Chapter 11
Knowledge of Language in Rubric Design:
A Systemic Functional Linguistics Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Rubrics have become popular tools for assessment and instruction in higher education. However, language choice and rubric efficacy is a topic that has been largely overlooked in the literature and teacher professional development. Composing an effective rubric—particularly for instructional and formative contexts—is a complex task that requires teachers to think about the implications of their linguistic choices for students' awareness of what and how they learn. In this chapter, the author offers a review of current research and guidance on effective rubric language. Second, this chapter uses the theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to explain how SFL-informed training in rubric design can foreground language considerations to enhance teachers' capacities in effective rubric design. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that developing teachers' knowledge about language and in turn their academic and assessment literacy, is key to developing both types of literacy in students.

INTRODUCTION

Rubrics are possibly the most common means of communicating assessment expectations and criteria to students (Balan & Jönsson, 2018). The term "rubric" is often used to refer to any grading criteria. In this chapter, the term rubric refers more narrowly to a specific assessment tool presented as a matrix, which provides scaled levels of achievement for a set of assessment criteria with descriptions of various levels of the quality of performance (Allen & Tanner, 2006). This type of rubric is known as an analytic rubric (Dawson, 2017). Rubrics are used across all levels of teaching for both summative and formative

purposes (Panadero & Jönsson, 2020) and are considered valuable assessment tools and instructional tools (Jönsson & Panadero, 2017; Reddy & Andrade, 2010). By making the purpose of the task, the criteria, and performance expectations more explicit, rubrics enhance the transparency of assessment (Panadero & Jönsson, 2013), and develop students' abilities in self-assessment and evaluative judgement (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Rubrics therefore play a key role in developing students' understanding of the process of assessment, its purpose, how it fits into their learning trajectory, and in developing their ability to judge their own work and identify means of improvement—known as assessment literacy (Chan & Luo, 2021b). Rubrics have found widespread support amongst teachers because they are a suitable vehicle for coordinating grading and comments between assessors, a time-efficient means of grading, and a sustainable and useful platform for providing feedback (Chan & Luo, 2021a).

Despite these benefits, rubrics' ability to enhance transparency of assessment has been questioned. It has been argued that teachers often take transparency for granted as students have limited understanding of rubric language, even describing it as a confusing, and thus perceive rubrics to be less helpful in clarifying aspects of assessment than teachers do (Bell et al., 2013; Fang & Wang, 2011; Li & Lindsey, 2015). Rubrics may not guarantee transparency because criteria remain opaque and valued knowledge remains implicit (Tierney & Simon, 2004). Therefore, rubrics may condition students to comply with stated criteria and standards without developing their autonomy and skills in evaluative judgement (Torrance, 2007). While the factors contributing to the efficacy of rubrics have been a topic of much research (see Panadero and Jönsson (2013, 2020) for a review), the accessibility of rubric language has emerged as a key consideration in the utility of rubrics as assessment and instructional tools (Andrade, 2001; Li & Lindsey, 2015). Empirical studies concur that rubrics can provide numerous benefits to students and staff in both assessment and supporting teaching and learning, provided they use appropriate language (Brookhart & Chen, 2015; Panadero & Jönsson, 2013, 2020). However, teachers often receive limited training and support in language and rubric development. Developing effective rubrics for assessment and instruction purposes requires that teachers understand pedagogy and assessment in their subject as well as the impact of their language choices for the users and utility of the rubric. Therefore, it is important that we support the development of teachers' knowledge of language via training and professional development.

This chapter pursues two objectives. First, an overview of current research and guidance on effective rubric language is offered. This guidance is grouped into four themes: articulating explicit criteria, pitfalls of evaluative language, precise definitions of quality and pitfalls in the pursuit of objectivity. In each theme the implications for rubric design and effectiveness are explored. Second, this chapter uses the theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to explain how SFL-informed training in rubric design can foreground language considerations to enhance teachers' capacities in effective rubric design. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that developing teachers' knowledge about language and their academic and assessment literacy is key to developing both types of literacy in students. SFL offers an actionable means of achieving these outcomes. Rubric developers might take a more informed approach to word choice in the rubrics they construct, and institutional policy makers might afford language greater prominence in rubric design training and guidance.

BACKGROUND

Rubrics are often used as instruction and assessment tools in higher education (Dawson, 2017; Popham, 1997). Internationally, a changing assessment context and increasing accountability and surveillance has led to the rise of an audit culture (Edwards, 2020). Teachers are commonly required to share assessments and assessment tools such as rubrics with various stakeholders for quality assurance purposes. Simultaneously, institutional drives to move away from norm referenced tasks and improve the transparency of assessment standards and student attainment relative to learning outcomes have fueled the adoption of rubrics (Sadler, 2005) to the extent that many universities encourage or even mandate their use (Dawson, 2017). These factors have driven a need for educators to improve their assessment knowledge and abilities to design assessment tools that effectively assess and support learning. A growing body of research supports the benefits of rubrics to students and teachers (Brookhart, 2018; Jönsson & Svingby, 2007; Panadero & Jönsson, 2020; Reddy & Andrade, 2010). For example, teachers may use rubrics to provide detailed guidance on how, and on what bases, judgements about the quality of student performance will be made and how appropriate grades will be assigned (Sadler, 2005). Therefore, rubrics may help the teacher to meet their responsibility of enhancing transparency in outlining criteria openly and explicitly for the student. Transparency of criteria and assessment requirements can positively influence student learning, self-evaluation, self-regulation and improve performance. From a teacher perspective, rubrics can contribute to quality assurance aspects of assessment like reliability (Jönsson & Svingby, 2007). However, simple implementations of rubrics like just handing a rubric to students is not enough to guarantee effectiveness and teachers need training on the appropriate design, implementation, and use of rubrics (Panadero & Jönsson, 2020). Teachers require high levels of assessment literacy to effectively design and implement rubrics. Given the ubiquity of simple rubric implementations, it is important to unearth areas in which teachers need training and explore the consequences if this training is missing.

Assessment literacy is difficult to define because "the concept is still in its infancy in higher education and poorly understood" (Medland, 2019, p. 570). From a sociocultural perspective, assessment literacy is viewed as a dynamic context dependent social practice in which teachers articulate and negotiate classroom and cultural knowledges among themselves and with learners to initiate, develop and practice assessment designed to achieve the learning goals of students (Willis et al., 2013). Assessment-literate teachers must be competent to develop high quality assessments and assessment rubrics (Popham, 2009; Sadler, 1998). Yet, current training and development initiatives do not sufficiently prepare teachers for these tasks. Many members of faculty begin teaching as doctoral students, where specific training in assessment is limited, if provided at all, and opportunities for systematic professional development opportunities or guided reflection are lacking (Austin, 2002). A perception of inadequate training and preparation reverberates up the levels of academic progression, as faculty assessment leaders (Gordon & Smith, 2021) and program evaluators (Martens, 2018) also cite a dearth of formal training and preparation around assessment tools and tasks. In addition, issues of language are mostly invisible in higher education and assessment discourse (Bond, 2020; Grainger, 2021).

In the rare cases that language is considered relative to rubric design, emphasis is placed on using 'simplified' (Li & Lindsey, 2015) descriptive language to explicitly describe levels of quality or performance (e.g., Grainger & Weir, 2020), as opposed to evaluative language (e.g., excellent, poor) (e.g., Brookhart, 2018; Wiggins, 1998) which conveys a final and irreversible judgement and offers no indication for improvement. In a review of studies examining the quality and effectiveness of rubrics, Brookhart and Chen (2015, p. 343) define descriptive rubrics as "a coherent set of criteria for students' work that

includes descriptions of levels of performance quality on the criteria". In other words, a descriptive rubric is characterized by the presence of descriptions of what levels of performance might look like across a continuum of quality, however the authors offer no further discussion of how performance might be described. Without discussion of effective rubric language and its implications, such guidance may not be sufficient for most teaching staff in higher education, who are subject specialists with limited training in rubric development (Edwards, 2020), and presumably even less in linguistics.

Designing a rubric is largely a linguistic process—a complex negotiated communicative endeavor—intended to code and convey assessment expectations. Yet choosing the right words is one of the most challenging aspects of rubric design (Moni et al., 2005; Tierney & Simon, 2004). To design effective rubrics, teachers must understand how language works in a rubric to aid users in meeting the complexities of understanding, delivering, and evaluating assessment, and should also understand how academic language is learned. For teachers to design effective rubrics they require a high level of academic literacy, which refers to "the ability to communicate effectively in an academic discourse community" (Wingate, 2015, p. 6). Within a discourse community, academic literacy is a multidimensional concept which involves:

(1) an understanding of the discipline's epistemology – the ways in which subject knowledge is created and communicated, (2) an understanding of the sociological context, i.e., the status of the participants and the purpose of the interactions occurring in the community, and (3) a command of the conventions and norms that regulate these interactions. (Wingate, 2015, p. 7)

The relationship between language, assessment literacy and academic literacy is therefore complex and multifaceted. Knowledge of language can be seen as a subset of academic literacy since it involves using language to communicate in academic settings. In this case, teachers need to understand the forms and functions of language that facilitate the design and use of assessment rubrics that align with their curriculum goals, learning outcomes and community members' needs. Students need language knowledge, assessment- and academic literacy to understand and respond to assessment tasks and feedback. Knowledge of language and assessment literacy can be seen as facilitators of academic literacy since they help teachers to monitor and improve their proficiency and skills in academic and assessment contexts. For example, language knowledge and assessment literacy can help teachers to express learning and assessment goals and provide effective instruction and feedback that support learning and learner's development of academic literacy.

For students, knowledge of language can facilitate students in identifying their strengths and weaknesses in assessment through better understanding of the goals and expectations, whilst providing a common language in which to articulate goals and appropriate strategies for learning. Knowledge of language can also be seen as a product of assessment literacy and academic literacy, as it reflects the level of competence and confidence that teachers and learners have in using language for assessment purposes. Therefore, improving teachers' understanding of language and its effects expands their skills in developing and using quality rubrics, thus improving their academic and assessment literacy (Koh, 2011) as well as the academic literacy development of their students (Gebhard et al., 2014). It is also imperative that teachers—both in service and pre-service—develop this knowledge so that they can use rubrics effectively in instruction and assessment.

RUBRIC LANGUAGE AND GUIDANCE: A REVIEW

Rubrics are assessment tools that articulate the expectations of assessed work by listing criteria and for the work and describing levels of performance across a continuum of quality (Brookhart, 2018). A rubric identifies for the assessor and the assessee what mastery of the goals of the assignment look like and what to look for when assessing the work (Andrade, this volume). The following section reviews existing research and guidance on effective rubric language. Guidance relevant to two broad themes is discussed: articulating explicit criteria and pitfalls in the pursuit of objectivity.

Articulating Explicit Criteria

Articulating criteria and instances of performance presents several issues for rubric developers. First, the need to summarize the qualities of the work at various levels in a rubric, without being too rigid, can lead to descriptors that are often vague and ambiguous (Li & Lindsey, 2015). Ambiguous language impedes users' accurate and consistent interpretation of the criteria. Criteria should clearly identify the qualities of the work that demonstrate that the student has met the target learning goals, whereas descriptors should outline what these qualities look like and how they can be measured (Grainger & Weir, 2020). For example, one criterion in a rubric for a marketing project may focus on content: 'the extent to which the essay demonstrates knowledge of the marketing concepts, theories, and models relevant to the topic'. A precise descriptor for this criterion might say 'the essay shows comprehensive knowledge of the marketing concepts, theories, and models relevant to the topic through accurate selection and application in isolation and in combination.' A vague descriptor might state 'the essay shows good knowledge and understanding the marketing concepts, theories, and models relevant to the topic'.

Pitfalls of Evaluative Language

Across many curricula, the learning outcomes, and goals of assessment center on core content that all students should learn, skills or abilities to be developed and knowledge requirements. Core content is often described through nouns which provide insight into what students are expected to engage with during a course of study and/or assessment. Examples include 'analysis of data', 'production of a marketing plan', etc. However, Tan (2020, p. 30) illustrates how nouns and adjectives serve different functions in rubric criteria and performance descriptions and offer a window into rubric developers' expectations.

If we were to consider aesthetics, our expectations can be described as wanting something "beautiful," or looking for "beauty." Yet, there is a difference between the two. The word beauty, as a noun, depicts one of the many qualities we may be looking for, but not the specific level of beauty. When we look for something beautiful (rather than plain or gorgeous), the adjective is more akin to a standard. Thus, when we use a combination of adjectives or nouns to convey our academic expectations, there is a risk that we may emphasise standards or criteria, depending on whether we use adjectives or nouns. (Tan, 2020, p. 30)

The language used in assessment rubrics should be descriptive, and not evaluative, such that the language helps students understand how they have met the learning goals and where they are going rather than simply indicating whether their performance was good or poor. Descriptive phrases are those that describe the quality or characteristics of the student's work, without making a judgment about whether it

is good or bad. Evaluative phrases are those that assign a value or grade to the student's work, based on some criteria or standards. For example, suppose you have a criterion for assessing the student's ability to apply marketing concepts to a real-world scenario. A descriptive phrase for this criterion might be 'the student demonstrates a clear and accurate understanding of the relevant marketing concepts and applies them appropriately to the scenario'. In contrast, an evaluative phrase for this criterion might read 'the student's application of marketing concepts is excellent and shows a high level of mastery'. In this example, the descriptive phrase focuses on what the student did and how well they did it, while the evaluative phrase assigns a label or rating to the student's performance. According to Brookhart (2018), descriptive rubrics are generally expective to be most conducive to learning. Yet, writing descriptive as opposed to evaluative performance descriptors presents a challenge for even the most experienced rubric designers. As a result, many examples contain a mix of the two (Brookhart, 2018). Table 1 provides examples of descriptive versus evaluative descriptors.

Table 1. Descriptive versus evaluative performance descriptors in rubrics

Descriptive	Evaluative
The student identifies and explains the main marketing objectives and strategies of the chosen company.	The student's analysis of the company's marketing objectives and strategies is thorough and insightful.
The student uses relevant and credible sources to support their arguments and cites them correctly using APA style.	The student's use of sources is excellent and demonstrates a high level of academic integrity and skill.
The student demonstrates creativity and originality in their approach to the marketing problem and solution.	The student's marketing solution is innovative and unique, standing out from the rest of the class.
The student organizes their report in a clear and logical manner, with an introduction, body, conclusion, and references.	The student's report is well-structured and follows the required format.
The student communicates their ideas effectively and professionally, using appropriate language, tone, and grammar.	The student's writing style is impressive and error-free, showing a strong command of the English language.

Through working with the core content, students can be guided to reach the knowledge requirements, which are often defined through verbs with adjectives of adverbs for qualifiers or achievement against the standards. Students find the use of evaluative adjectives such as 'outstanding', 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', or 'poor' (whether they are appreciative or derogatory) misleading and confusing; they perceive them to be devoid of meaning and dismiss them in self-evaluation because these words invoke subjective interpretation (Wang, 2017). Li and Lindsey (2015) examine teachers' and students' perceptions of rubric used on an undergraduate writing course and found discrepancies in both parties' understanding of evaluative language used in the rubric. They conclude that rubrics did not always clarify assessment expectations for students as effectively as teachers assumed they would, due to differences in interpretation of evaluative language. One way to avoid these differences in interpretation is to describe the qualities or characteristics of the work that demonstrate achievement of the learning goals. For example, instead of stating instead of saying "The student's report is good', a descriptive rubric might say 'the students report contains evidence, analysis, and recommendations.' Descriptive language, as opposed to evaluative language, helps the student to gauge the extent of their learning, to direct progression on their learning journey, and to specify learning goals (Brookhart, 2018). For example, a descriptor stating 'the research uses a balance of verbal facts/numerical data which are examined and discussed as component parts of an argument' denotes for a student what information and treatment might evidence 'analysis'.

In contrast, indicating work 'well analysed' at a particular level of performance is evaluative and tells the student little about what good analysis might look like.

Second, ambiguity may be used to set the tone of rubric and covertly indicate bandwidth of professional judgement for assessors. Interpreting rubric criteria and descriptors entails subjectivity (Sadler, 2011). Some teacher trainers may suggest the inclusion of adjectives and adverbs to "soften" rubric language, which can increase the assessors' subjectivity (Holmes & Oakleaf, 2013). In assessment rubrics, adverbs like 'very' more often than adjectives, are the qualifiers that refer to proficiency. Kohn (2006, p. 12-13), who takes a position of critique against the general idea of rubrics points out that:

Rubrics are, above all, a tool to promote standardization, to turn teachers into grading machines or at least allow them to pretend that what they are doing is exact and objective… [However, they are criticised because] they can never deliver the promised precision; judgments ultimately turn on adjectives that are murky and end up being left to the teacher's discretion.

Gipps (1999, p. 370) further highlights that judgement of performance in particular "is construed according to the perspectives and values of the assessor". Experienced assessors have a tacit understanding of what constitutes high-quality student work and can recognise high quality when they see it (Lea & Street, 1998; Sadler, 2013). Grainger et al. (2008) find that using this tacit knowledge, experienced assessors are able to accurately interpret descriptions of student behaviour that are often ambiguous in order to differentiate between standards or levels of performance. However, rubric designers should not assume assessors are experienced. Rubrics should be written a language effective for graduate teaching assistants and experienced assessors alike. More precise use of language facilitates universal translation and interpretation of the rubric in the way the rubric developer intended (Jönsson & Svingby, 2007; Libarkin, 2008). To improve precision, some rubric designers may opt for longer performance descriptors. Some research does in fact indicate that rubrics with more detailed descriptors significantly increase inter-rater reliability and improve raters' ability to identify different aspects of the work (e.g., Knoch, 2009), although longer descriptors do not necessarily result in greater effectiveness for students (Covill, 2012; Li & Lindsey, 2015).

Precise Definitions of Quality

Precision is increased in the rubric when developers use qualitative instead of quantitative terms (Wiggins, 1998). Qualitative language such as 'consults and interprets appropriate sources' describes the quality of work, whereas quantitative terms such as 'has three sources' can lead to a laundry list of points of requirements (Brookhart & Chen, 2015). Statements related to the number of times a student has demonstrated a skill, or similarly, the number of times an error is observed, as an indicator of the students' level of mastery lead only to an illusion of precision while overlooking how well the student has performed in the work (Holmes & Oakleaf, 2013). Related are frequency terms like 'always', 'sometimes', 'rarely', 'never' which are commonly used as rating scales (Brookhart, 2018) and find their way into performance decsriptors, but do not describe performance. When designing the rubric, the teacher must ask whether the number of times, or the frequency with which a skill or error manifests can truly establish where a student is in their learning. Does demonstrating a skill once rather than three times reveal anything about the depth of students' mastery of that skill? If so, what does developmental feedback look like for that

student, and can an improvement be gleaned from comparing their performance with the next level of performance descriptor in the rubric?

Articulating the gradation of performance can be difficult because words may not be able to capture the nuance and richness of performance (Sadler, 2011). Therefore, being completely explicit in a rubric may be more difficult than it sounds. Bearman and Ajjawi (2018) suggest that true precision and explicitness may not even be possible. However, the exercise of articulating criteria precisely forces rubric designers to identify what they consider to be relevant and important as demonstrations of learning. Defining performance as precisely as possible allows for reflection, discussion within a community of practice, critique, and later modification. Developing teachers' knowledge and mastery of rubric language, and in turn, their academic and assessment literacy, is key in developing their ability to produce effective rubrics.

Pitfalls in the Pursuit of Objectivity

Guidance on rubric language commonly suggests that descriptors should be written in objective language as far as possible to facilitate objective assessment, which is not influenced by feelings, opinions, or implicit judgement in representing facts of the assessed performance (Chan & Ho, 2019; O'Donnell et al., 2011). Objectivity is enhanced when developers refrain from using adverbial phrases such as 'sound understanding of' and 'comprehensive use of' or adverbs like 'very' and 'little' (Grainger, 2021). However, this apparently simple advice overlooks several considerations.

First, difficulties in generating descriptors that meaningfully differentiate between performance levels can lead to the use of evaluative and comparative language, such as 'provides adequate', 'sound', or 'excellent argument' (O'Donnell et al., 2011). The use of adverbs may mask the developer's attempt to capture some of the tacit knowledge that simply cannot be codified or expressed (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2018). Another example of this problem is descriptors stating the student 'uses some eye contact' and 'student uses eye contact effectively' without specifying what 'some' or 'effectively' mean (Oakleaf, 2009). Attempts to capture this knowledge in the rubric necessarily lead to simplification and lose some sense of the knowledge we translate into words, thus introducing some subjectivity. Some guidance on writing effective rubrics advises rubric designers to articulate the gradation of performance quality by describing the best and worst levels of quality and then filling in the levels in between based on their knowledge of common problems (e.g., Montgomery, 2000). However, anchoring the generation of descriptors around common problems that may occur invariably leads to the use of negative language (e.g., 'does not identify some parts of the problem', 'identifies the problem but does not propose a solution'). Descriptors of lower levels of performance should not use unduly negative language (Oakleaf, 2009). Negative descriptions may demotivate students. Besides clarifying the negative qualities of work evidenced at the lowest or failing level, rubric wording should focus on what the student demonstrated they can do (Grainger & Weir, 2020).

Another problem with negative performance decsriptors at the lower levels of a rubric is that they do not indicate to students who are clearly struggling how to improve, or what their next steps should be. If rubrics can and should support learning, the descriptions at all levels should provide instruction and guidance, not evaluative put-downs. Positive qualities, which are precisely distinguished at the various levels of performance, are also potentially easier for students to evidence and for assessors to identify concretely at each incremental level of success. Rubric developers might consider describing effective performance at each level as well as identifying problems commonly demonstrated in the work to better differentiate between performance levels in positive terms. For example, 'identifies both a problem and

solution', 'offers critical assessment of proposed solution considering perspective other than their own'. Research shows that students do not consider opposing arguments, not because they are not able to, but because they do not think of doing so (Andrade, 2001; Perkins et al., 1993). Thus, identifying common problems can help to distinguish between levels of performance more precisely while also enhancing the rubric's developmental value for users' academic and assessment literacy (Andrade, 2001).

Second, and compounding the first difficulty, is that rubric developers may not want to design descriptors that are overly prescriptive for students or other assessors. Therefore, they may use language of uncertainty, known as hedging. Hedging refers to words that indicate tentativeness and possibility (e.g., 'may', 'might', 'could', 'likely', etc.) (Hyland, 1996). Hedge words also appear in descriptors differentiating levels of performance with statements such as 'to some extent', 'more', or 'less'. For these terms to be interpreted accurately, the rubric designer needs to give the assessor some description of what 'to some extent' looks like in students' work. The subjectivity and diversity of interpretation that hedged statements can produce thwarts the aim of unambiguous rubric communication. Moreover, rubric developers' proclivity for hedging may preclude true evaluation or benchmarking of performance by creating a scenario where descriptors overlap, so a student's performance can be pigeonholed against multiple descriptors, or may fit into any (Oakleaf, 2009). Descriptors should convey an absolute basis for performance to reduce the need for them to be interpreted relative to each other. Sadler (2014, p. 281) specifies that qualifiers, modifiers, and hedge words should thus be avoided. In addition, Sadler points out that "A work that is 'outstanding' literally stands out from some background, either real and immediate, or recalled from memory", meaning that a judgement of "outstanding" can only be made if the performance is judged relative to other work. The same applies to extraordinary, exceptional, excellent, and superb. Assessors may not have access to the full breadth of student work to make comparative judgements, and even if they do, may not have access to the same sample as other assessors which inevitably cultivates unreliability in the evaluation processes. Moreover, students will rarely, if ever, have access to the complete body of student work to make judgements of their own their own performance relative to others.

Beyond assessing content knowledge, rubrics provide a platform for the assessment of processes, skills, competencies, and quality of performance or product. Processes (e.g., 'details the methods and or steps of data analysis' or 'systematically explains analytical reasoning'), competencies (e.g., 'applies basic negotiation principles to diffuse conflict and strengthen relationships between groupmates') and skills such as creativity of analysis (e.g., 'combines analysis techniques for nuanced interpretation') must be articulated to permit their observation and measurement. It may not be possible to express measures of process, skills, competencies, performance, and product in a single rubric. In a study of how creativity can be assessed, Lindström (2006) used separate rubrics to detail product versus process criteria. Similarly, Cole et al. (2018) demonstrated how assessment of STEM students' learning could be facilitated by using two rubrics: a product rubric to assess students' written or submitted work, and an interaction rubric to assess students' behaviour, processes, and workplace skills during active learning. Rubric designers must be especially clear on the indicators that evidence processes, competencies or skills may be demonstrated in student work. How rubric designers convey the complex requirements of their assessment via their language is a key aspect of their assessment literacy which greatly impacts the assessment literacy of their assessor team and their students.

However, gains in clarity may come at the cost of rubrics' effectiveness for the student. Enhanced clarity may facilitate student success and foster learning (Andrade, 2000; Jönsson & Panadero, 2017), but over-specification in rubrics can diminish student agency and learning, leading to 'criteria compli-

ance' (Torrance, 2007). Studies show that greater elaboration of criteria and performance descriptors add little value in clarifying criteria for students (Huang, 2012), and instead can accentuate the subjectivity built into the rubric (Turley & Gallagher, 2008). To promote learning in the short-term, rubric language should nurture students' semantic and contextual understanding and develop their skill in evaluative judgement. In the long-term, familiarisation and fluency with rubric language promotes development of their academic and assessment literacy. Therefore, inducting assessors and students to the language to establish understanding and achieve consensus of interpretation is fundamental (Sadler, 2011). Rubric developers' knowledge of the language they use necessarily plays a role in their ability to streamline interpretation. In addition, achieving objectivity of some descriptors might obscure or diminish the focus on others (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2018). Recognising how the language used emphasizes or downplays aspects of the rubric allows the developer to strike an intended balance and identify where understanding of fundamental concepts or vocabulary and socialisation to the discourse may need to be supported in other ways (Walker & Hobson, 2014).

In addition to evaluation or assessment terms, a rubric may feature subject-specific content words. Content words are terms that denote concepts, principles, technical terms, or jargon relevant to the assessment, subject, and discourse. For instance, using the example of marketing, students must understand that marketing means 'to market' ideas, people, places, products, or services, and also refers to the activities and process involved in transferring such offerings from producer to buyer or user such a that a mutually beneficial exchange takes place (Brennan & Vos, 2021). Content words featured in a rubric are likely to be critical to students' grasp of the subject and completion of the assignment. Therefore, students must understand this language deeply. However, these words may not be familiar to students who have not studied this subject before. Content words become even more problematic in a rubric when students' ability to access or understand these words depends on their understanding of other vocabulary.

Further complicating the issue, supporting words may have homophones or different meanings across subjects or disciplines (Calderon & Slakk, 2018). A rubric that states 'the student demonstrates an understanding of the ethical implications of the chosen research topic and the informed consent process for the participants' requires the student to be familiar with the varous ways the word 'ethics' may be used in different subjects, to understand what ethical implications are and how they relate to research. Therefore, it is important that students have access to definitions, explanations, or examples of these content words, either in the rubric itself or in other sources such as handouts explaining terms and glossaries (Cox et al., 2014). However, glossary definitions per se are not explicit (Richards & Pilcher, 2014). Glossaries should be adapted to the assessment or subject-specific discourse, and shared understanding of glossary words might be reached using teacher-led explanation and dialogue (Hawe et al., 2021; O'Donovan et al., 2008). The semantic meaning of rubric words will differ across subjects and contexts (Cox et al., 2014). Therefore, rubric developers might consider when delineation of meaning is important and the circumstances under which multiple, or alternative, meanings might arise.

A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL VIEW OF RUBRIC LANGUAGE

SFL (Halliday & Kress, 1976; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) considers language to be a system of subsystems, where its function and meaning are derived from its use in a social context. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), language serves three main functions, which they call metafunctions. These are: (1) ideational, which serves to organise our experience in the world; (2) interpersonal, which

serves to express interactions; and (3) textual, in which linguistic units are contextualized and organised as discourse.

Whereas linguistic theories tend to describe language as a set of rules that are characteristic of a context, SFL describes language as systems of choices that users can draw upon based on the meaning they wish to impart. Choice relates to the selection of language features. The notion of choice is a fundamental concept in the theory of SFL, as it is through choice that meaning is created and expressed (Halliday, 2013). With regards to language features, an SFL lens highlights the importance of what is chosen and what is not but could have been (Fontaine, 2013). The impression given in SFL literature about choice "implies *more* than the mere availaibility of features in an inventory but *less* than a deliberate, purposeful communicative act" (Bache, 2013, p. 73). Consideration of the purposeful meaningful communicative goals we try to achieve with the aid of assessment rubrics is important because langauge choice closely reflects and impacts what we choose to mean (Halliday, 2013). Moreover, by treating these choices as a motivated means to a communicative end, allows for greater achnowledgement that choosing to mean in an assessment rubric is often guided, but can be modified, by design.

SFL also conceives language as a social process, connected to a society or community and its culture. The general rhetorical practices of a culture, called genres (Martin & Rose, 2008), are characterized by discourse organization and by obligatory and optional language features (Brisk & Zisselsberger, 2011). Within a genre, language use serves a social function, where its construction and interpretation of meaning are shaped by the social, cultural, and situational context. In this functional view of language, language use varies depending on the context. That is, language is used differently in different situations and for different different audiences (e.g., novice students, expert markers) subject areas (e.g., marketing, history) and purposes (e.g., teaching, self assessment, expert marking). In SFL, language use is learned in and from context. Therefore, to fulfil the requirements of the genre and to design a rubric that effectively achieves it communicative goals depends on one's knowledge of language, ability to use it in context and understanding of the audience.

Genres can be viewed through three lenses: field, which relates to how the content of the text is expressed; tenor, which relates to the relationship between the interactants; and mode, which relates to the way that language is delivered (e.g., written or spoken, formal or informal, etc.). Because this chapter's focus is written rubrics, mode is not discussed further. These aspects of genre are construed through and correspond to the three planes of meaning in SFL, called metafunctions, which are ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). From the SFL perspective, genres are typified by texts with specific structures and purposes to fulfil communicative and/or social goals (Martin & Rose, 2008). Question and answer texts, essays, and rubrics are all genres of text produced which are related to the university assessment situation. Systemic variation of field, tenor, and mode leads to distinguishable variation the language, relative to its usage in a particular situation such as academic register (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Table 2 shows the relationship between the three SFL metafunctions and language choices, which are relevant to the rubric genre.

Table 2. SFL metafunctions and language choices in rubrics

Metafunction	Genre aspect	Unit of analysis	Description
Ideational	Field	Content words	Subject-specific concepts
		Participants (nouns)	Words used to describe a class of entities actions, qualities, states of existence, or ideas.
		Processes (verbs)	Words used to convey an action, occurrence, method, or state of being.
		Attributes (adjectives)	Words naming the attributes of a noun.
		Quality (adverbs)	Words modifying the participants (nouns), processes (verbs), or attributes (adjectives).
Interpersonal	Tenor	Positive versus negative words	Words describing describe something good or desirable and express approval, possibilities, and potential, versus bad, undesirable, disapproval, impossibility, and failure.
		Modal verbs/adverbs	Words used to indicate likelihood, ability, permission, request, capacity, suggestions, order, obligation, or advice, (e.g., can/could, may/might, will/would, shall/should, must, etc.).
		Evaluation-laden lexical choices	Words which express the subjectivity of the marker (e.g., excellent, good, adequate, inadequate, poor).
		Familiarity and formality	Academic tone denoting status and relationships as well as the intended user of the rubric (e.g., assessors versus students); formality of language used to facilitate the user in evaluation.

Adapted from Aguirre-Muñoz et al. (2009) and Troyan et al. (2019).

As an applied model of linguistics, SFL is designed to be a strategic tool and a guide to action, as well as a means of responding to everyday language-related issues in a variety of social, professional, and academic contexts. The students that enter university education are increasingly diverse in terms of language, cultural background, ethnicity, disability status, learning needs, and educational experience (McDuff et al., 2020). For some students, rubrics can be helpful in translating the requirements and expectations of assessment, and for many, an effective rubric can help to level the playing field for engagement with the assessment and subsequent attainment (Smith et al., 2013). However, students often have very different understandings, or little understanding, of the academic terms we use. Stevens and Levi (2013, p. 42) point out that:

…we may be startled to discover that many students think 'introduction' and 'conclusion' are synonyms for 'beginning' and 'end' or that 'critical thinking' means criticizing something… some students may assume that 'analysis' refers only to situations in which numbers are involved or to the analysis contained in secondary sources. The revelation that in an academic paper, for example, 'analysis' most often means their own conclusions informed by data can be startling to them.

Although rubrics may be beneficial to students throughout the progression of their course, they may be most influential in the development of assessment literacy and socialisation to disciplinary discourse in the formative years of learning. Gebhard (2010) and Schleppegrell (2004) illustrate the utility of SFL-based pedagogies in enhancing students' familiarity with the linguistic options relevant for defining concepts, making an argument, describing process, and narrating an event. Gebhard (2010) offers the example of an interaction with school-aged student during an activity designed to improve students' understanding

of scientific method and the language for objectively describing the findings of an experiment. Gebhard corrected the student's use of the first-person to describe findings and explained that scientists typically report their studies in objective and author evacuated language. The student expressed her reluctance to speak like "a geek". However, her response revealed that she understood that linguistic choices construct and conveys ideas, reflect modes of interaction (familiar or formal), and convey aspects of identity. Schleppegrell (2004) highlights that the content and medium of teaching as well as the demonstration of learning are all dependent on academic language. Teachers often assume students' fluency with academic language (Stevens & Levi, 2013), yet facilitating students' understanding of the language used in a rubric is an important element of effective rubric design and assessment literacy (Smith et al., 2013). Therefore, SFL is a valuable lens for language-based approaches in instruction as users learn language, learn through language, and learn about language (Halliday, 1993). SFL-based pedagogies focus on expanding users' awareness of the linguistic options available to them to engage with assessment and broaden their ability to use language more expertly to achieve assessment tasks. This statement applies whether we take the student or the teacher as the user.

A concerning finding in research is that teachers are often unable to clearly articulate what they mean by terms they regularly use in assessment. For example, Lea and Street (1998) found that even though assessors are able to identify successful and unsuccessful work, they were not able to describe what constitutes a 'well-argued' or 'well-structured' piece, or how a particular piece of writing 'lacked' structure. Academics also had difficulty explaining terms such as 'critical analysis' and 'evaluate'. Lea and Street quote one lecturer who stated "'I know a good essay when I see it, but I cannot describe how to write it" (p. 163). Terms like 'critical thinking' feature prominently in assessment and rubrics, but assessors' opinions and interpretations of what constitutes good or poor quality critical thinking differ (Bloxham et al., 2011). Effective communication of criteria and expectations depends on shared definitions, assumptions, and understanding. An SFL perspective views language as a set of resources, rather than a set of rules. This "makes it possible to consider the appropriateness or inappropriateness of language choices in a given a context of use" (Gibbons, 2003, p. 250-251). Therefore, an SFL approach to rubric design serves to encourage rubric designers to clarify these definitions, become aware of their language beliefs and assumptions, and address dissonance in understanding, iteratively, until it is certain that all rubric users are speaking the same language. In more practical terms, this means that An SFL perspective to rubric design not only raises the awareness for teachers and assessors about the academic language demands but equips them to anticipate student need and be prepared for discussion and teachable moments. An SFL approach may also reveal which aspects of language for which understanding may need facilitation, allowing a teacher to focus on those. SFL is widely used in Australia, and increasingly in the United States as a response to teacher preparation programmes that often lack sufficient focus on the linguistic structures that characterize academic language (Aguirre-Muñoz et al., 2009, p. 298).

IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, an SFL approach to rubric design has been introduced and its value for improving teachers' and students' academic and assessment literacy has been discussed. It also provided an overview of extant research and guidance on effective rubric language with a discussion of the implications for rubric design and effectiveness. Developing teachers' understanding of the language they use in their rubrics by drawing on SFL scholarship could enhance their assessment literacy and their ability to de-

sign effective rubrics. Rubrics designed with mindfulness of linguistic choices and the consequences of those choices are likely to be of greater utility to their users. When used as a learning support tool for students, rubrics designed with greater consideration of language may increase students' awareness of what and how they learn.

Developing rubrics shapes how teachers think and teach, not only because rubrics provide the framework in which they situate their expectations, but also because they force teachers to articulate and codify those expectations. This activity is perhaps most influential to the development of teacher's assessment literacy in the formative years of teaching. However, as their socialisation into the language of their discipline evolves, so will the way they use, understand, and assess against that language. Teacher trainers have an essential function in guiding teachers' practice. Without sufficient focus on the non-technical aspects of rubric development, the benefits of rubrics may be called into question.

Teacher education, colleges, and universities seeking to improve faculties' capacities in designing effective rubrics can take several approaches to introducing SFL. First, institutions favouring a short-term approach might offer group workshops designed to provide teachers (i.e., rubric developers) with a foundational understanding of how language works in the rubrics they routinely provide to their students, informed by SFL scholarship. Such workshops might use SFL resources to introduce the metafunctions of language and link these to rubric language using exemplars or participants' own rubrics. In SFL-based professional development, teachers are typically introduced to functional terms for noticing and naming the features of genre and or/register, which develops their ability to use that language to analyse a text (Accurso & Gebhard, 2021). Through analysing rubrics, teachers develop more critical understandings of the text in context through more conscious awareness of the meaning-making intents and purposes of the text (de Oliveira et al., 2021; Schleppegrell, 2004). This would facilitate teachers' active learning of effective rubric language as well as reflection and discussion of the impact of language on their rubrics' outcomes. Galguera (2011) suggests that it may be through providing teachers with opportunities to examine specific functions of language in academic contexts and experience ways in which language is used to represent knowledge in rubrics and interpersonal dynamics encoded in language, that they begin to construct deep understandings of language. This type of professional development can help teachers to explore the meaning and the design of meanings within specific disciplinary discourse communities which fosters their ability to guide other assessors and students to do the same (Accurso & Gebhard, 2021). With deeper and more critical understanding of the impact of word choice, teachers would be better placed to design rubrics that explicitly focus on and support the development of pedagogic knowledge and disciplinary and assessment literacy practices.

Empirical studies reveal that SFL training in workshops has positive impacts on teachers' awareness of language and their capacity to develop rubrics that serve as effective instructional and assessment tools. Berg and Huang (2015) investigated how integrating an SFL approach to skill and instructional practice development in teacher training impacted their instruction of language in disciplinary content areas. Their study demonstrated that the SFL approach improved teacher candidates' linguistic sensitivity and enhanced their ability to design instruction within their subject with an explicit focus on language and literacy development. Similarly, Brisk and Zisselsberger (2011) demonstrated that participating in a teacher development program that introduced SFL theory and strategies to teach specific genres of writing improved teachers' confidence to teach those genres of writing, and to develop and review their lessons with language features in mind. In a study of 21 teachers, Aguirre-Muñoz et al. (2009) examined the instructional impact of a one-week SFL-informed teacher development program designed to improve teachers' understanding of the linguistic features of academic language in their disciplines.

Using evaluations of student work prior to and after the SFL training, the findings revealed that teachers' understanding of the linguistic features of their subject area had improved and they were better able to evaluate student work in a way that informed further instructional needs. Taken together, these findings suggest that teacher training need only introduce the concept and general principles of SFL, drawing on the literature and scholarship available, to give teachers the tools they need to think more critically about rubric language.

A concern with the complexity of SFL theory is briefly mentioned in the literature; thus, teacher trainers should exercise caution. SFL theory is useful for those who learn it because it is well suited to use outside the classroom and can be easily applied to everyday life, yet those who teach it may find it to be "a veritable maze, very messy and complex" (Bourke, 2005, p. 93). However, Macken-Horarik (2008, p. 47) highlights that SFL-informed training can be useful provided teachers have a level of SFL metalanguage that is good enough "to think with", but that doesn't require them to become theoretical linguists. Awareness of this metalanguage and some familiarity with it provides a means to foreground language considerations in rubric design and instruction and connect this knowledge in a meaningful way to the social purposes for which the language is being used. Such an approach positions SFL as just one tool in a box of larger efforts to aid teachers in developing knowledge of language, to critically assess students' emergent academic literacy practices and to implement responsive pedagogical practices (Gebhard et al., 2008). It may also be crucial that teacher trainers are frequently reminded that rubric language, which is genre-specific, cannot be presented as a fixed set of rules due to the important role context plays in guiding word choice and meaning for the rubric's audience and purpose (Brisk & Zisselsberger, 2011).

Once teachers are aware of SFL's concepts, another approach to developing faculty's abilities to design rubrics to enhance academic and assessment literacy is for faculty to act as peer reviewers, giving each other feedback on rubrics. Faculty review of rubrics can lay fertile ground for sharing best practice in rubric language and promotes continued active learning from a range of examples and perspectives, due to faculty members' dual roles as rubric developers and members of marking teams. Because faculty will approach rubric design with varying levels of socialisation into the language of the discipline and experience, it is important for institutions to facilitate training and professional development opportunities that support growth at the novice, intermediate, and advanced levels. While novice teachers will need guided opportunities to develop rubrics and reflect on the effectiveness of rubric language, they also need opportunities to develop their pedagogical and assessment approaches to know how the criteria might be realised. More experienced teachers are likely to have more awareness of how criteria can be realised, leading them to focus on the nuances in communicating levels of performance in a way that generates consistent interpretations among rubric users.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the rationale for improving students' awareness of what and how they learn via rubrics supports the need for equipping teachers with contemporary knowledge about the language of effective rubrics and this language's relevance in developing students' and assessors' academic and assessment literacies. This knowledge simultaneously develops the teacher's academic and assessment literacy and allows them to make intentional and informed rubric design choices. Rubric training and teacher development programs could adopt training in SFL. Training in SFL would systematically build rubric developers'

and assessors' linguistic knowledge base, allowing them to develop a nuanced understanding of the discourse and context through field and tenor. This understanding could also help to focus teaching and learning on the way language functions within the discourse, raising individuals' awareness to areas where language should be given greater visibility during instruction. It is hoped that the review offered in this chapter assists teachers by increasing their awareness of language and its implications to enhance the effectiveness of their rubrics in developing users' academic and assessment literacy. Institutions should give higher priority to considerations of rubric language for teachers who have limited pedagogical training—which leaves them underprepared for effective rubric design. The aspiration is that this discussion might prompt the inclusion of SFL concepts in training and professional development focusing on rubric design.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Literacy: An understanding of the way knowledge is created and communicated in a discourse community, the nature of relationships and interactions between participants in the discourse community, and the norms that regulate these interactions.

Analytic Rubric: An assessment tool to assess performance or learning on a given task. The analytic rubrics outlines criteria against which performance is assessed and various levels of quality at which performance may be demonstrated.

Assessment Literacy: An understanding of the purpose of assessment, how it fits into the learning trajectory, knowledge of the process of assessment, and the ability to evaluate work and identify means of improvement.

Criteria: Characteristics that are useful for determining the quality of work.

Discourse Community: A group of people who share the same values, goals, and language-use practices.

Performance Descriptors: Expressions of what a performance at a particular level looks like.

Rubric: An assessment tool that lists criteria for student work and articulates the levels of quality for each criterion.

Standards: Levels of academic achievement that students are expected to meet.

Teacher Development: The construction of teaching competences and pedagogical growth in teachers who make decisions in instruction and assessment.