

Rubric-Mediated Assessment as a Catalyst for Motivation: Evidence from an EFL Teacher Education Context

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined the influence of rubric-based assessment on EFL students' motivation. The participant group comprised twelve teacher-trainees from Sakhnin College, many of whom are currently active within the school system. This dual identity—as both learners and educators—offered a unique, multidimensional perspective on assessment practices.

The central research question guiding this study was: *How does rubric-based assessment influence student motivation?* To investigate this, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

The analysis revealed several critical themes regarding the integration of rubrics in an EFL context:

- **Rubrics as a Roadmap:** For most participants, rubrics served as essential navigational tools, transforming initial confusion into clarity.
- **The Fairness Factor:** The structured nature of rubrics fostered a perception of grading equity, which in turn increased student receptiveness to feedback and sustained academic motivation.
- **Barriers to Readiness:** A subset of participants struggled with the complexity and linguistic formulation of the standards, highlighting disparities in academic literacy and readiness.
- **The Constraint Dilemma:** Conversely, some participants reported that overly rigid rubrics felt stifling, potentially limiting creative expression and rendering the learning process mechanical.

The findings suggest that while rubrics can significantly enhance student motivation, their effectiveness is contingent upon several factors: clear design, seamless integration into the curriculum, accessible language, and the instructor's pedagogical approach.

The study offers practical implications for educators and teacher-training programs, emphasizing that for rubrics to effectively support learner achievement in EFL contexts, they must be balanced with flexibility and clear instruction to accommodate varying levels of academic literacy.

I. Introduction

In recent years, the use of rubric-based assessment has gained attention in foreign language education, especially among university teachers and curriculum designers. One of the most discussed tools in this context is rubric-based assessment, which provides students with detailed, transparent criteria that outline the expectations for a task or skill (Sáiz-Manzanares et al., 2017), unlike the traditional approach. Traditionally, tests that provide a single grade, rubrics allow students to see where they are, what they have done well, and what needs improvement.

Student motivation is also a key element in this study. Motivation refers to the two important types that push students to engage in learning: internal drive or external encouragement. In Deci and Ryan's *Self-Determination Theory* (1985), students feel more motivated when they feel autonomous, competent, and connected. In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, motivation plays a significant role in helping learners overcome language barriers, persist through difficulties, and achieve academic success (Zeng & Chen, 2022).

In the EFL context, where learners study English in non-native environments, learning a foreign language can be a long and challenging process. To keep them active, EFL students benefit from specific educational goals, timely feedback, and motivational support (Tosuncuoglu, 2018). In such environments, assessment and motivation are essential for achieving long-term success. For the EFL learners, this depends on their motivation and the way their learning is assessed. Many of them struggle with confidence, fear of making many mistakes, and limited exposure to authentic English. Rubric-based assessment may help by offering clear feedback and building a sense of progress and achievement.

Importance of the Study: Understanding how rubric-based assessment affects student motivation is highly relevant in today's classrooms. As teachers shift from traditional testing to more formative, feedback-based assessment, it becomes necessary to explore whether such changes truly support students' motivation and achievement. This study focuses on university-level EFL students and aims to give practical insights for teachers and policymakers. Through this study, we will review the impact of standards-based assessment on student motivation, focusing on the positive and negative aspects of this method (Taylor, Kisby & Reedy, 2024).

Purpose of the Study

This research investigates how Rubric-Based Assessment might enhance motivation among students learning English as a foreign language. How using clear rubrics influences student engagement, learning behaviors, and perceived success in English learning tasks.

Research Questions

Main Research Question: How does rubric-based assessment affect student motivation in learning English as a foreign language?

Sub-questions:

1. How do students perceive the use of rubrics in their English learning?
2. In what ways do rubrics influence students' sense of achievement and engagement?
3. What role does feedback within rubric-based assessment play in supporting motivation?

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks of Motivation in Language Learning

Examining the motivational effects of an assessment instrument, such as a rating scale, necessitates grounding in well-established motivational theories. These frameworks provide insight into students' cognitive and behavioral responses in learning contexts. Among the most prominent theories in contemporary second language acquisition (SLA) research are self-determination theory and the L2 motivational self-system

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (1985, 2000), is a comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation, emphasizing personality development and functioning within social contexts. According to SDT, optimal psychological health and well-being depend on the satisfaction of three innate and universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the desire to experience self-direction and agency in one's actions. Competence involves the need to feel effective and capable of achieving desired outcomes. Relatedness denotes the desire to feel connected to and valued by others. Fulfillment of these needs fosters intrinsic motivation and engagement in meaningful and rewarding activities.

Recent empirical research supports the applicability of SDT in educational settings. For instance, a randomized controlled study by Peltzer et al. (2025) found that formative feedback utilizing rubrics significantly enhanced self-efficacy, enjoyment, and writing motivation among at-risk EFL learners, particularly when such feedback was combined with model exemplars.

In educational contexts, Taylor, Kisby, and Reedy (2024) note that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) highlights the significant role of classroom climate in either supporting or undermining students' basic psychological needs. For instance, the use of rubrics that provide choices, clarify the purpose of assignments, and acknowledge students' emotions can enhance autonomy. Competence can be fostered through appropriately challenging tasks, constructive feedback, and clearly defined pathways to success. Furthermore, creating a warm, respectful, and supportive classroom environment promotes relatedness (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Research in second language acquisition (SLA) has consistently demonstrated a positive association between the satisfaction of these needs and beneficial learning outcomes, including higher engagement, increased persistence, and reduced anxiety (Noels, Pelletier, & Vallerand, 2000). Specifically, Noels (2001) found that students who perceived their teachers as autonomy-supportive exhibited greater intrinsic motivation for language learning.

Deci and Ryan (2000) emphasized that intrinsic motivation thrives in environments where fundamental psychological needs are satisfied. Their research demonstrates that social contexts, such as classrooms, can either enhance or undermine motivation depending on the extent to which they support these needs. Assessment tools that incorporate explicit rating criteria, such as rubrics, can effectively address all three core psychological needs.

Rubric-based assessments support competence, autonomy, and relatedness by clearly articulating the criteria for success. By “demystifying” the expectations—the so-called “rules of the game”—rubrics directly foster competence. Consistent rubric use has been shown to improve alignment between students’ self-assessments and instructor evaluations, resulting in enhanced writing outcomes (Bidna, 2024). Clear guidance reduces uncertainty about teacher expectations, making complex tasks more manageable and enhancing students’ confidence in their abilities, or self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Murad and Assadi, 2025). Supporting this, Fraile et al. (2023) found that applying explicit criteria in collaborative problem-solving tasks significantly increased students’ self-regulation and self-efficacy.

Moreover, this independence supports students by empowering them to become more organizers of their own learning, and using the criteria for self-assessment, such as evaluating their work before submission, making decisions about their mistakes, where to focus their efforts, and tracking their own progress, thereby allowing them to own their learning journey (Fraile et al., 2023).

Thus, when the criterion is used as a basis for constructive and non-judgmental feedback, it can enhance the relationship between the student and teacher, emphasizing the need for communication. Therefore, feedback is not considered a personal criticism from the teacher, but rather an objective guidance based on shared and transparent standards.

The L2 Motivational Self System

Transitioning from general motivational theory to frameworks specific to language learning, Zimmerman, 2002) L2 Motivational Self System has emerged as a dominant model. This framework explains language learning motivation by emphasizing learners’ future self-concepts. The system comprises three main components:

1. The Ideal L2 Self represents the learner’s vision of themselves as a successful and proficient user of the target language. It encompasses their hopes, aspirations, and personal goals related to language learning, serving as a powerful source of intrinsic motivation.
2. The Ought-to L2 Self includes the attributes that learners believe they should possess to meet external expectations or to avoid negative outcomes, such as passing an exam or satisfying parental or societal pressures.
3. The L2 Learning Experience refers to situational and immediate motivational factors arising from the classroom environment, including the teacher, peers, curriculum, and specific learning activities.

Dörnyei (2005; 2009) posits that the primary catalyst for sustained longitudinal motivation is the construct of the Ideal L2 Self, integrated with a favorable L2 Learning Experience. Within this framework, the internal representation of an individual’s future self—characterized by proficiency in the target language—serves as a powerful incentive for self-regulatory behavior. Provided this vision is perceived as both vivid and attainable, learners are significantly more inclined to engage in the sustained effort necessary for successful second language acquisition (SLA).

From a pedagogical perspective, the instructional environment serves as a critical mechanism to mediate the discrepancy between the learner’s actual state and their idealized future identity. Empirical evidence consistently validates this theoretical model; notably, Papi and Teimouri (2012) demonstrated that the Ideal L2 Self operates as a robust predictor of intended learning effort among Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

The operationalization of abstract goals, such as "English proficiency," into discrete, observable performance indicators (e.g., rhetorical construction or lexical diversity) facilitates a clearer trajectory for competence development. By mastering these granular competencies, learners experience a sense of incremental progress, which reduces the perceived distance between their current state and their Ideal L2 Self. This alignment enhances self-efficacy, rendering the overarching linguistic objective more psychologically attainable.

Furthermore, standardized rubrics serve as a critical component of the L2 Learning Experience by ensuring transparency and perceived procedural justice in evaluation. By mitigating the affective filters associated with "grading anxiety" or arbitrary assessment, well-defined criteria foster a more stable and positive instructional environment. This reduction in extraneous cognitive load and emotional stress promotes sustainable engagement, thereby reinforcing the motivational cycle required to pursue long-term linguistic identity goals.

Rubrics as a Formative Assessment Tool

The pedagogical efficacy of rubrics is maximized when operationalized as mechanisms for assessment for learning (AfL) rather than purely for summative evaluation. Formative assessment—as conceptualized by

Black and Wiliam (1998)—is an iterative process of eliciting and interpreting empirical evidence of student performance. Both educators and learners utilize this data to diagnose current competencies, clarify target objectives, and formulate adaptive instructional or learning trajectories.

As a dynamic, longitudinal mechanism, formative assessment aims to optimize cognitive development concurrently with the learning process (Assadi and Murad, 2025). This diagnostic approach stands in contrast to summative assessment, which functions as a terminal measurement of cumulative knowledge acquisition at the conclusion of an instructional unit. When embedded within this formative framework, rubrics transcend their role as scoring instruments and become cognitive scaffolds that guide ongoing self-regulation and mastery.

The Role of Rubrics in Formative Assessment and Self-Regulation

Standardized evaluation criteria, such as rubrics, provide both instructors and students with a transparent framework of task expectations. Rather than offering nebulous praise (e.g., "good job"), rubrics facilitate granular feedback by isolating specific competencies. For instance, an assessment might reveal that while a student demonstrates high-level conceptual understanding, their structural organization requires further development. This diagnostic precision offers actionable pathways for improvement. Empirically, Panadero and Jonsson (2013) demonstrated that rubrics enhance academic achievement by delivering targeted feedback, which in turn fosters student autonomy and self-regulation. Furthermore, Williams (2024) posited that timely, structured rubric feedback serves as a critical driver for student motivation, sustained engagement, and metacognitive reflection.

Furthermore, rubrics facilitate a shift toward student-centered learning by fostering metacognitive awareness and self-regulation. When provided with evaluative criteria prior to commencing an assignment, students are empowered to engage in proactive self-assessment, allowing them to identify and rectify errors before final submission. This process not only cultivates academic independence but also enhances critical thinking skills.

The Role of Self-Regulation in Student Success

The integration of rubrics aligns with established educational theories regarding learner autonomy:

- **Self-Regulated Learning (SRL):** Zimmerman (2002) posits that students who effectively manage their own learning processes—known as self-regulated learners—demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement.
- **Psychological Impact:** Providing clear, transparent rubrics reduces ambiguity, which in turn increases student focus and self-efficacy (confidence) throughout the task execution.

Student Perceptions of Rubric-Referenced Assessment

Most students see rubrics as helpful. Andrade and Durney (2005) found that students feel more confident when they know what the teacher expects. They also said rubrics helped them understand the assignment better and gave them a chance to improve their grades. Students also felt the grading was fairer when there were clear rules.

But not all students have the same experience. Some find rubrics confusing when the language is too difficult or not clear. Wollenschläger, Hattie, and Machts (2016) explained that rubrics with vague words like “good organization” don’t help students understand what they really need to improve. Also, when rubrics are overly detailed, students might feel they need to “tick the boxes” rather than think creatively. This can reduce their motivation.

In English as a foreign language (EFL) class, rubrics can be even more difficult if the language in the rubric is too advanced. Some students spend more time trying to understand the rubric than doing the task. That’s why teachers must use simple and clear language when giving rubrics to EFL learners. A good rubric should give support without limiting students’ thinking or making them feel lost.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Context

English is not spoken outside the classroom in many countries. This is the case for students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Unlike students who live in English-speaking countries, EFL learners often have limited chances to use the language in daily life (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Because they depend more on school and teachers to develop their English.

Rubrics can help students a lot in this situation. For those who are not confident in English, rubrics make it easier to understand what is expected. Instead of guessing what the teacher wants, they get clear steps. This reduces their stress and gives them a sense of control. Andrade and Durney (2005) and Panadero and Jonsson (2013) found that rubrics help students stay motivated because they know how they will be graded.

Rubrics also make students feel the process is fair and not random. According to Wollenschläger et al. (2016) many students feel less anxious when they understand the grading criteria. Especially true for EFL

learners who often feel unsure about their English level. When things are clear, they feel more confident and try harder.

Also, because EFL students don't hear or use English much outside school, they rely a lot on feedback. Rubrics help them give feedback to themselves, not just wait for the teacher. This helps them become more independent and responsible in their learning, which Noels et al. (2000) said is important for progress in language learning.

Achievement in Language Learning

Achievement in language learning refers to observable progress or measurable success. In the context of English language learning, achievement encompasses students' ability to speak accurately, write effectively, read comprehensively, and understand the language. It may also be reflected in improved test scores or increased confidence in using English within the classroom. Such indicators serve as evidence of tangible progress in learners' language development (Dörnyei, 2005).

Motivation is a key determinant of student success. Research by Dörnyei (2009) and Babi and Temouri (2012) has shown that when learners are engaged with their studies or envision themselves using English proficiently in the future, they exert greater effort and exhibit greater persistence, reducing the likelihood of disengagement.

Rubrics facilitate this process by providing students with structured guidance. By clearly outlining the criteria and steps required for success, rubrics enable learners to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. Panadero and Jonsson (2013) observed that the use of rubrics enhances clarity and focus, making the learning process more systematic and less ambiguous.

In addition, a rubric creates a direct connection between motivation and achievement. Black and Wiliam (1998) and Zimmerman (2002) said that when students know exactly how they will be evaluated, they feel more in control. This helps them set goals, stay motivated, and feel proud of their progress (Taylor, Kisby & Reedy, 2024).

Methodology

Research Questions

- Does rubric-based assessment increase student motivation by providing clarity of expectations?
- Does the effect of rubric-based assessment vary depending on students' academic abilities and learning styles?
- Does rubric-based assessment improve perceived fairness in grading, thereby enhancing motivation?
- What are the potential limitations or challenges of using rubrics in a way that sustains motivation and creativity?

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to obtain an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences. Qualitative approaches are particularly well-suited for investigating complex human phenomena such as motivation, as they emphasize meaning, context, and the subjective perspectives of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, a collective case study design was employed. This design facilitated a focused examination of a defined "case"—the group of teacher-students at Sakhnin College—while simultaneously acknowledging the unique experiences of each participant within that case (Stake, 1995). The objective was not to generate generalizable findings, but rather to produce a rich, "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of participants' perceptions of rubric-based assessment and its role as a motivational factor within this particular and contextually insightful setting.

Participants

This study included 12 participants (8 females and 4 males) from the English teacher training program at Sakhnin College. Participants were purposefully selected rather than randomly chosen to ensure they could provide rich, relevant insights related to the research questions (Patton, 2015). The goal was to include a diverse group of students reflecting the variability typically found in real classroom settings in terms of language proficiency, academic backgrounds, and personal circumstances.

Academic Profile: The participants exhibited a range of academic abilities. Based on course performance and instructor feedback, two were classified as top-performing students, four as very good, three as good, and three as academically weaker. This variation allowed for an examination of how rubric-based assessment might impact students across different levels of achievement.

Demographic Profile: Participants had diverse life experiences that could influence their engagement with their studies. Among the eight female participants, four were married (including some with children), two were engaged, and two were single. Among the four male participants, two were married, one was engaged, and one

was single. These personal circumstances were considered important, as home responsibilities can affect the time and effort students devote to their studies (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Prior Experience: Most participants had little or no prior experience with rubrics. For many, this study represented their first structured and intentional use of rubrics, making their reflections particularly valuable as they simultaneously explored the functionality of rubrics and their own motivational responses.

All participant names were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Table 1 shows the background information of the twelve participants in the study.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Study Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Educational Background	Proficiency Level	Experience (Years)
Noor	Female	28	Single	B.A. Social & Human Sciences	Low/Weak	2
Ahmed	Male	29	Single	B.A. Education	Intermediate/Good	2
Aliya	Female	32	Engaged	M.A. TEFL	High	3
Manal	Female	40	Married	B.A. Statistics & Business Admin.	Low/Weak	2
Khalid	Male	50	Married	B.A. Business Administration	Very Good	10
Sarah	Female	25	Single	B.A. English Language Teaching	High Achieving	4
Alaa	Female	29	N/A	M.A. Applied Linguistics	N/A	N/A
Hassan	Male	28	Married	B.A. Education	Low/Weak	1
Eman	Female	30	N/A	M.A. TEFL	N/A	N/A
Fatima	Female	25	Married	B.A. Social & Human Sciences	Very Good	2
Yusuf	Male	33	Engaged	M.A. English Education	Intermediate/Good	N/A
Dyana	Female	27	N/A	B.A. Education	N/A	1

Description of Participant Cohort

The study involved a diverse group of 12 participants (N=12), comprising eight females and four males. The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 50 years, providing a broad generational perspective on the use of rubrics.

- **Academic Diversity:** The cohort includes individuals with various educational qualifications, ranging from Bachelor's degrees in Social Sciences and Business to specialized Master's degrees in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and Applied Linguistics.
- **Professional Experience:** Years of experience varied significantly, from entry-level practitioners (1 year) to seasoned professionals with a decade of experience.
- **Proficiency Variance:** Participants represented a wide spectrum of achievement levels, categorized from "Weak" to "High Achieving," allowing the researcher to analyze how rubrics assist learners at different stages of competency.

Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection in this study was the semi-structured interview. This methodological choice provided a flexible framework, utilizing a predetermined set of guiding questions while allowing the researcher the latitude to pursue emergent themes in greater depth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was designed to elicit expansive, qualitative reflections regarding participants' experiences with rubrics and the subsequent impact on their academic motivation and learning trajectories.

Data Collection Environment and Rapport

To ensure the gathering of authentic, nuanced data, the researchers prioritized the establishment of a collaborative and non-threatening atmosphere:

- **Conversational Tone:** The interviews were structured to mirror professional dialogues rather than rigid formal assessments. Participants frequently characterized these sessions as "collegial discussions" or "informal chats," a perception that facilitated psychological safety and encouraged honest disclosure.
- **Logistics and Duration:** Each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. To maintain confidentiality and minimize external distractions, interviews were conducted in private settings within the college premises.
- **Documentation:** With the explicit consent of the participants, all sessions were audio-recorded to ensure an accurate transcription of the "lived experiences" and narratives regarding rubric-driven behaviors in the classroom.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). This systematic qualitative approach enabled the researcher to move from broad data sets to nuanced patterns of meaning, ensuring that the findings were both organized and theoretically grounded.

The Six-Phase Analysis Process

Phase	Procedural Step	Researcher Action
1	Data Familiarization	All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researcher engaged in repeated, active reading of the transcripts to achieve a deep immersion in the data.
2	Initial Coding	Significant segments of text were identified and labeled with preliminary codes. For example, participant statements regarding "knowing what was expected" were categorized under the code "Clarity of Expectations."
3	Generating Themes	Initial codes were aggregated into broader, meaningful patterns. Codes such as "Clarity," "Goal Orientation," and "Reduced Anxiety" were synthesized into the overarching theme: "The Rubric as a Navigational Tool."
4	Reviewing Themes	The candidate themes were refined and cross-referenced against the original data set to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences.
5	Defining and Naming	Each theme was assigned a precise, descriptive title that captured its conceptual essence within the context of the study.
6	Producing the Report	The final analysis was synthesized into a narrative, integrating primary participant quotations with existing scholarly literature to provide a rigorous evidence-based discussion.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed all ethical rules for working with human participants. The most important points were informed consent, confidentiality, and ensuring that no harm was done.

The participant signed a form that explained the purpose of the research, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could stop at any time without any problem. They were also told that their answers would be kept private and that their real names would not appear anywhere in the study. All data, including the recordings and written transcripts, were stored safely on a computer that only the researcher could access.

Findings

This section presents the results of the study according to the research hypotheses. The findings are organized to address each hypothesis, showing whether it was supported, partially supported, or not supported, based on participants' responses.

The analysis of the interviews revealed a complex. An often contradictory picture of how rubrics affect student motivation. The participants' journey with this assessment tool was not linear. It was shaped by their academic background, learning styles, and prior experiences. Four major themes emerged from the data, capturing the full spectrum of their perceptions.

Research Question 1: Does rubric-based assessment increase student motivation by providing clarity of expectations?

For a vast majority of the cohort (83%, or 10 out of 12 participants), the initial introduction to rubrics was characterized by significant cognitive dissonance and apprehension. Rather than being perceived as a

supportive framework, the rubric was initially viewed as an unfamiliar "academic artifact" that appeared to exacerbate the existing complexity of their assignments.

Noor, a student who identified as weaker and single, reflected on her initial encounter with the rubric: she stated, "*Honestly, it was the first time that I saw a rubric. I got scared. I thought, 'OHHHH, really, what is this now?' These tables and English words.*" She further commented, "*I understand none*" (laughs). Noor described feeling that the rubric was an additional complication, at a time when she was already struggling to keep up with the course material. She perceived it as just another assignment she was likely to fail. This initial sense of overwhelm and exhaustion was a common experience among students at the outset. However, for most participants, this perception changed markedly after the first assignment was graded and returned alongside the completed rubric. The rubric transitioned from a source of anxiety to a tool that provided clarity and empowerment, being described by many participants as a "map" or a "guide" to navigate the assignment expectations.

Ahmed, a high-achieving and single student, reflected on his prior experience with assignments: "*I used to just submit my assignments and hope for the best. I never knew what the grade was based on. It felt like a lottery. But when the instructor explained the assessment criteria for our first assignment, and then I received my paper with it, I felt for the first time that I knew exactly what was expected of me. I had a work plan. I stopped writing randomly and would go back to the rubric to check: Did I cover this point? Did I use enough vocabulary? It gave me confidence. It was motivating because it made success seem possible, not random*" (Bandura, 1997).

This account aligns with Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, which posits that individuals are more motivated when they believe in their ability to succeed, particularly when supported by clear feedback and achievable criteria. For high-achieving students like Ahmed, the rubric functioned not merely as an evaluative tool but as a strategic resource for improvement. They quickly recognized its utility in guiding their efforts, allowing them to focus their energy more efficiently and purposefully.

Aliyah, a high-achieving and highly engaged student, noted: "*I'm naturally an organized person, so the rubric suited me perfectly. Before that, I would put maximum effort into every single aspect of an assignment because I wasn't sure what the instructor valued most. Now, I can distribute my effort intelligently. If I see that critical analysis has a heavy weight of 40%, I know where to focus my time and not waste it. It makes me work more efficiently, which is motivating in itself because I feel in control of the process and the outcome.*"

This observation is consistent with recent research indicating that rubric-based assessment provides students with clearer guidance and reduces confusion, thereby enhancing engagement (Freel et al., 2023; Peltzer et al., 2025). For organized and motivated students, the rubric functions not only as an evaluative tool but also as a mechanism for strategic planning and self-regulation.

Research Question 2: Does the effect of rubric-based assessment vary depending on students' academic abilities and learning styles?"

While most students eventually came to appreciate the rubric. This was not a universal experience. For two of the three weaker students, the rubric remained a source of frustration and confusion throughout the semester. The tool, designed to provide clarity, instead became a symbol of their academic struggles. The core issue was not the rubric itself, but a mismatch between the academic language of the rubric and the students' current skill level.

Manal (weaker student, married): says, "To be honest, I still don't get it. The lecturer explains it, and I feel like I understand in class. But when I go to my home and open the assignment and the rubric, the words feel too big for me. Terms like 'critical analysis' or 'synthesis of ideas'. I don't really know what they mean, so how can I apply them? I look at the 'Excellent' column, and I can't even understand the sentence. It makes me feel like that, the rubric is written for the smart students, not for me. It just makes me feel stupid, and then I don't want to even try."

Manal's powerful testimony reveals a critical flaw in implementation: a rubric assumes a shared understanding of academic terminology. When that understanding is absent, the tool fails. It becomes frustrating because it constantly reminds the student of what they do not know, which enhances the feeling of helplessness.

Hassan's experience clearly illustrates how learning tools interact differently with individual learning styles. His preference for practical, concrete, step-by-step guidance conflicted with the abstract, analytical structure of the rubric. Instead of acting as a scaffold, the rubric became an additional cognitive burden, leading to frustration, disengagement, and a sense of wasted effort.

From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with Bandura's (1997) concept of learned helplessness—when students perceive that their efforts do not lead to success, motivation declines. Similarly, Deci & Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory suggests that when autonomy and competence are undermined, intrinsic motivation

suffers. Empirical research supports this: overly complex or abstract rubrics overwhelm students with lower academic readiness, reducing their ability to benefit from them (Wollenschläger et al., 2016; Bidna, 2024).

In practice, Hassan's case underscores that one-size-fits-all assessment tools may inadvertently demotivate certain learners. For students with concrete learning preferences, more structured, sequential instructions or guided exemplars may be far more effective than traditional analytical rubrics.

Research Question 3: Does rubric-based assessment improve perceived fairness in grading, thereby enhancing motivation?

Among the ten participants who were able to effectively engage with the rubric, one of the most frequently and emphatically reported benefits was the perception of fairness and objectivity in the grading process (Taylor, Kisby, & Reedy, 2024; He, Zeng, & Chen, 2022). This perception functioned as a significant motivational factor, as it alleviated concerns regarding subjectivity and potential evaluator bias.

Fatima, a high-achieving student, experienced teacher, and mother, reflected on her experience with the rubric, noting: "With all my responsibilities, I don't have time to waste feeling wronged. In the past, in other courses, I sometimes felt that grades were subjective, depending on the teacher's mood. That used to kill my motivation. With the rubric, I feel the assessment is objective. The grade isn't personal; it's tied to clear standards for everyone. Even if I received a grade I don't like, I accept it because I can see exactly where points were lost. This feeling of fairness is everything. It allows me to accept criticism and work on improving for next time."

This perception of fairness served as a critical gateway for accepting constructive feedback. It enabled students to depersonalize the grade and interpret it as a diagnostic tool rather than a personal judgment. Such perceptions of fairness in assessment are essential for sustaining motivation, particularly when encountering disappointing outcomes, and have been shown to directly enhance student engagement (Taylor, Kisby, & Reedy, 2024; Andrade & Du, 2005)

Yusuf, an engaged student, reflected on the role of the rubric in clarifying feedback: "*Nobody likes to get a low grade. But when you get a 70, and there are no comments, you feel bad. When you get a 70 but the rubric shows you got full points on 'Content' but low points on 'Grammar' and 'Citations,' it's a different story. You still don't like the grade, but you understand it. You know what to fix. It gives you a direction. The motivation comes from knowing that if you work on those specific things, your grade will improve. It's not a mystery anymore.*"

Yusuf's reflection illustrates how detailed, criterion-referenced feedback can enhance students' sense of competence and control over their learning outcomes, supporting Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory. At the same time, previous research cautions that highly prescriptive rubrics may inadvertently constrain creative thinking and render learning experiences mechanistic (Wollenschläger et al., 2016; Panadero & Jonsson, 2013).

Research Question 4: What are the potential limitations or challenges of using rubrics in a way that sustains motivation and creativity?

Theme 4: The Rubric as a "Double-Edged Sword": Guidance vs. Constraint

As participants gained greater proficiency in using rubrics, more sophisticated and critical perspectives began to emerge, particularly among those with teaching experience and students at the higher end of the academic spectrum. These participants recognized a potential limitation of the tool: while its structured guidance is valuable, if not carefully designed, it can become overly prescriptive, potentially constraining creativity and limiting authentic expression.

Khaled, a high-achieving student, experienced teacher, and parent, reflected on the potential pitfalls of rubric use: "*There's a problem, a danger. When students—and I include myself—get used to the rubric, they start working to fill in the boxes. The goal becomes to satisfy the rubric, not to express an original idea. Creativity becomes calculated. You start thinking, 'Will this sentence get me points in the vocabulary criterion?' instead of, 'Does this sentence convey my meaning effectively?' This is dangerous because it turns learning into a mechanical process. It can kill the intrinsic love of the subject.*"

This critical perspective was most pronounced among participants who could evaluate the rubric from their dual role as both student and teacher, highlighting that while rubrics provide clarity and fairness, they can also risk reducing learning to a formulaic exercise if overemphasized.

Sarah, a high-achieving student who is single and financially struggling, reflected on the dual impact of rubrics: "*As a student, the rubric is a relief because it tells me exactly where to focus my limited time and energy. It's efficient. But as a future teacher, it scares me. I'm afraid my students will become clones of each other, all writing the same way to meet the standards. A rubric must be flexible. It has to be a 'good servant but*

a bad master.’ There has to be a criterion for ‘originality’ or ‘intellectual risk-taking’ with real weight, to encourage students to step outside the box. Otherwise, we are just training them to be compliant.”

This reflection highlights a central tension in rubric-based assessment: the very features that make rubrics effective—structure and clarity—can also render them restrictive. Participants who articulated this tension were not opposed to rubrics; rather, they advocated for a pedagogically nuanced approach that balances guidance with opportunities for creativity. Research supports this perspective, indicating that clear rubric language combined with thoughtful instructor support is essential for enhancing both motivation and learning outcomes (Freel et al., 2023; Peltzer et al., 2025).

Student Perspectives on Rubric Use: Balancing Motivation and Limitations

Participants’ reflections reveal that rubrics have a multifaceted impact on student motivation and learning. For those who were able to engage effectively with the rubric, one of the most frequently cited benefits was the perception of fairness and objectivity in grading. Fatima, a high-achieving student and experienced teacher, described how the rubric transformed her experience: *“With all my responsibilities, I don’t have time to waste feeling wronged. In the past...grades were subjective, depending on the teacher’s mood. That used to kill my motivation. With the rubric, I feel the assessment is objective...Even if I received a grade I don’t like, I accept it because I can see exactly where points were lost. This feeling of fairness is everything.”* Such clarity allowed students to depersonalize grades, accept constructive feedback, and view evaluation as a diagnostic tool, thereby sustaining motivation even in the face of disappointing outcomes (Taylor, Kisby, & Reedy, 2024; Andrade & Du, 2005).

Similarly, Yusuf highlighted how rubrics provide actionable guidance: *“When you get a 70 but it comes with a rubric that shows you got full points on ‘Content’ but low points on ‘Grammar’ and ‘Citations,’ it’s a different story...The motivation comes from knowing that if you work on those specific things, your grade will improve. It’s not a mystery anymore.”* This supports Deci and Ryan’s (2000) theory that students are more motivated when they feel competent and in control of their learning outcomes.

At the same time, participants with higher academic proficiency or teaching experience articulated potential limitations of rubrics. Khaled, a high-achieving student and teacher, observed: *“When students—and I include myself—get used to the rubric, they start working to fill in the boxes. The goal becomes to satisfy the rubric, not to express an original idea...It can kill the intrinsic love of the subject.”* Similarly, Sarah, a high-achieving student and future teacher, emphasized the need for balance: *“A rubric must be flexible. It has to be a ‘good servant but a bad master.’ There has to be a criterion for ‘originality’ or ‘intellectual risk-taking’ with real weight, to encourage students to step outside the box. Otherwise, we are just training them to be compliant.”*

These reflections collectively highlight a central tension in rubric-based assessment: while structure, clarity, and fairness enhance motivation and provide direction, overly prescriptive rubrics risk constraining creativity and reducing learning to a mechanical exercise. Participants advocating for nuanced rubric design were not anti-rubric; rather, they called for thoughtful integration of flexibility and criteria that reward originality. Research supports this approach, showing that clarity in rubric language and instructor support are crucial for maximizing motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes (Freel et al., 2023; Peltzer et al., 2025; Wollenschläger et al., 2016; Panadero & Jonsson, 2013).

II. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced and insightful response to the central research question: How does rubric-based assessment influence student motivation in an EFL context? Participant voices not only corroborate established theoretical perspectives but also contribute additional dimensions—particularly regarding the balance between clarity, fairness, and the potential constraints on creativity—that are frequently underexplored in prior research.

Most participants described how the rubric facilitated a shift from confusion to clarity. Rather than guessing what the teacher expected, they could clearly understand the criteria and expectations. This clarity fostered a sense of competence and autonomy—two core components of motivation according to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Participants expressed this as, *“I know what I’m doing,”* and *“I can do this on my own.”* Such perceptions of capability are closely linked to self-efficacy and the development of intrinsic motivation (Bandura, 1997).

These findings align with Andrade and Du (2005), who reported that students value rubrics because they clarify learning goals. Similarly, Dörnyei (2009) argued that learners maintain motivation when they can envision a clear future version of themselves, or the “Ideal L2 Self.” Rubrics support this process by breaking down larger goals into concrete, achievable steps. Recent studies further corroborate that rubric-based

assessment enhances engagement and confidence when expectations are transparent (Freel et al., 2023; Peltzer et al., 2025; Taylor, Kisby, & Reedy, 2024).

However, not all participants experienced the same benefits. For students such as Manal and Hassan, the rubric introduced confusion and discouragement. This illustrates that rubrics do not automatically support all learners. A key factor appears to be academic literacy—the ability to interpret the formal language of the rubric (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013). For these students, the wording was overly complex, which hindered their understanding and reduced their sense of competence. Consequently, rather than motivating them, the rubric undermined their confidence and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

This finding is particularly significant because, while much of the existing literature emphasizes the benefits of rubrics, our study highlights a more nuanced reality. For some learners, a tool intended to enhance fairness can inadvertently create challenges when insufficient guidance is provided. This underscores the importance of designing rubrics that are accessible to all students, particularly those who may be academically struggling. Recent research indicates that overly complex or dense rubrics can overwhelm students and undermine motivation (Wollenschläger, Hattie, & Machts, 2016; Bidna, 2024; Freel et al., 2023).

A prominent theme in the data was students' appreciation for fairness. Many participants reported that rubrics made grading feel more objective and less dependent on the instructor's personal judgment, fostering trust in the assessment process. According to Dörnyei's (2009) framework, motivation is influenced not only by future goals but also by the immediate learning experience. Fairness and transparency are particularly important for adult learners, especially those with prior experiences of inequitable grading practices.

Perceptions of fairness also reinforced the student–teacher relationship (Taylor, Kisby, & Reedy, 2024). When students felt respected and understood, they were more receptive to feedback and more willing to persevere. This aligns with the relatedness component of Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes the importance of feeling connected to instructors and the learning environment. Other studies similarly demonstrate that fair and transparent assessment practices positively influence both motivation and engagement (Andrade & Du, 2005; He, Zeng, & Chen, 2022).

Several participants offered a more nuanced perspective. While they valued the rubric's structure, they cautioned that an overemphasis on “filling the boxes” could stifle creativity and encourage surface-level learning rather than deep engagement (Wollenschläger, Hattie, & Machts, 2016; Bidna, 2024; Freel et al., 2023). These participants suggested that different types of rubrics may be appropriate for different tasks: highly structured rubrics are beneficial for basic assignments, while open-ended or creative tasks require greater flexibility.

This insight reflects a sophisticated understanding: the effectiveness of a rubric does not lie in the tool itself, but in how, when, and why it is implemented. Recent research supports this view, emphasizing that clear rubric design and instructor guidance are critical for sustaining student motivation, engagement, and meaningful learning outcomes (Freel et al., 2023; Peltzer et al., 2025; Taylor, Kisby, & Reedy, 2024).

III. Conclusion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of how rubric-based assessment influences student motivation in an EFL context. The findings indicate that rubrics can enhance motivation by promoting clarity, fairness, and a sense of competence, allowing students to depersonalize grades and view feedback as a tool for improvement. These effects align with established theoretical frameworks, including Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1997), and Dörnyei's (2009) Ideal L2 Self model.

At the same time, the study highlights potential challenges. For some learners, particularly those with lower academic literacy, complex or poorly explained rubrics can create confusion and reduce motivation. Additionally, overly prescriptive rubrics may inadvertently constrain creativity and deep learning, particularly in tasks requiring originality or critical thinking. Participants emphasized that the value of rubrics lies not in their existence alone, but in their thoughtful design, appropriate application, and alignment with pedagogical goals.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of balancing structure and flexibility in rubric-based assessment. Well-designed rubrics, coupled with clear guidance and instructor support, can foster motivation, engagement, and fairness, while minimizing the risk of mechanical or compliance-driven learning. By incorporating student perspectives, this study extends current understandings of rubric use, offering practical and theoretical insights for educators seeking to optimize assessment practices in EFL contexts.

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