Chapter 10
Making Language Learning More Inclusive:
Introducing Rubrics to Adult Students to Improve Written Performance

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the results of a study conducted in a language classroom in Galicia (Spain). The course was sponsored by the local administration and addressed to unemployed students (n = 14; average age 47). The education in foreign languages of the participants in the '80s and '90s had been held back due to curricular needs to promote the use of the second official language, Galician. The extrinsic motivation for English language learning of the participants was their need to improve linguistic skills to re-gain access to the job market. It was observed that they were consistently underperforming during writing exam preparation tasks. In order to meet the needs of these students, it was decided to study the impact that the explanation of the assessment rubric had on learners' written production. Results of their performance in a pre-test were compared to the results in a post-test. The implementation of this strategy proved to be effective. By allowing the students to have knowledge of the rubric for the assessment of their writings, their fear was significantly reduced.

INTRODUCTION

Research on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has increased during the last two decades, but most of these studies have mainly focused on high school or university students, and not so much on adult L2 learners (Dewaele, Petrides & Furnham, 2008). The focus on language learners over 25 years of age is particularly relevant in the context where the study here presented was carried out. The 2007 global economic and financial crisis has had a huge impact in the Spanish region of Galicia, where many companies faced bankruptcy and many jobs were lost. More than a decade later, the effects of that crisis can still be observed. Many professionals and workers, who previously had steady jobs, have found themselves in need of updating their training skills with the aim of re-gaining entrance into the contemporary job market. In the globalized world, the ability to use a foreign language is no longer a favorable quality but a basic prerequisite. In Spain, English the L2 language required by most hiring companies.

In the bilingual region of Galicia, since the end of the dictatorship in 1975, most of the educational efforts regarding language teaching and learning were made towards reducing the dominance of Spanish over Galician – which is also an official language. As a result, the generation born and educated during the 80s and 90s in Galicia has had an insufficient training in foreign languages. English has been the main foreign language taught at schools during that period, but Galician people lack real communicative competence in it.

Within this context adult language learners need to be given some strategies to overcome the stress of performing in English. With that in mind, this study focuses on improving the written performance of a group of unemployed language learners who, during the course of the lessons of an intensive English course, were feeling very insecure and over stressed during exam preparation tasks. This article focuses on the writing tasks training them for the official exam, which would grant them their much sought-after English certification.

In order to meet the needs of these students it was decided to study the impact of the access to and explanation of the assessment rubric, which concentrates more on communicative performance rather than on language knowledge. In the authors' opinion, due to political and social circumstances, these adult learners were never given proper training in communicative language learning. There is a need to find strategies to bridge the language gap among adult language learners. In that sense, this study aims to raise awareness on the impact of the use and explanation of rubrics in the adult learner's writing performance. It intends to answer the following questions: (i) would the explanation of rubrics have a positive influence on student's post writing test?; (ii) explaining assessment instruments can help in making language learning more inclusive by lessening adult students' anxiety during their performance?

As an introduction to the case study, a brief theoretical consideration will address relevant issues, such as the nature of adult language learners or previous studies on the use of rubrics. As it will be seen, rubrics are becoming a frequent tool for the assessment of communicative skills. As opposed to traditional tools of evaluation, which normally measured the memory ability and cognitive skills of the learner, rubrics are assessment tools which measure learners' performance in a standardized way. Later, the study is explained, describing the method, the participants, the analysis and the results. The chapter concludes with some considerations and further research suggestions, as well as with the pedagogical implications of the study.

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