TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF ASSESSMENT RUBRICS IN ASSESSING STUDENTS' LEARNING AT HIGHER EDUCATION LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore teachers' perceptions and practices of the use of rubrics in assessing students' learning in the context of higher education institutions in Gilgit-Baltistan. A case study method of inquiry within a qualitative paradigm was adopted to collect the relevant data through semi-structured interviews from three purposefully selected teacher-educators (instructors) and six student-teachers (prospective teachers) of semester III and IV from one of the colleges of education. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis and following themes were emerged: (1) the importance of assessment rubrics in teaching and learning processes, (2) effectiveness of rubrics in assessing teaching and learning, (3) co-construction of assessment rubrics by student-teachers and teacher-educators, and (4) the challenges for student-teachers and teacher-educators in developing and using of assessment rubrics. From the discussion on the emerging themes, it is concluded that (a) use of assessment rubrics makes assessment process more meaningful to both teacher-educators and students-teachers; and (b) use of rubrics makes student-teachers and teacher-educators more focused on their purpose of teaching and learning outcomes. It is recommended that teacher-educators in teacher training institutions should use rubrics to assess prospective-teachers so that they, after completing their degree programs, would use similar techniques in their respective schools to assess their students' learning outcomes effectively.

Keywords: Assessment, Assessment Rubrics, Rubric Design, Teaching and Learning.

INTRODUCTION

Studies revealed that assessment rubrics in higher education are used for a variety of purposes. For example, rubrics are used to enhance students' achievements, to bring improvement in teaching and to assess programs' effectiveness, etc. (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Assessing a student's learning outcome through rubrics helps a teacher to mark the quality of work through indicators from highest to lowest in the form of an excellent to poor performance (Gezie, 2012; Shanta & Wells, 2020). Gallardo (2020) and others claimed that assessment rubrics work as scoring guides. These guides contain criteria to evaluate a student's performance for a given task. Thus, using such criteria for assessment that is shared with students during teaching enables students to focus clearly on the expected learning outcomes to achieve. Reflecting on the practices of teaching, learning and assessment, it was observed that most of the teachers generally use traditional criteria to assess students learning rather than developing rubrics and sharing with students before their assessment (Kilgour, Northcote, Williams & Kilgour, 2020; Mehall, 2020).

The researchers Newton, Williams and Feeney (2020) argued that in traditional assessment, without using rubrics, teachers give grades to students like A, B or C, which do not make better sense to

the students on which basis they got these grades. These types of practices create questions in the minds of all the stakeholders (e.g., student-teachers and others etc.) about what is the meaning of a particular grade they got in the exam. How that grade equates the knowledge they have in the field? Thus, such questions (assessment for grading) can develop a space for educators to think about a tool that can better inform learners why they should get a particular grade in their exam. Therefore, using assessment rubrics to assess students' learning enables students to make better sense of what to perform and how to perform.

Assessment rubrics are also tools of self-assessment which students can use to assess their activities during the whole study process. In so doing, these tools of self-assessment help students to benchmark their own performance (Gallardo, 2020). However, Panadero and Romero (2014) pointed out that rubrics are not always used for formative assessment but they are also used for summative assessment. Martin (2000) also argued that the justification of grades and marks through certain tools like rubrics are helpful because such tools of evidence provide more satisfaction to students with their grades (Kilgour *et al.*, 2020).

In the field of teaching and learning research, the importance of rubrics for promoting students' learning and aiding teachers' feedback on students' performance has been extensively discussed. In the context of government colleges of education which are the professional institutions are supposed to provide pre-service and in-service training courses for both male and female learners less is known about this area of research. Therefore, this study is aimed to explore the perceptions and practices of students and teachers about use of assessment rubrics in teaching and learning in the context of colleges of education in Gilgit-Baltistan. For this purpose, one of the colleges was selected as the research site. There are 20 teacher-educators (16 male and 4 female) to teach associate degree in education (ADE) classes. In the ADE Programme, some of the teacher-educators use tools like rubrics to assess the students' learning. Being teacher-educators, the researchers experienced that assessing students through rubrics seemed to enhance students' satisfaction level of their grades (i.e., in what ways their responses to the questions make better sense of the grades they get in written tests and presentations etc.) (Din, Qutoshi & Khan, 2020). Rowntree (1997) also suggested that the nature and quality of students' work must be determined before it can be labeled with suitable symbols i.e., grades. It is, therefore, appeared to be very important to use tools like rubrics that contain clear criteria for the assessment (Kilgour *et al.*, 2020).

Generally, a rubric is represented in the form of a table where quality levels are shown in the form of indicators with statements. These indicators are presented in the top row of the table (Matshediso, 2020; Dawson 2017). The statements which indicate different quality levels are basically linked with taxonomies like Bloom's grade levels (i.e., remembering and understanding- lower order thinking domain to creating the higher order thinking domain) in the light of their learning outcomes (Dawson, 2017). Similarly, SOLO taxonomy focuses on four levels of performance and these levels are represented in the form of A-D grade descriptors as its headings (Biggs & Tang, 2015). In contrast, Fluckiger (2010) argued for a 'single-point' rubric, which only illustrates an acceptable level of students' performance. Thus, using assessment rubrics enables both students to focus on levels of performance and teachers to focus on standards of teaching (Mehall, 2020).

It means, if all the teachers in schools and colleges use rubrics, the learning gaps would be filled, and students will be high achievers with satisfaction (Dawson 2017; Huber et al., 2020). In this way, it is important to probe the views of the teacher-educators and prospective teachers to realize the importance of using rubrics in assessing students' learning. However, in the context, to assess the students' learning in ADE classes, rubrics are used by those teacher-educators who were either trained or got exposure to attend professional training programmes focused on assessment. Studies show that the students become satisfied with their assessment when they compare their learning/work against the rubrics given beforehand and teachers also satisfy with their grading of students in a fairly manner (Huber, Leach-López, Lee & Mafi, 2020). Therefore, this study is conducted to explore the perceptions of teacher-educators about the students' assessment while using rubrics in the assessment process. Reddy (2007) argued that a rubric ensures active learning by emphasizing on continuous feedback from teachers for the improvement of the learning process. To address the problem, the researchers have focused these research questions:

1. How do the teacher-educator perceive the use of assessment rubric to assess their students' learning?
2. Why do they use assessment rubrics in assessing students' learning?
3. What is the role of assessment rubrics in assessing students' Learning?
4. What are the challenges faced by teacher-educators during designing and implementing rubrics?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies revealed that developing and using assessment rubrics is very important for both teachers and students (Huber *et al.*, 2020). For example, assessment rubrics with clear criteria help students to reflect on their own abilities to solve real-world problems, analyze and synthesize information and it also helps teachers to reflect on their own approach to teaching (Brookhart, 2015). Thus, rubrics with criteria and performance level descriptions are considered to be effective tools for assessment and means of communicating performance by providing feedback on student work (Matshedisho, 2020).

Similarly, other researchers asserted that a rubric is necessary to enhance the satisfaction level of students over their performance and to improve the quality of teaching at the teachers' level. Moreover, they claimed that rubric is a scoring tool that provides evidence about what counts for a particular piece of students' work in terms of the purpose, organization, and other details etc. (Chong, Tam, Yau & Wong, 2020; Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Andrade and Andrade (2012) argued that a rubric articulates the expectations for an assignment by observing the criteria describing levels of quality with clear indicators along a continuum (i.e. from excellent to poor). Thus, rubrics can make students' performance visible on the basis of the open criteria which inform about the achievement in terms of learning outcomes and failure in terms of unachieved. This means that rubrics help students to engage with the process of learning and outcome of learning. So, Martin-Kniep (2000) also mentioned that "rubrics assist students as they proceed with the development of processes and products" (p.37).

Reflecting on the nature of rubrics, the researchers came to know that there are two types of rubrics such as holistic rubrics and analytic rubrics. According to Alkharusi (2008), a holistic rubric helps teachers to score the overall process or product as a whole. It does not require explaining the achievement of a student at each component of the complete work. Thus, holistic rubrics are used when teachers focus on summative assessment of students. On the other hand, when the purpose of assessment is to focus on each and every part of the whole work an analytic rubric is used. Because, analytic rubrics enable teachers to collect scores separately and then obtain a total score. One of the characteristics of analytic rubrics is to look at a fairly focused type of response to collect.

Matshedisho (2020) asserted that "a rubric is a set of clear expectations or criteria used to help teachers and students focus on what is valued in a subject, topic, or activity" (p. 223). The expectations are usually descriptive and help to "develop a common understanding of what is valued in a performance" (p. 223). It means that without using rubrics neither teacher nor student become clear about the direction and outcome of their task. Using rubrics also helps the teachers to convey their expectation to the students in an easy way.

Rubrics are useful for assessment measures that are more qualitative, open-ended and interpretive. For instance, to assess essays, plays, book reports, projects, etc. rubrics help teachers to align standards of performance with those of students learning outcomes (Cohen-Vogel, Sadler, Little & Merrill, 2020). If rubrics with such kind of purposes are constructed in a collaborative manner (i.e., both teacher and students sit together to decide what to teach and how to assess etc.) can help faculty refine their teaching skills (Joseph, Rickett, Northcote & Christian, 2020). Yet another important characteristic of a well-designed rubric is to inform a teacher to explore *blind spots* of teaching learning activities. Thus, it enables a teacher to explore the developmental process of learning as well as the weakness of a student over time.

This means that rubrics carry a wider meaning for assessors. Assessors use rubrics not only as tools of assessment but also ways and means to improve both teaching of teachers and learning outcomes

of students. For example, teachers use rubrics as a way to provide constructive feedback for improvement in learning (Nordrum, Evans, & Gustafsson, 2013). Similarly, students can use rubrics for self-assessment as well as for peer assessment to enhance their levels of learning (Andrade & Du, 2005; Panadero & Romero, 2014; Hassell & Lee, 2020). Moreover, a rubric is found to be a source of stimulus for students to generate discussion on teacher's feedback when the purpose of assessment is formative. Thus, it is preferred to design rubric in a collaborative manner that is the co-construction of assessment rubrics which is a challenging task for teachers to think about (Joseph *et al.*, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This research, within a qualitative design, uses a case study method of inquiry. Among colleges of education and higher educational institutions of teacher education one college is selected purposefully as a unit of study. To explore the perceptions and practices of teachers about their use of assessment rubrics to assess the learning of students, a case study approach is more robust in the context it is applied. Qualitative case study approach to research is capable of enabling the researchers to identify the understandings held by the research participants and meaning they make from their perceptions and experiences in the form of reliable data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013). Similarly, Creswell (2012) points out that qualitative study takes place in the natural setting, which helps researchers to reflect and ask for clarifications. Thus, using a case study approach enabled the researchers to gather relevant data from researcher participants about their views on and practices of using assessment rubrics.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflection of teacher-educators and student-teachers. The researchers further explored using probing questions to know research participants' point of views about assessment rubrics, their significance, the challenges that they face while using in teaching and learning, and their function in assessing learning etc.

The researchers, based on the following criteria, used purposive sampling technique (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) to select the research participants. The criterion was: (1) faculty members who were teaching to ADE classes, who have experience of using rubrics to assess the student- teachers; and (2) students of ADE III and IV classes where rubrics are used to assess their learning especially for the portfolio assessment.

Three teacher-educators and six students of ADE III and IV class were selected. First of all, the overall plan about the nature of the interview, time and date etc. was shared with the principal, teacher-educators and student-teachers of ADE II and IV classes. The ethics of research was shared with all research participants and the consent letters were obtained from them. The researchers assured them that the data will not be disclosed to any irrelevant person without their consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The researchers started analyzing data during the fieldwork/field notes and reflections on the views of respondents and their approaches to using rubrics in order to focus on the most relevant and important data. The researchers included the only data responded to the research questions and research purpose. The audio tape data was transcribed first, based on the interview recorded. Similarly, the researchers studied the transcriptions and tried to make meaning of themes in order to write a research report. Likewise, during this process, the researchers have triangulated all the data to ensure its validity. The researchers revisited the information and material gathered before putting them under different themes. The researchers used the thematic analysis approach to segregating data by codes, then into data clumps for further analysis and description. This process was used on the coding of different themes and finally interpreting findings for reporting. After analysis, the following themes emerged from the data.

Current Assessment Practices

Most of the research participants mentioned that the role of assessment is crucial in the teaching and learning process. If an organization has some good practices in assessing their students' learning (e.g., determine the learning outcomes and sets criteria/rubrics to assess), it boosts up students' performance in a holistic manner (Qutoshi, Ramzan & Iqbal, 2018). Some of the research participants say that teachers

use two types of assessment procedures; summative and formative assessment as Wynne, (2007) described the types of assessment. Other researchers argued that the importance of modern and postmodern assessment strategies such as self-assessment, peer assessment and transformative approaches to assessment a teacher can clarify what to assess, why to assess, and how to assess his/her students learning (Kilgour *et al.*, 2020; Qutoshi, Ramzan & Iqbal, 2018).

But traditional assessment (e.g., without developing rubrics) does not enhance students' learning. However, in the college of education (the research site) traditional assessment is also in practice. During the interview instructor A said, *"There is an idea in my mind about assessment for example, how much content is there and how the students have presented and organized the paper?"* (Interview -1, October 25, 2018). It means the teacher is assessing the students without any written criteria. Any student can challenge this process because there is no such evidence with the teacher to justify the assessment process used for the purpose. Traditional assessment is mostly based on input process and output measures that means that teachers do not use a rubric to make sense of how to assess a piece of students' work (Reddy, 2007).

The Effectiveness of Rubrics in Teaching and Learning

Rubrics are helpful tools of assessment for teachers in assessing students' learning because teachers use these guides to assess students' work in an effective manner (Gallardo, 2020). One of the students mentioned that *"we are studying books according to the pattern of questions, we know while assessing how a question is checked, which areas are focused. I realized that rubrics help us in the focused study"* (Field Text, November 2018). Likewise, teachers also shared that, *"rubrics help us in getting feedback from students; we easily identify our strengths and weaknesses, and also improve our strategy of evaluation"* (Interview-2 Teacher-educator B, October 25, 2018).

Martin-Kniep (2000) argued that developing rubrics will have a positive effect on teachers' instructions. Because their ideas will be clearer in articulating their plans. What aspects of the questions should be assessed and why? Whether the students have addressed the questions appropriately and to what extent it meets the standard of the rubrics. It appears from the discussion that the use of rubrics makes teachers reflective practitioners. They can reflect on their lessons and can try to identify gaps in their teaching in order to fill the gaps identified.

Andrade and Du (2005) reflect on their research findings that using rubrics enabled students to remain focused on their tasks, produce high quality work, obtain good grades and get more satisfaction etc. They further asserted that rubrics helped teachers to communicate their expectations from students. On the other hand, student-teachers also noted that rubrics helped in identifying their strengths and weaknesses in their work. Martin-Kniep (2000) added that, *"rubrics assist students as they proceed with the development of processes and products"* (p.37). The nature and quality of students' work must be determined before labeling with any symbols in order to describe their achievements (Rowntree, 1997).

The effectiveness of Rubrics in Assessment

It reveals from the data that rubrics make assessment process impartial because the assessors used guidelines for assessment of a particular subject rather than his/her own personal judgments. One of the research participants pointed out that teachers' mood does not affect the marking of any paper during the assessment. *"Traditional assessment depends on teachers' mood... but rubrics do not allow teachers' mood to influence assessment... and teachers' personal biases can't hinder in assessment"* (Interview-1, October 24, 2018). Similarly, Wolf and Stevens (2007) argued that the rubrics improve teaching, provide feedback to students, contribute to sound assessment, and are an important source of information for program improvement.

The effectiveness of assessment depends upon a well-designed and careful description of what to assess and how to assess. When assessing students' learning, this means clearly specifying intended learning outcomes before selecting the assessment procedure to use (Linn, 2000). To make a reliable assessment i.e., giving similar results regardless of when and how the assessment was made.

Most of the research participants shared their views that rubric helped them understand their level of understanding. One of the students expressed his views that *“it helps to make tasks systematic. It reduces subjectivity and increases the objectivity of assessment and keeps teachers impartial while assessing students' work”* (Interview, October 24, 2018). Rubrics were like rating scale and define and differentiate levels of students' performance (Martin-Kniep, 2000). Teachers have expectations from the students which they explore through assessment tools. The tools give justification to teachers and students and make harmony among them due to agreed criteria and level of assessment rubrics. Andrade and Du (2005) and Matshedisho (2020) also pointed out the importance of rubrics saying that a document that articulates the expectations of learners for an assignment, given to them, by listing the criteria, or what counts and describing levels of quality in the form of performance on a scale of higher level to lower level.

Effectiveness in Professional Development of Teachers and Teacher-educators

From the data, it appeared that rubrics help not only in assessing students' learning but also improving the performance of the teachers and teacher-educators. To this end, first of all, teachers have to develop rubrics for every subject they teach by keeping in view the intended learning outcomes of the subject. Second, it is helpful for the teachers to find out the gaps in teaching and learning. Third, it enables teachers to create links between teaching and assessment. When teachers develop rubrics they also plan their lessons accordingly. They design activities to cope with individual differences and try their best to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

One of the teacher-educators shared his views saying that *“teachers' role is like a judge who does justice with all. To ensure his role as an effective justice he/she needs tools and skills. But in the classroom, I found rubrics are the good tools to make justice with students in the assessment process”* (Interview-2, October 24, 2018). This shows that teachers who use rubrics can realize the importance of rubrics to ensure justice with learners as well as self.

Assessment Rubrics Enhances the Satisfaction Level of the Students

The research participants shared their views that rubrics help them to understand their level of understanding. They said, *“rubrics give a clear vision of a given task to follow the instructions...satisfy my grading because I follow each step”* (Interview, October 25, 2018). Rubrics are like rating scales and define and differentiate levels of students' performance, which enhance students' satisfaction over their performance (Martin-Kniep, 2000; Huber *et al.*, 2020). Andrade and Du (2005) asserted that using assessment rubric is important because it provides directions to students with clear indicators about different levels of their performance.

One of the interviewees pointed out that *“with rubrics, assignments lead students in a fixed track to complete”* (Interview, October 25, 2018). This means that using rubrics in teaching and assessment enables teachers to enhance students' satisfaction over the grade they get. Thus, it is important for all teachers in higher education to design rubrics and share with students before they decide what to teach and how to assess.

Challenges in developing and using Assessment Rubrics

The use of assessment rubrics is helpful for the teachers and students to enhance their capacity in teaching and learning (Cockett & Jackson, 2018). It was revealed from the data that most of the participants, especially teacher-educators argued that “rubrics are very helpful but developing rubrics are very challenging. Without training, it is very difficult even impossible for a novice teacher to develop and implement them” (Interview, October 25, 2018). They also pointed out that the development and use of rubrics are resource demanding, burdensome and time-consuming. It is a fact that some of the teacher-educators were involved in designing and implementing rubrics. Studies revealed that it was very difficult for new and less trained teachers to link the levels of the rubrics and descriptions in each level (Panadero & Jonsson, 2020). This means that higher education institutions need to focus on creating opportunities for teachers to develop their capacity to develop rubrics and align their teaching with assessment

practices. In doing so, they can enhance the performance of students and their own as professional teachers.

CONCLUSION

Rubrics are the tools of assessment with clear guidelines for teachers and students about the expectations in the form of learning outcomes. Applying assessment rubrics in higher education a teacher becomes satisfied with his/her teaching approaches and also makes students satisfied with their performance. Without providing proper training to teachers on assessment rubrics it seems to be almost impossible for untrained teachers to develop even simple rubrics to assess fairly. However, it is an even more challenging job for the teachers, especially the novice ones to co-construct rubrics with students to ensure fair assessment in educational institutions. A well-constructed rubric, as a powerful tool of assessment, helps a teacher to identify the gaps in teaching and learning and guides the students how to improve their performance in a holistic manner. Thus, well designed and co-constructed rubrics can better help students in attempting questions with a clear understanding of the purpose and standards of performance at the highest level with confidence. It was revealed that using rubrics would be helpful for all stakeholders (i.e., the students and teachers etc.) to improve teaching and learning by fulfilling expectations on both sides. However, collaborating with students to determine their assignments, designing their assessments and co-constructing rubrics appear to be a demanding task. Because it is an ongoing process through which everyone needs to be very responsible, committed and updated with what to teach, why to teach and how to assess learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above discussion based on key findings of the study, some suggestions to address the challenges in future research are; rubrics should be designed by the teacher-educators and shared with students before implementation. The Involvement of students in rubrics development would be more productive because it gives ownership to both students and teachers (Kilgour et al., 2020). It also provides an opportunity for students to reflect and share their own ideas. Assessment rubrics need to be implemented at school levels. Both teachers and teacher-educators need to be trained in designing and implementing rubrics during the assessment. This practice will make the assessment less biased and more productive. This topic could be investigated through action research to engage researchers and researched in a co-learning situation. The process of action research provides the learning opportunity to all teachers and trainee teachers to understand the developing process and before using rubrics the capacity of teachers and teacher-educators needs to be enhanced. Otherwise, it will create more challenges in assessment (Panadero & Jonsson, 2020).

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