

Sustainability in EFL Education: Using a Simple Grading Tool to Improve English Speaking in the New Normal

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Abstract

This study explored the use of a single-point rubric as a self-assessment tool in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking activities among adult students in Thailand, with a focus on sustainability in language education in the “new normal.” The research aimed to develop a refined rubric tailored to adult EFL learners, fostering self-assessment and improving English-speaking abilities. The participants were 36 Thai adult students enrolled in an English Listening and Speaking course at a university. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data from pre-and post-test English speaking activities and qualitative feedback gathered from an expert-validated self-developed questionnaire. The analysis revealed significant improvements in the students’ speaking performance, with the mean score increasing from 14.89 to 17 and the median from 16.5 to 18, indicating the effectiveness of the single-point rubric. Additionally, questionnaire responses highlighted the students’ positive perceptions of the rubric, citing its clarity, ease of use, and its role in promoting autonomous learning. The findings suggest that the single-point rubric is a sustainable tool for enhancing EFL students’ English-speaking skills and encouraging self-directed learning in the new normal.

Keywords: Rubric, EFL, Assessment, Mixed-methods, Questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

In today’s globalized world, the English language plays a pivotal role in facilitating international communication, sharing knowledge, and fostering intercultural understanding. While English is often referred to as a “universal language,” many nations, including Thailand, continue to grapple with its effective integration into everyday life, particularly in critical sectors such as education, tourism, and business. Despite numerous educational reforms and efforts to promote English learning, proficiency among Thai learners remains limited, especially in spoken communication, which carries a significant barrier to participation in global dialogues and economic opportunities (Office of the Education Council [OEC], 2007).

This challenge highlights the need to align English language education with the broader goals of sustainability in education. According to UNESCO (2017), sustainability in education includes fostering learner autonomy, promoting lifelong learning, and ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education. Within this framework, learner autonomy refers to the capacity of students to take responsibility for their own learning, including setting goals, monitoring progress, and reflecting on outcomes. Lifelong learning involves equipping individuals with the skills and mindset to continuously learn and adapt beyond formal education. Inclusive pedagogy emphasizes instructional strategies that accommodate diverse learners' needs, encouraging participation and engagement from all students.

In this context, the Single-Point Rubric (SPR) emerges as a promising tool to support sustainable English language education. Defined by Fluckiger (2010), the SPR is a self-assessment framework that presents a clear set of success criteria while allowing space for personalized feedback and reflection. Unlike traditional rubrics that compare students against a range of performance levels, the SPR promotes a growth mindset by focusing on improvement relative to clearly defined expectations (Ross et al., 2006). This approach helps reduce performance anxiety and fosters an autonomy-supportive environment, in line with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which asserts that learners are more motivated and engaged when they feel in control of their learning processes.

Moreover, teaching students how to engage with assessment tools such as the SPR helps them become active participants in their learning journey. It encourages self-regulation, critical thinking, and goal setting, all of which are essential attributes of autonomous and lifelong learners. As noted by Asdar (2017), the SPR also enhances learners' understanding of the assessment process, making feedback more transparent and meaningful. This contributes to inclusive pedagogy by clarifying assessment for students with different learning backgrounds and needs, thus supporting equity and fairness in the classroom.

Despite these advantages, the use of the SPR in adult EFL programs in Thailand remains limited. This study addresses this gap by introducing a Single-Point Rubric model designed for Thai university students. The aim is to foster their self-assessment skills in English-speaking tasks and, in doing so, enhance their oral communication competence. The rubric was applied in classroom activities involving dialogues and conversations, allowing students to reflect on their performance and set personal goals for improvement.

Furthermore, the urgency to improve English communication skills in Thailand is reinforced by Teng and Sinwongsuwat (2015), who emphasized the need to elevate English teaching standards in alignment with ASEAN integration. Reports from Thailand's Quality Learning Foundation and the CEFR benchmarks highlight the persistent struggle among Thai learners to move beyond basic levels of proficiency, particularly in speaking (Yusica, 2014). This calls for targeted, learner-centered interventions that not only develop English proficiency but also cultivate the competencies required for sustainable participation in global and regional communities.

METHODS

Research design

In this study, a convergent parallel design was employed to effectively combine qualitative and quantitative research methods. By employing a convergent parallel design, a type of mixed-methods study, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and assessed independently at the same time.

During the interpretation phase, these data were integrated or compared to analyze results from multiple perspectives. This enhanced the depth of understanding regarding the research issue. This design's strength lies in its ability to concurrently gather and analyze qualitative insights into experiences and perceptions alongside quantitative trends and patterns. This methodological approach facilitated triangulation, where findings from different data types complement and validate each other. In doing so, it bolstered the study's credibility and validity.

The study involved adult EFL university students aged 20 and above, which represented a diverse socioeconomic background. These second-year students had completed foundational English courses and are enrolled in a Listening and Speaking in English class. Both male and female students from this private institution participated in the English-speaking activities during the Listening and Speaking class. They attended alternating online and face-to-face classes throughout the semester. The research specifically occurred during face-to-face sessions to ensure comprehension and accurate execution.

For this study, the Single-Point rubric was utilized to gather relevant data to address the research questions. This single-point rubric used text written in English. To assess students' speaking skills, they participated in two conversations: a pretest dialogue with a peer on a given topic and a posttest conversation. The talk lasted two minutes, and lessons from the prior lecture were included. A checklist-based rubric was implemented to evaluate characteristics such as body language, information, pronunciation, and interaction. The scale is from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest, for a maximum score of 20.

In addition, this current study employed a variety of research tools as part of its research instruments. These included computers, projectors, videos, tablets, and smartphones. During the study, the projector, videos, and the researcher modeled sample conversations. The model conversation demonstrated effective English-speaking skills to the students. Tablets and smartphones also served another crucial role; as they allowed students to record their own conversations with partners. These recordings were used for subsequent review and self-assessment. This enabled student to analyze their performance against the criteria outlined in the single-point rubric. This combination of instructional technology and personal devices enhanced the learning process. It provided visual models and fostered reflective practice among students, and thereby supported their development of English-speaking proficiency.

A self-developed questionnaire was designed to gather qualitative insights for the development of a single point rubric tailored for Thai students' English-speaking skills. The questions were written in the English language and explained for better comprehension. The questionnaire was structured into three sections: preliminary question, content questions, and exit interview questions. Initially, students were asked a preliminary question regarding their comfort level with the rubric. Following this, content-related questions were considered such as font, style, table formatting, and wording preferences. Lastly, an exit question was used to seek suggestions from students on improving the rubric.

For quantitative data collection, the study utilized a Single-Point rubric to collect quantitative data. Pronunciation, interaction, body language, and information were assessed on a scale from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater proficiency. The criteria for Pronunciation would be the clear pronunciation of the English vocabulary words from the

prior lesson. Words should not be mumbled, nor spoken too fast or too slow. The criteria for Interaction revolved around the equal time given for each person to ask and answer questions that led to the topic. Both should share the conversation equally, and neither person should have talked too much more than the other. Meanwhile, the criteria for Information centered on the sharing of information about the given topic that made sense, explaining information clearly, staying true to the topic, and including details and examples. Furthermore, the criteria for Body Language were focused on the proper use of eye contact, appropriate volume of the voice, and keeping the body still and free of unnecessary movements.

Conceptual framework

In the study of the single-point rubric, the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework played a foundational role by offering a structured, backward-design approach to assessment. UbD begins with clearly defining learning outcomes – what students should know and be able to do – before designing assessments and instructional strategies. This approach aligns seamlessly with the single-point rubric, which also starts by establishing clear criteria for assessment. By using UbD, specific goals for EFL speaking skills such as body language, pronunciation, interaction, and information delivery were identified. This enabled the creation of a self-assessment tool like the single-point rubric. Teachers can then incorporate targeted speaking activities so that the rubric could effectively evaluate their strengths and identify areas for improvement in order to make meaningful progress.

The study spanned four lessons, each lasting 2 to 3 hours, employing the UbD framework. Before creating an English conversation with a partner, students received clear guidelines and utilized the self-assessment rubric. The initial conversation served as the pretest, and the final conversation as the posttest for summative evaluation. Socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, and language exposure influencing English proficiency were also surveyed.

Figure 1. Understanding by Design (UbD) Framework

(Wiggins & McTighe 2005)



Participants and Sampling

The study involved adult EFL university students aged 20 and above, which represented a diverse socioeconomic background. These second-year students had completed foundational English courses and are enrolled in a Listening and Speaking in English class. Both male and female students from this private institution participated in the English-speaking activities during the Listening and Speaking class. They attended alternating online and face-to-face classes throughout the semester. The research specifically occurred during face-to-face sessions to ensure comprehension and accurate execution.

Respondents' sociodemographic profile

The sociodemographic profile of the respondents reveals important insights into the characteristics of Thai students engaged with the EFL Listening and Speaking class at SAU. The gender distribution among the respondents revealed that just under half were male which represents 42% of the sample. Nearly half of the participants were female, representing 47% of the total number. Additionally, about 11% of respondents identified as having a gender other than male or female.

Table 1. Participants Socio-demographics

Category	Description	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	15	42
	Female	17	47
	Others	4	11
Total		36	100

This diversity in gender representation emphasizes the complexity of gender identities among Thai students engaged in the EFL Listening and Speaking class at SAU. This reflects the rich socio-demographic landscape that shapes their learning experiences. The data highlights the need for inclusive teaching approaches that resonate with the varied backgrounds of these learners.

The age distribution of the respondents varied significantly. The largest group comprised of 19-year-olds, who made up 44% of the sample. This was followed by 39% of respondents who were 20 years old. Additionally, 17% of the participants were aged 21 or older, with the oldest among them being 26. This distribution highlighted a predominance of younger adults in the study, with a notable portion of participants in the older age category.

Table 2. Age and Age of Language on Set (AELS)

Category	Description	<i>n</i>	%
Age	19	16	44
	20	4	39
	21 above	6	17
Total		36	100
Age of English	Kinder	9	25
Language on Set	Elementary	16	44
(AELS)	High School	11	31
Total		36	100

The respondents' Age of Language on Set (AELS) based on study revealed that the 25% of the participants began learning English since kindergarten. Then, this was followed with a data of 44% who started during elementary school. Additionally, 31% began their English education in high school.

This distribution indicated that a significant proportion of learners were introduced to English at an early age, around three years old, while a considerable number started their language studies during their later educational years.

Instrument

The descriptive statistics for the English-speaking pretest and posttest provide valuable insights into the student's abilities evaluated using the single-point rubric. The summary of the descriptive statistics for the English-speaking pretest and posttest, evaluated using the single-point rubric were then considered.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Summary Table		
Statistics	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	14.89	17
Median	16.5	18
Mode	16.17	18,20
Variance	8.29	7.67
Standard Deviation	2.88	2.77
Minimum	10	14
Maximum	18	20

Note: N=36

On average, participants scored 14.89 (mean score) on the pre-test. This provides a baseline measure of their English-speaking ability during the initial use of the self-assessment rubric. The middle score of 16.5 (median) suggests that most participants scored around this value. Half of the participants scored below 16.5, and half scored above it. The most common scores (mode) were 16 and 17, which indicated that these were the typical performance levels at the initial use of the rubric.

The range (8) also indicated that there was a wide spread between the highest and the lowest scores. This showed significant variation in participant's English-speaking abilities during the initial use of the SPR. The variance (8.29) and standard deviation (2.88) are values indicating that scores were fairly spread out from the average. This suggested further that there were diverse levels of proficiency among participants during the initial use of the single-point rubric.

The post-test results showed a significant improvement in SPR scores compared to their initial use. The average score (mean score) improved to 17 after several uses of the rubric. This suggested that, on average, participants' English-speaking abilities improved after engaging with the self-assessment rubric.

The middle score (median score) increased to 18 which indicates that more participants scored higher in the post-test compared to the pre-test. This shows an improvement in the overall performance level. The most frequent scores (mode) increased to 18 and 20, suggesting that higher performance levels became more common after several uses of the rubric.

The range (6) decreased which meant that the difference between the highest and lowest scores became smaller. This suggested that while some improvement occurred, there was less disparity in scores during the post-test. The variance (7.67) and standard deviation (2.77) both decreased. These showed that scores became more consistent and closer to the average after using the rubric several times. This indicated that many participants made significant progress.

Paired t-test

The results of the paired t-test between the Pre-Test and Post-Test data also showed the t-value (t-statistic) is 3.12 and the p-value is 0.0062. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the result is statistically significant. This means there is strong evidence to suggest that the Post-Test scores are significantly different from the Pre-Test scores which likely indicate an improvement confirming the effectiveness of the SPR.

A Self-Developed Questionnaire was created to collect detailed feedback about the use of the single-point rubric. This feedback would help create an improved single-point rubric guide to assess Thai students' speaking skills in English. The questionnaire was structured into three sections: preliminary question, content questions, and exit interview questions. All questions were explained well with examples. The EFL Thai students' responses were in English and were typically brief and to the point. Only a few students who were proficient in English were able to provide longer responses.

Following the collection of comments and feedback from the exit interview, a single-point rubric was developed for future use in assessing the English-speaking activity of Thai students. Several updates were made to the single-point rubric based on the students' feedback.

Firstly, the rubric was explained into to enhance understanding among all students. Additionally, the English language used was simplified to use basic English to make it more understandable to students with low English proficiency.

Finally, a dedicated space was added for students to write their comments and reflections. This would allow for more personalized feedback. The font style and table format of the original rubric were retained due to its simplicity and approval of the students.

Table 4. Single-Point Rubric (SPR)

Areas to grow	Criteria	Areas that glow
	Body Language (5 Points)	
	- You used eye contact	
	- You kept your body still	
	- Your voice was an appropriate volume	
Score	-----	

Table 4. Single-Point Rubric (Cont.)

Areas to grow	Criteria	Areas that glow
	Information (5 Points) - You stayed on topic - You shared information about your topic in an order that makes sense - You explained information clearly - You included details and examples	
Score	-----	

Areas to grow	Criteria	Areas that glow
	Pronunciation (5 Points) - You pronounced words clearly - You did not mumble your words - You did not speak too fast or too slow	
Score	-----	

Areas to grow	Criteria	Areas that glow
	Interaction (5 Points) - You asked each other questions that lead to the topic - You answered all the questions properly - Both of you shared the conversation equally; neither person talked too much.	
Score	-----	

ASSESSING THAI STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS USING THE SELF-DEVELOPED QUESTIONNAIRE (SDQ)

The SDQ (See Table 5) was aimed to gather feedback on a single-point rubric used by the researcher to assess Thai students' English-speaking skills. The purpose was to enhance the rubric and in turn, develop an improved single-point rubric fully suited for adult

Thai students during English speaking activities in the classroom. The questionnaire was divided into preliminary, content, and exit interview sections, with all questions translated into Thai and explained with examples. Responses showed general approval of the rubric. The students expressed appreciation for its clarity and ease of use.

Most students found the font, table layout, and color scheme satisfactory, though some suggested improvements like adding space for personal comments and including Thai translations. While half of the students found the rubric's language easy to understand, others felt it could be simplified further. The exit interview revealed a mix of opinions, with some students satisfied as is, while others proposed specific improvements such as adding examples or incorporating a checkbox feature.

Table 5. Self-Developed Questionnaire (SDQ)

STATEMENTS
A. Preliminary Questions
How do you feel about the rubric provided for this assignment? -----
B. Content Questions
1. How do you feel about the font and style used in the rubric? -----
2. Is the table layout of the rubric clear and easy to follow? -----
3. Do you think the color scheme in the rubric enhances its readability? -----
4. Are the wording in the rubric easy to understand? -----
5. Overall, do you find the rubric clear in outlining expectations?
C. Exit Interview
In which area or aspect of the rubric do you feel improvement is needed? -----

CONCLUSION

This research successfully developed and evaluated a specialized Single-Point Rubric (SPR) designed to serve as a self-assessment tool for improving the English-speaking skills of Thai adult learners. The findings indicated that the use of this rubric led to a noticeable improvement in students' performance, as evidenced by the increase in the mean score from 14.89 (pre-test) to 17.00 (post-test). In addition to higher scores, student performance became more consistent, as shown by the decrease in variance, standard deviation, and range. Furthermore, the increase in modal scores to 18 and 20 highlighted that higher levels of performance became more common, suggesting significant individual progress across the group.

Feedback from the self-developed questionnaire was largely positive. Students appreciated the rubric's clarity, format, and usability, although some recommended enhancements such as the inclusion of Thai translations, space for comments, or a checkbox feature. While most respondents found the rubric's language clear, others proposed further simplification. Exit interviews reinforced these findings, revealing both satisfaction and suggestions for improvement.

The use of a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, following Creswell's (2012) framework, enabled a well-rounded understanding of the impact of the SPR. Qualitative data from interviews and surveys enriched the quantitative findings, confirming the rubric's effectiveness while also highlighting areas for further development.

Pedagogical Implications

The results demonstrate that the Single-Point Rubric is a practical and effective tool for enhancing Thai students' English-speaking abilities. Teachers can adopt this rubric as a student-centered alternative to traditional assessments, encouraging learners to take ownership of their progress through regular and reflective self-evaluation. The SPR can also help standardize oral assessment across classrooms, ensuring fairer and more transparent evaluation practices.

Furthermore, its simplicity and adaptability make it suitable for varied proficiency levels. With minor modifications such as incorporating visual aids, simplified language, or bilingual support the rubric can cater to diverse learners. Its positive reception by students also suggests that it could increase motivation and engagement in speaking activities.

Research Implications

This study contributes to the limited body of research on self-assessment rubrics in EFL contexts, particularly in Thailand. The effectiveness of the SPR underscores the potential for future studies to explore its application across different learner groups, skill areas, or educational settings. Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to examine long-term effects of SPR use, compare the SPR with other assessment tools to evaluate relative effectiveness, investigate teacher training programs to support SPR implementation, explore digital integration, such as app-based or online versions of the rubric and adapt and validate the SPR for use in multicultural or multilingual settings.

By building on these findings, future researchers can refine the SPR further and expand its utility in enhancing language assessment practices, not only in Thailand but also in broader EFL and ESL contexts.

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