Comparison of Three Kinds of Alternative Essay-Rating Methods to the ESL Composition Profile

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ABSTRACT

Although the ESL Composition Profile (CP) has been widely used by scholars as a well-balanced rubric for learner essay evaluation, it is not necessarily easy for L2 teachers to rate students’ essays based on the five criteria of the CP. This indicates the necessity to explore reliable alternatives to the CP. This article, therefore, compares three kinds of alternative approaches: (1) using the simplified version of the CP, (2) using edited essays, and (3) using model essays, paying attention to the correlation between each of the possible alternatives and the original CP. Our learner-corpus-based analysis has shown that simplifying the CP and paying attention to the organization of learner essays appears to be the most effective method.

KEYWORDS

Essay Evaluation, Essay Organization, ESP Composition Profile, Learner Corpus, Rubrics

INTRODUCTION

How learner essays can be evaluated with high reliability and without increasing workload is one of the hottest topics in applied linguistics and, to date, various essay-scoring methods have been proposed. One of the most widely used essay evaluation methods is the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et al., 1981; CP hereafter), which includes five kinds of essay-rating criteria: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

The CP is a well-balanced rubric for essay evaluation. While it has been widely used in L2 writing studies, it is not as common for L2 teachers who need to rate a lot of essays consistently throughout a semester, as CP-based ratings are often time-consuming.

What alternative approaches, then, would satisfy L2 teachers’ needs? Among several possible alternatives, we compare three kinds of essay evaluation methods. The first involves the use of a simplified version of the CP. By reducing the number of rating criteria of the original CP, we could lessen teachers’ workloads. The second is the use of edited essays. Teachers often correct and edit learner essays to give some pedagogical feedback. If we can use these edited versions for the evaluation of learners’ original essays, it would also lessen the rating workload. The third is the use of model essays. It is not difficult for teachers to access model essays on a variety of topics, such as those
included in books and online for purposes of test preparation. If we can use these for the evaluation of learner essays, the workload might also be reduced.

It should be noted that an alternative method must be simple and convenient, while at the same time sufficiently correlate with the CP. If not, it would not be possible to adopt the method in L2 classes, no matter how easy it may be to do so. The current study, therefore, compares three possible approaches and aims to identify the best approach that can be used as a reliable alternative to the established CP.

BACKGROUND

Concerning learners’ L2 essay evaluation, many approaches have been proposed to date. Recent studies emphasize the merits of a portfolio evaluation, which enables teachers to see the whole of learners’ writing process and also gives learners a chance to get more actively involved in assessment and learning process (Lee, 2017). However, many of the EFL teachers still rely on rubric-based direct rating of learner essays, which is relatively less complicated and therefore easier to be incorporated into their teaching routines. In this section, we will have a quick look at the CP and other rubrics.

Holistic vs. Analytical Evaluation

Many scoring guides define different levels of performance or product with specific indicators and descriptors, which are usually called rubrics. Rubrics can be classified into two types: a holistic rubric and an analytical rubric, each of which has its own merits and demerits.

A holistic rubric, which is “a single, overall rating for an entire performance or product” (Arter, 2010), has its own strength in practicality, especially in large-scale testing contexts (East, 2009). Raters, however, have a tendency to focus on only one or two superficial traits (Sakyi, 2001), such as essay length, handwriting, lexical diversity / richness, or errors in word choice or spelling (Charney, 1984; Grobe, 1981; Engber, 1995). Meanwhile, an analytical rubric, which is based on an evaluation of “several different, important dimensions” of a performance or a product (Arter, 2010), can be more objective and reliable. The limitation is that it is often too time-consuming and, consequently, difficult to apply to large-scale testing or everyday assessment in L2 classes.

When comparing a holistic rubric and an analytical one, much of the literature has regarded the latter as being better balanced and, therefore, a relatively more reliable scoring guide for evaluating learner essays (Jacobs et al., 1981; Bacha, 2001).

The CP

As mentioned above, one of the most widely used rubrics is the CP, based on an analytical approach. The CP defines a good essay in five viewpoints (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>What Should Be Examined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content (Con)</td>
<td>13-30</td>
<td>Are learner essays knowledgeable, substantive, thoroughly developed, and relevant to the topic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization (Org)</td>
<td>7-20</td>
<td>Are ideas fluently expressed, clearly stated, and well-supported? Are essays well-organized, logically sequenced, and cohesive?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary (Voc)</td>
<td>7-20</td>
<td>Is vocabulary sophisticated in range, effectively chosen, and used in an appropriate register?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Use (LanU)</td>
<td>5-25</td>
<td>Do essays include more complex constructions and fewer grammatical errors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics (Mech)</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>Do essays include few errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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