group created a holistic rubric, the second practiced scoring with the rubric, whereas the third one only saw the rubric, and the last group (the control group) was totally uninformed about the rubric. They all had to complete the pre- and post- summary writing tasks. It was displayed in the results that the students who designed and/or applied the holistic scoring rubrics were superior to the other two groups in the post-writing test. Becker (2016) then suggested that *"the development and use of the scoring rubric served as a learning opportunity whereby students could practice metacognition"*, and they could have *"a better sense of the expectations for their summary writing, which resulted in their higher quality writing products"* (p.20).

Trinh's (2020) action research investigated the relationship between the use of scoring rubrics and improvement in writing skills of 150 English-majored first-year students in University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University. The author had the students involve in creating the rubric and later use it while writing and assess their own products. Trinh (2020) concluded that the use of rubric was an effective way to improve students' writing grades as well as reduce the number of mistakes in their essays. In the same year, Mahmoudi and Buğra carried out a study aiming at analyzing the correlation between ESL students' writing performance, rubric application and teacher face-to-face feedback. Thirty-six students from the preparatory school participated in the study, in which students learned writing skills with the support of ESL Writing Grading Rubric and received teacher face-to-face feedback to their work. The data were collected through the open-ended questionnaire and focused group interview. Qualitative analyses of the results indicated that the participants' writing performance was enhanced through the use of rubric and teacher face-to-face feedback. Mahmoudi and Buğra (2020) concluded that with their raising awareness about the rubric, students could evaluate their own assignments, thereby having high quality products and getting better grades as well as give feedback to their peers' work.

Current literature reveals positive effects of using instructional rubrics on learners' writing ability. The results of the aforementioned studies offer evidence to support the notion that teaching writing skills with the aid of rubrics could be potentially beneficial to English-majored students in the context of Vietnamese education. However, although there has been great concern about teaching English writing in every level of education in Vietnam, there have been very few studies on the implementation of rubrics to improve students' writing ability, especially in high school contexts. For these reasons, the researcher conducted this action research to gain insights into the impact of instructional rubrics on high school students' writing performance.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Design

This study was classroom action research with a one-group pre-test and post-test design. During the study, the implementation of instructional rubrics – the independent variable – was monitored and participants' writing performance – the dependent variable – was measured. After the termination of the experimental study, learners' responses to a questionnaire with multi-choice items and one open-ended question were collected to get insights into participants' perceptions of using holistic and analytic rubrics when writing.

3.2 Participants

The participants in the study were thirty English major students of Grade 11 in a high school in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. This was a convenience sample because they were in the class where the researcher did his practicum. Their ages ranged from 16 to 17.

By the time of conducting the research, all of the students had learnt English from seven to ten years, and were studying the new English textbook of the MOET published by Vietnam Education Publishing House. In the book, there are two volumes with five units each. Each unit consists of nine sessions which are Getting Started, Language, Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, Communication and Culture, Looking back and Project. After the first three units and the last two units of each volume, there is a review. The researcher began to work with the students from the Writing part of unit 7 in volume 2.

3.3 Research instruments

The research instruments included two instructional rubrics (holistic and analytic), writing assignments as a pre-test and two post-tests, and a questionnaire.

- The instructional rubrics

    The research employed two rubrics – a holistic rubric and an analytic rubric. The holistic rubric was a five-point scale that offered a general description for typical writing performance at each point, comprising task fulfillment *(knowledge schemata)*, organization *(strategic competence)*, grammar *(grammatical competence)*, vocabulary *(knowledge of vocabulary and register)*, and coherence/cohesion *(rhetorical knowledge)*.

The analytic rubric also contained a five-point scale with the same five writing grading domains as the holistic rubric. However, within each domain, there were several well-defined standards of performance points that the students could clearly understand and follow while writing the paragraphs.

- Scripts and Writing tasks

    The scripts consisted of paragraphs written by the 30 participants in response to three independent, timed writing tasks. The first task was done before the treatment; that meant, the students wrote the paragraph without any rubrics. The second task was

completed with the holistic rubric while the third one was done with the analytic rubric. The task prompts to the paragraphs were as follows:

1) Write a paragraph (130-150 words) to describe at least three characteristics of Vietnamese people. Use evidence to support your ideas.

2) Write a descriptive paragraph (130-150 words) to portray at least three characteristics of a successful student in Vietnamese academic contexts. Use evidence to support your ideas.

3) Write a descriptive paragraph (130-150 words) to portray at least three advantages of using electronic devices in learning. Use reasons or examples to support your ideas.

- The questionnaire

The questionnaire was bilingually designed to avoid the students' misunderstanding. There were 34 items which were divided into three sections: (1) The first section included the participants' personal information; (2) the second section elicited the students' *learning interest* with five statements following Likert scale of five levels (from Not at all interested to Extremely interested) and their *perceptions of writing* with 4 statements on the five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree); (3) the last section consisted of 5 clusters, which asked students to report their *satisfaction about analytic rubric, satisfaction about holistic rubric, perceptions of general improvements, perceptions of grades and comments from the teacher* (also based on five-point Likert Scale) and an *open-ended question* to allow the respondents to state their determination in using rubrics while writing in the future and the reasons for it.

3.3 Intervention program

The aim of using rubrics was to enhance participants' writing ability. Specifically, the intervention program provided participants with types of rubrics and guidance to apply them while writing. After the introduction to the rubric, the students were given the writing task and fulfilled it independently. The total mark for each task was 10. When receiving their own papers already rated by the teacher, the students were asked to analyze their products using the rubrics to gain more insights into their writing performance. The treatment took place in three 45-minute sessions in three weeks. Following was the instruction procedure:

Session 1: The researcher worked with the treatment group on the writing part of unit 7 in the textbook. The lesson plan of this class was designed exactly in accordance with the stages in the textbook. The students were asked to write a paragraph (130-150 words) to describe at least three characteristics of Vietnamese people. In this session the participants were not yet introduced grading rubrics. The researcher then graded them and used the grades as pre-test results.

Session 2: The next writing class was the *Culture* part of unit 7. This session was carried out with the second lesson plan using the holistic rubric. This lesson's final product was a paragraph of 130-150 words to describe at least three features of a good

student in Vietnamese academic contexts. The graded product was the data for the first post test.

Session 3: The second post test results were gathered in the last writing class which was the writing part of unit 8. The test was a writing of 130-150-word paragraph to describe at least three advantages of using electronic devices in learning. This session follows the lesson plan with the analytic rubric.

After the termination of the experiment, the questionnaire was administered to the participants. The whole process of teacher explaining and student completing the questionnaire took 30 minutes. All the data from the writing tests' grades and the questionnaire were added into the Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 18 for analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The extent to which using instructional rubrics enhances learners' writing performance

The data gained from the pre-test and post-tests of 30 learner participants were subjected to SPSS program, version 18 to find out the answer to the first research question. First, the Descriptive Statistics Test was run to gain results of the participants' performance before and after the study. Next, the Paired-Sample t-Tests were used to check for the mean difference in participants' before and after the study. The results of these tests are reported as follows.

4.1.1. The effect of using holistic rubrics

Table 1: Participants' performance before and after holistic rubric instruction

Performance	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	30	4.733	1.7207	.3142
Post-test H		7.233	1.3817	.2523

It is shown in Table 1 that the learners writing performance changes after the implication of the holistic rubric. The mean score of participants' performance after the second session (MpostH = 7.233) is higher than that of the same participants before the study (Mpre = 4.733). The mean difference (t = -8.601, df = 29, p = .000) is statistically significant. The result indicates that there is a significant change in participants' performance. It can be concluded that with the use of holistic rubrics, learner participants' writing performance has been significantly improved.

4.1.2. The effect of using analytic rubrics

Table 2: Participants' performance before and after analytic rubric instruction

Performance	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	30	4.733	1.7207	.3142
Post-test A		7.367	.9994	.1825

Tables 2 reveals that there is an increase in the participants' performance with the application of analytic rubrics while writing. To be detailed, using the rubrics while writing the paragraph, the students gain higher mean scores (MpostA = 7.367) compared to their own results in the pre-test (Mpre = 4.733). Besides, the mean difference (t = -9.093, df = 29, p = .000) indicates a statistically significant difference between the scores in the pre-test and the post-test. In conclusion, using analytic rubrics can make positive changes to students' writing skill.

Generally, the results of the study showed that using rubrics (both holistic and analytic types) was effective in improving learners' ability to write. In accordance with the present result, previous studies demonstrated that learner's writing skill can be enhanced through the use of rubrics (Silva, 2014; Turgut & Kayaoğlu, 2015; Becker, 2016). An explanation for this is that a grading rubric sets mutual criteria for both teachers and students. In other words, the rubrics helped the researcher teacher explicitly explain the task requirements and his instructional objectives as well as provide constructive feedback to the students (Andrade, 2000; Moskal, 2000; Andrade & Saddler, 2004). Thus, with a checklist of the expected outcomes from the teacher, the participants were able to evaluate the quality of their work, thus performing better by using those descriptions as goals to achieve.

4.2 Learners' perceptions

In order to gain more insights into the implementation of the use of rubrics in writing classes, the learner participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire about their feelings of the intervention program. Thirty questionnaires were collected and analyzed. The reliability of this questionnaire was 0.939 by using the Cronbach Alpha in SPSS program, version 18. The perceptions of the students were as follows.

4.2.1. Students' learning interests and perceptions of writing

First of all, the participants' interests in learning English and the four skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking (Questions 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 respectively) were explored. Table 3 illustrates the result.

Table 3: Students' learning interests after the experiment

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q2.1	30	2	5	3.87	.819
Q2.2	30	2	5	3.90	.803
Q2.3	30	2	5	3.37	.809
Q2.4	30	2	5	3.53	.776
Q2.5	30	1	5	3.83	.986
Valid N (listwise)	30				

As can be seen, the means scores for all items are above 3.0, which means above average. In other words, the respondents show rather high interest in learning English (M = 3.87) as well as in all skills. Specifically, reading is ranked the most interested with the mean score of 3.90 and speaking the second (M = 3.83). This finding is quite interesting because reading is a receptive skill while speaking, a productive skill. The explanation might be that students find it easy to apply their competence in grammar and vocabulary in reading comprehension and in conveying their thoughts. Meanwhile, the other two skills – listening and writing – receive less interest (M = 3.53, M = 3.37, respectively). It should be mentioned that despite trialling rubrics while writing, the students still are not attracted in learning this skill. This could be explained by the fact that this experiment offers students first-time experience with using this tool. Moreover, there are only two trials of using rubrics. Therefore, it might be that students are not getting used to rubrics and cannot exploit them to the best, resulting in writing difficulties still remaining and thus students' preference being unchanged.

Table 4: Students' perceptions of writing after the experiment

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q3.1	30	3	5	4.07	.640
Q3.2	30	3	5	4.00	.525
Q3.3	30	3	5	3.73	.828
Q3.4	30	2	5	3.40	.675
Valid N (listwise)	30				

The students accept that writing plays an important role in English learning (M = 4.07) and requires their creativity while doing the tasks (M = 3.73). It is worth for teachers noticing this idea to design creative writing tasks in their lessons though students of grade 11 are only at intermediate proficiency level and have to work with familiar topics. However, the participants still perceive writing as a difficult skill to study (M = 4.00). The reason may lie in the requirement of writing – assuring the five characteristics of writing ability: *knowledge schemata* (knowledge of the topic), *strategic competence* (strategies for content development), *rhetorical knowledge* (strategies for producing cohesive supporting arguments), *grammatical competence*, and *knowledge of vocabulary and register* (Bachman & Pamer, 1996) that hinders them from viewing writing as an easy skill. It should also be noted that in spite of being introduced to rubrics students still find difficulties in understanding the assessment criteria before writing (M = 3.40). This result suggests

teachers concentrate more on clarifying the criteria and give clear descriptions for each and every feature of a rubric (Mertler, 2001).

### 4.2.2. Students' perceptions on using rubrics
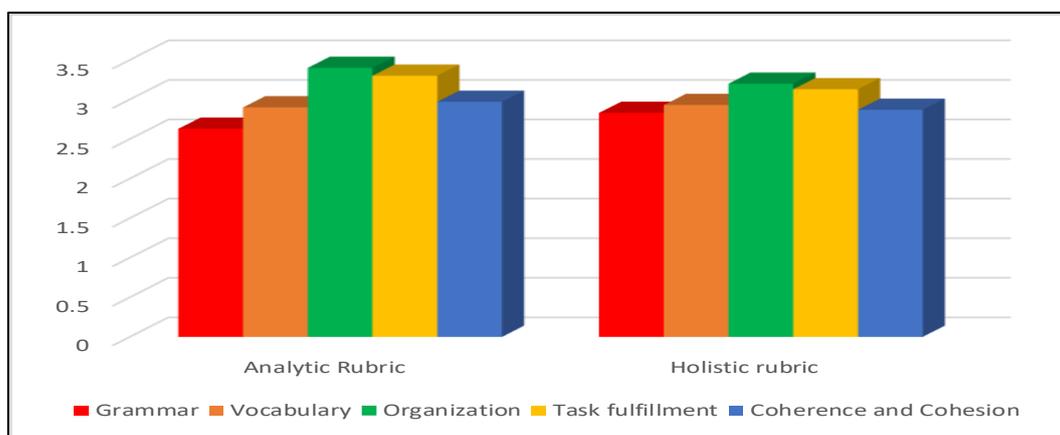
Figure 1: Students' perceptions on using rubrics after the treatment

Figure 1 reveals that *organization* gains the highest mean scores in both types (M=3.40 for analytic rubric, and M=3.20 for holistic one). This means that with a detailed description of a paragraph organization, rubrics are useful to the students. In addition, students consider *task fulfillment* criteria as the second best benefit offered by rubrics. Obviously, the instructional rubrics guide students to produce texts that have essential components of a paragraph and meet the topic requirements, all of which cannot be achieved in the pre-test. However, the participants report their disagreement about the usefulness of both rubric types in terms of *grammar, vocabulary* and *coherence/cohesion*. Actually, all the three criteria receive the mean scores below 3.0, which is below average. The reason for this may be that though the students know what criteria they have to meet, it is still hard for them to respond due to their lack of linguistic competence and performance as well.

4.2.3. Students' satisfaction of using rubric

Table 5: Students' satisfaction of using rubric

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q4.1	30	1	5	3.67	.844
Q4.2	30	1	5	3.77	.858
Q4.3	30	1	5	3.63	.809
Valid N (listwise)	30				

Questions 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 aimed to discover whether students were satisfied with the use of rubrics or not. As can be seen from Table 5, students are quite contented with the overall process of using rubric in learning (M=3.67, SD=0.844). In regard to each type of rubrics, analytic rubrics seemed to satisfy the students more than holistic rubrics did (M=3.77, M=3.63, respectively). A possible reason for such preference is that analytic

rubrics provide students with a detailed evaluation and specific feedback on their performance; therefore, they can recognize their strengths and weaknesses, which results in the improvement of writing skills (Brookhart, 2013; Turgut & Kayaoğlu, 2015).

As can be seen from Figure 2, the students are quite satisfied with their improvements in writing with all the mean scores above 3.0. Firstly, the general satisfaction towards the overall improvements after using rubrics is positive (M=3.60). To be more precise, students report that when using rubrics, they can improve their writing work in terms of task fulfilment (M=3.57) and paragraph organization (M=3.53). Meanwhile, the participants do not highly value the usefulness of rubrics in improving their vocabulary (M=3.33), grammar, and coherence/cohesion (M=3.27, both). The less satisfaction about grammar development was inconsistent with the result of Trinh's (2020) which indicated that using rubrics helped increase her participants' grammar. Based on the finding, it is indispensable that besides introducing rubrics, teachers provide students with vocabulary and structures necessary for their writing tasks.
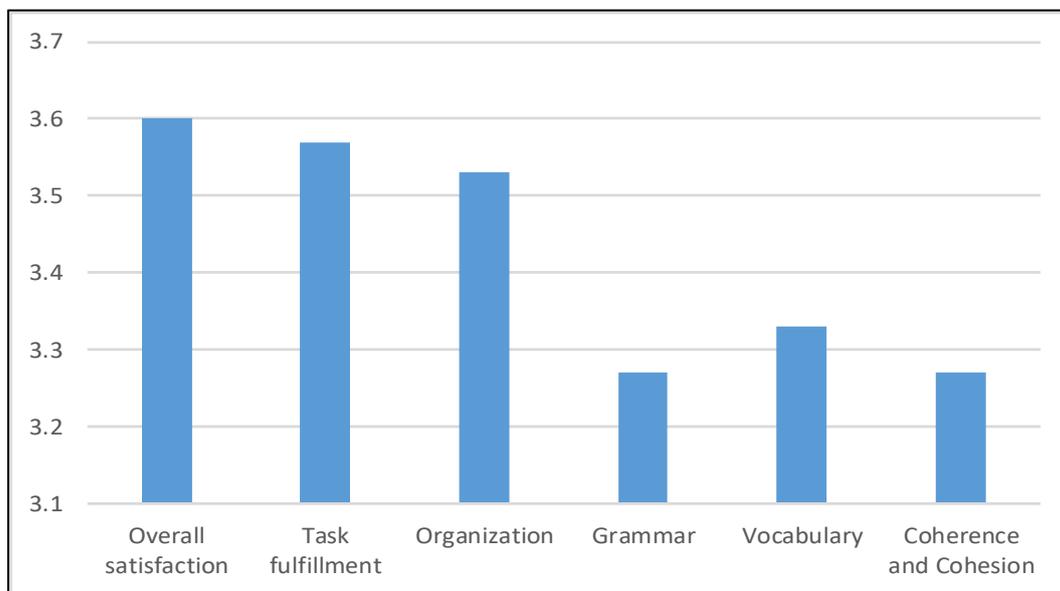
Figure 2: Students' satisfaction of the improvements after using rubrics

4.2.4. Students' confirmation of using rubrics after the experiment

The last item in the questionnaire is an open-ended question to identify whether students would use rubrics after the termination of this research. The item was entered into SPSS program by associating *'Yes'* with item 5.1 and *'No'* with item 5.2. By using the sum equation, the research was able to find the number of students continued to use rubrics afterwards.

As reported, twenty-six out of the thirty participants (86,6%) chose to continue to use rubrics after the experiment while the remaining four students (13,4%) chose not to. Two of those who opposed rubric use gave no comments while the other two stated two reasons which were the complexity of rubrics and not being part of the group that could use rubrics. These reasons were understandable because it took more than just reading

skills to understand a set of criteria and then apply it. Indeed, as the experiment took only three weeks, which was a very short time, the students were less likely to be able to internalize the rubrics to successfully use them while writing (Turgut & Kayaoğlu, 2015). Moreover, students probably had their own preferences in learning, so this instructional tool might not be their favorites.

Concerning the *'yes group'*, most of these students perceived that rubrics were useful and helped them improve their writing ability. They explained that rubrics helped reduce their habit of writing the task in Vietnamese and then translated it into English. Moreover, the respondents stated that thanks to the two criteria: *organization* and *task fulfillment*, their assignments could meet the teacher's expectations and requirements for the task, and they themselves knew how to plan and organize the paragraph as well as stay on the topic. The most impressive point was that the participants were able to use such technical terms appearing in the rubrics as 'organization' and 'task fulfillment', which could be considered as evidence for their internalization of the rubric criteria and it is hoped that they could apply these criteria while practice writing in the future as Andrade (2000) and Turgut and Kayaoğlu (2015) emphasized. These findings were in line with those of Silva (2014) and Becker (2016) in which students when responding to interview questions could mention the terms or criteria used in the rubric. By the same token, the students in the current study expressed that the description of rubrics was their goals to strike for better writing. In addition, the students indicated that although the criteria of grammar and vocabulary did not directly affect their improvements in these aspects, these criteria still kept them more cautious in writing. More importantly, the participants' self-monitoring and self-confidence in writing practice and writing ability were reported to be enhanced when they used rubrics when writing. This result was congruent with that of Wang (2016).

In short, rubrics could help improve students' writing skill. Furthermore, most of the students had positive perceptions of the use of rubrics in writing classes as well as satisfaction of their improvements after the experiment.

5. Recommendations

The results of the study raise important recommendations for pedagogical actions as follows.

Firstly, teachers should raise learners' awareness of the importance of focusing on the program's and teachers' requirements for their writing work. In other words, teachers should train learners to apply writing standards when doing their writing tasks. The habit of thinking and writing the task in Vietnamese and made an English translation version later should be discouraged and replaced with using writing criteria. Since rubrics list out the criteria by which student's work will be assessed, through the use of rubrics students are likely to form their self-regulated learning. As Allen (2014) states, by delivering rubrics to students during instructional stages, the students can "monitor" themselves. With efficient training, students will be able to self-assess their own work.

Allen also points out that teachers should not be the only one creating rubrics. Therefore, after a considerable amount of time getting used to using teacher-designed rubrics to assess some products, students should be encouraged to create their own version of rubrics. Nevertheless, it is advisable that students should know the expectations from their teachers prior to their rubric design. In a study by Andrade (2000), students indicated that their chances of being able to self-assess relied greatly on what teachers expected them to perform. In other words, teachers should be mindful when asking students to self-assess.

Another way to use instructional rubrics is to facilitate collaborative learning. Allen (2014) suggested that teachers should hold activities in which students would exchange their works and give feedbacks for further improvement. Assessment has never been an easy task even for teachers. For this reason, teachers should bear in mind that students will need a great deal of assistance when it comes to peer-assessment. Thus, creating rubrics as guidance for students to assess each other's work would be a good idea. There have been many studies of which the participants had improvements in their writing performance with peer-assessment. (Goodrich, 1997; Wolf & Stevens, 2007; Reddy & Andrade, 2010; Lovorn & Rezaei, 2011; Stevens & Levi, 2013).

Finally, instructional rubrics should be widely used in teaching writing. It is clear that learners need frequent practice of using rubrics when writing so that they can take on the rubric criteria and as such they can get better writing performance. Besides, students should be promoted to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their own and peers' writing work, recognize the reasons for these weaknesses, and have discussions about possible improvements with their peers and their teachers. This will allow students to flourish a more visible individual voice in their writing attempt.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated the effectiveness of using rubrics to enhance high school students' writing skill. Based on the results from the three writing assignments (one pre-test and two post-tests) of 30 students from a high school in Can Tho city, Viet Nam, the data was entered into the SPSS program, version 18, to find out discrepancies concerning the results before and after the experiment. The findings revealed that the students gained better achievements in writing when applying rubrics (both holistic and analytic types). Also, the participants showed positive attitudes towards the use of rubrics in writing classrooms and reported an intention to use rubrics when writing in the future. Accordingly, by introducing the instructional rubrics to students, teachers can make positive changes in students' writing skill.

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