



Semarak International Journal of Current Research in Language and Human Studies

Journal homepage:
<https://semarakilmu.my/index.php/sijcrlhs/index>
ISSN: 3083-9572



Gendered Perceptions of Writing Rubrics in Higher Education: An Exploratory Study of English Lecturers in Malaysia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 December 2025

Received in revised form 28 February 2026

Accepted 1 April 2026

Available online 28 April 2026

Keywords:

Writing assessment; rubric perception; gendered perspectives; higher educations; ESL lecturers

ABSTRACT

Assessment rubrics are essential tools in higher education for ensuring transparency and consistency in evaluating student learning. While existing research has largely focused on student perspectives, there is a lack of inquiry into the role of gender in how educators perceive these tools. This exploratory study investigated the differences between male and female lecturers' perceptions of a generic writing rubric within a Malaysian centre of foundation studies. Employing a quantitative descriptive design, data were collected from 24 English lecturers (4 males, 20 females) with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 21 years via a 16-item questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and mean comparisons revealed that female lecturers consistently rated the rubric more positively than their male counterparts, particularly regarding its role in enhancing learner skills and improving assessment practices. These preliminary findings suggest that gender may influence the perceived value of assessment tools. The study concludes that institutions should consider these divergent perspectives when designing professional development and suggests that wider, gender-inclusive engagement in rubric design is necessary to ensure departmental cohesion in assessment.

1. Introduction

Assessment plays a central role in teaching and learning in higher education, especially in language-related disciplines where students are evaluated through complex tasks such as academic writing. In English language courses, writing assessment requires explicit criteria to ensure fairness, consistency, and transparency. As a result, rubrics are widely used to specify performance expectations and support both teaching and evaluation [1,2]. Previous research emphasises that rubrics have evolved from simple scoring guides into complex pedagogical tools that facilitate the assessment of multifaceted competencies [3]. In EFL/ESL contexts, students often report that rubrics help them revise their writing by clarifying the features of effective written work [4]. Some empirical studies suggest that well-designed rubrics can enhance feedback and support self-regulated learning, particularly when they are used to promote student agency [5,6].

Although rubrics are often presented as neutral technical instruments, their effectiveness depends on how they are interpreted and used in real classroom settings. It has been noted that

students see rubrics as creating “shared criteria,” but also doubt consistent, objective application, attributing inconsistency to differing lecturer interpretations and values [7]. This inconsistency and impartial application of rubrics across lecturers suggests that staff differences in interpretation are visible to learners [7], which can lead to anxiety among students regarding assessment [8]. Hence, educators must ensure that the function of the rubric is more than just as “boundary objects” by communicating their expectations to address students’ doubts and ensuring consistency with their perceptions of the rubric. Consequently, effective implementation of rubrics requires communication among instructors and between instructors and students so that assessment criteria are understood in a similar way [9]. As a result, this highlights that assessment is not only a procedural task but also a social practice influenced by beliefs, preferences, and prior experiences [10].

In addition, demographic factors such as gender may also shape assessment beliefs and judgment approaches, yet this dimension remains understudied in rubric-based writing assessment in ESL or EFL settings. Therefore, understanding gendered fine distinction is critical, as evidence suggests that gender plays a significant role in language learning motivation and achievement in English [11,12], a factor that may extend to the educators who assess these learners. Since most research on rubric writing focuses on students, it is highly suggested that future studies consider gendered patterns among lecturers and their interpretations of rubrics [13,14]. Thus, to address this gap, this exploratory study sought to investigate gendered perceptions of a generic writing rubric among English lecturers in a Malaysian centre of foundation studies. By addressing this gap, findings may become relevant for the design and development of assessments for foundation programmes where academic writing is a crucial skill.

1.1 Assessment Rubrics in Higher Education

Assessment rubrics are structured scoring guides that outline performance criteria across different levels of achievement. Previous studies have highlighted their benefits, including improving grading reliability, supporting formative feedback, and fostering student self-regulation [9,15]. Similarly, earlier insights on the purpose of a rubric in higher education suggest it serves as a tool for students to measure and improve their ability in desired skills [16]. This is especially portrayed in writing instruction, where rubrics are valuable as they break down complex skills such as organisation, language use, and content development into measurable components [17].

A study highlights that transparency provided by rubrics is often described as a “double-edged sword” [18]; while it clarifies expectations, its success relies heavily on the evaluative judgement of the person using it [19]. However, recent studies reported that some students perceived rubrics as strict and that they can potentially contribute to stress due to poor design [20,21]. Hence, rubric developers need to emphasise the right criteria and evaluate them fairly.

1.1.1 Educators’ perceptions of writing rubrics

Lecturers’ perceptions are crucial because they influence how rubrics are interpreted, implemented, and integrated into assessment practices [15]. Recent studies suggest that if educators at higher education institutions do not share a common understanding of a rubric’s criteria, the tool may fail to achieve its purpose as a consistent assessment instrument [22]. A similar study revealed that when educators make the effort to explicitly discuss rubrics with their students, it helps educators to monitor fairness and consistency, especially with multiple raters [23]. Furthermore, educators’ expectations are influenced by teaching experience, disciplinary background, and personal beliefs. Consequently, as lecturers are involved in the design or critical review of these tools, their self-efficacy and performance improve [5]. Therefore, understanding lecturers’ views is

essential to ensure that rubrics function as intended and contribute meaningfully to teaching effectiveness [9,24].

1.1.2 Gender and assessment perceptions

Gender has been identified as another significant factor that may influence professional beliefs, instructional approaches, and assessment practices. Prior research suggests that male and female educators may differ in how they perceive teaching tools and evaluative practices [12]. While both male and female instructors valued and endorsed assessment alike, studies have found that female instructors may value assessment purposes more highly [14]. Similarly, a significant difference in the level of knowledge of rubrics has been found among genders, with females having higher usage knowledge compared to their male counterparts [25]. It has also been claimed that females are more skillful in communicating assessment results than males [26].

On the other hand, some research found a significant difference among gender on the perception of evaluation criteria, with males reporting a higher degree of perception than females [27]. Thus, it is important to further investigate the gender perception factor, as peer assessment research suggests that gender and training can influence how individuals approach scoring [28]. These factors strengthen the rationale to examine how gendered perception extends to lecturers' assessment orientations. In addition, studies have also revealed that Teachers' assessment literacy is also shaped by work experience, educational background, training, and gender [29]. While rubrics are intended to reduce subjectivity, implicit biases may persist in how criteria are applied [30].

Despite these findings, empirical studies examining gender-based differences in perceptions of assessment rubrics are minimal, especially in non-Western and ESL contexts [31]. In Malaysia, higher education is currently shifting to alternative assessments, such as Rubric-Referenced Assessment (RRA), to develop 21st-century skills [9]. As institutions look for ways to scale these assessments effectively [32], it becomes vital to understand the human variables, such as gender, which influence how rubrics are deployed [2]. Because few studies analyse gender-based differences in lecturers' perceptions and uses of assessment rubrics themselves [14], this preliminary study helps to provide insights for improving practices and informing targeted professional development.

In short, across varied settings, gender differences in educators' perceptions and use of rubrics or assessment criteria do appear, but they are small, inconsistent in direction, and highly context-specific. Female educators more often show higher rubric knowledge or value certain assessment purposes, while in some contexts males report stronger grasp of formal criteria. More targeted, rubric-specific gender research is still needed. Therefore, due to this clear gap in research focusing on lecturers' gendered perceptions of these assessment tools, this preliminary study helps to provide insights for improving assessment practices and informing targeted professional development initiatives.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This exploratory study employed a quantitative descriptive design to examine gender differences in lecturers' perceptions of the generic scoring rubric used to assess essays written by ESL pre-university students. The sample consisted of 35 lecturers from a Malaysian centre of foundation studies. Of these, 7 were male, and 28 were female. All participants were from English and education backgrounds, and their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 21 years, providing a diverse representation of academic expertise.

A structured questionnaire, adapted from previous research on teaching instruments [33], was used to measure the effectiveness of teaching and learning instruments, comprising 18 items, and was administered online. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Section A to gather the lecturer’s background information and Section B to examine the lecturer’s perceptions of the generic scoring rubric used to assess essays written by ESL foundation learners. For Section B, the items were adapted to measure lecturers’ perceptions of rubric use across three domains: (a) Goals and Objectives, (b) Components and Organisation, and (c) Usefulness. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree).

2.2 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics for the mean and standard deviation of each item were calculated separately according to gender. Mean differences were analysed to identify areas of consensus and divergence between male and female lecturers. Since this preliminary study is to determine the differences between the genders’ perceptions, Welch’s t-test was employed when analysing the data, as it is a robust alternative when dealing with unequal sample sizes [34].

3. Results

This preliminary study aims to investigate the perceptions of ESL lecturers of the generic scoring rubric used to assess problem-solving essays written by ESL pre-university students. Findings from the questionnaire are reported and discussed in the following sections.

3.1 The Background Information of the Respondents

This preliminary study has a sample size of 35 participants. The sample of the study consists of males with 20% (n=7), while females make up 80% (n=28). Most respondents had between 6 and 10 years of teaching experience (48.6%, n=17), followed by 1–5 years (37.1%, n=13), while a smaller proportion reported 11 years and above (14.3%, n=5).

Table 1
 Rubric practices by gender

	Male (n=7)		Female (n=28)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Men	Std. Deviation
I refer to the generic scoring rubric when teaching writing to my students	3.29	1.11	3.04	1.32
I show the generic scoring rubric before assigning an essay task to my students	3.86	1.07	3.79	1.03

According to Table 1, male lecturers reported slightly higher mean scores than female lecturers for the items “I refer to the generic scoring rubric when teaching writing to my students” and “I show the generic scoring rubric before assigning an essay task to my students”. For the first item, males reported a mean of 3.29 (SD = 1.11), compared with the mean score of 3.04 (SD = 1.32) for females. Similarly, male lecturers reported a marginally higher mean score for the second item (M = 3.86, SD = 1.07) than female lecturers (M = 3.79, SD = 1.03). Overall, the mean scores indicate that both male and female lecturers frequently refer to and share the generic scoring rubric. This is viewed as a good

practice since students need to understand that the criteria used to assess them are similar to the instructors' expectations of their work [29].

3.2 The Perceptions towards the Generic Scoring Rubric

Section B of the questionnaire was used to explore the ESL lecturers' perspectives on the generic scoring rubric used to assess problem-solution essays written by the ESL pre-university students. This section reports the findings that are divided into three domains: A) Goals and Objectives, B) Components and Organisation, and C) Usefulness.

The data rated as "1=Strongly disagree and 2=Disagree" with mean scores of 1.00 to 2.99, were considered a low rate of the ESL lecturers' perceptions of the generic scoring rubric to assess problem-solution essays. While the data rated as "3=neutral, and 4=agree," with mean scores ranging from 3.00 to 4.99, were considered moderate. Finally, data rated as "5=strongly agree" with mean scores of 5.00 were categorised as high. Due to unequal sample sizes between male (n=7) and female (n=28) lecturers, the gender differences in ESL lecturers' perceptions of the generic scoring rubric were analysed using Welch's t-tests. This test was chosen because it does not assume equal variances and is specifically recommended as a more robust alternative when dealing with unequal sample sizes [34].

3.2.1 The perceptions of the ESL lecturers towards the goals and objectives of the generic scoring rubric

Table 2

ESL lecturers' perceptions towards the goals and objectives of the generic scoring rubric

Item	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	p-value
1. The purpose and rationale for the generic scoring rubric are clear in assessing problem-solution type of essay	Male	4.00	1.15	0.483
	Female	3.64	1.10	
2. The goals and objectives of the generic scoring rubric to assess problem-solution type of essay are clear	Male	4.29	0.76	0.008
	Female	3.54	0.92	
3. The generic scoring rubric able to enhance learners' skills in writing problem-solution essay	Male	3.57	1.13	0.893
	Female	3.50	0.96	
4. The generic scoring rubric presents in detail the assessment for the problem-solution essay.	Male	3.57	1.27	1.000
	Female	3.57	0.92	
5. The generic scoring rubric helps learners to apply their skill to write a problem-solution essay	Male	4.14	0.69	0.143
	Female	3.64	0.91	

Table 2 presents gender-based differences in lecturers' perceptions of the Goal and Objectives domain of the generic scoring rubric. For the item "The goals and objectives of the generic scoring rubric to assess problem-solution type of essay are clear", male lecturers reported a significantly higher mean score of 4.29 (SD = 0.76) than female lecturers with a mean score of 3.54 (SD = 0.92). This mean difference of 0.75 is the largest observed within the domain and is the only statistically significant ($p = 0.008$), although both groups remained within the moderate perception range.

For the item "The generic scoring rubric helps learners to apply their skill to write a problem-solution essay", males again reported a higher mean score of 4.14 (SD = 0.69) compared to females with a 3.64 mean score (SD = 0.91). However, this difference did not reach statistical significance as Welch's score is $p = 0.143$. This suggests that perceived support for skill application is broadly similar across genders.

The smallest gender differences were observed for *“The generic scoring rubric can enhance learners’ skills in writing problem-solution essay”* and *“The generic scoring rubric presents in detail the assessment for the problem-solution essay”*. Mean scores for skill enhancement were comparable between males (M = 3.57, SD = 1.13) and females (M = 3.50, SD = 0.96). Notably, both genders reported a similar mean score of 3.57 for the level of assessment detail, resulting in no observable difference ($p = 1.000$). Overall, these findings indicate a consistent, moderate perception of the rubric’s effectiveness in supporting problem-solution writing across genders.

3.2.2 The perceptions of the ESL lecturers towards the components and organisation of the generic scoring rubric

Table 3

ESL lecturers’ perceptions towards the components and organisation of the generic scoring rubric

Item	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	p-value
6. The requirements of the generic scoring rubric are easily understood to be used to assess problem-solution essay	Male	3.86	0.90	0.428
	Female	3.54	1.00	
7. The generic scoring rubric emphasises important criteria in assessing problem-solution essay	Male	4.57	0.53	0.004
	Female	3.68	0.90	
8. The terms and language used in the generic scoring rubric are appropriate	Male	4.57	0.53	0.002
	Female	3.54	1.10	
9. The number of criteria (content, language, organisation) of the generic scoring rubric to assess problem-solution essay is reasonable	Male	3.86	0.90	0.227
	Female	3.36	0.99	

Table 3 indicates significant gender differences in lecturers’ perceptions towards the Components and Organisation domain. The largest difference concerns the item *“The terms and language used in the generic scoring rubric are appropriate”*. Male lecturers reported a strong perception of the appropriateness of the terms and language used in the rubric (M = 4.57, SD = 0.53), whereas female lecturers expressed a more moderate perception (M = 3.54, SD = 1.10). Welch’s t-test confirmed this difference to be statistically significant ($p = 0.002$), indicating that male lecturers view the rubric language as more appropriate than female lecturers.

A similar pattern emerged for the item *“The generic scoring rubric emphasises important criteria in assessing problem-solution essays”*. Male lecturers again reported a high mean score of 4.57 (SD = 0.53) compared to females with a mean score of 3.68 (SD = 0.90), with a significant mean difference of 0.89 ($p = 0.004$). This suggests a consistent tendency for male lecturers to perceive the rubric as more effective at highlighting key assessment criteria.

In contrast, no statistically significant gender differences were found for items related to the rubric’s structural clarity. As for the perceptions of the item *“The number of criteria (content, language, organisation) of the generic scoring rubric to assess problem-solution essay is reasonable”*, males have a mean score of 3.86 (SD = 0.90) and a 3.36 mean score for females (SD = 0.99). Likewise, for the item *“The requirements of the scoring rubric are easily understood to be used to assess a problem-solution essay”*, the perceptions did not differ significantly across genders (males: M = 3.86, SD = 0.90; females: M = 3.54, SD = 1.00; $p = 0.428$). These findings indicate shared, moderate perceptions of the rubric’s clarity and organisation.

3.2.3 The perceptions of the ESL lecturers towards the usefulness of the generic scoring rubric

Table 4

ESL lecturers' perceptions towards the usefulness of the generic scoring rubric

Item	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	p-value
10. The generic scoring rubric is effective to assess a problem-solution essay	Male	3.86	1.07	0.270
	Female	3.36	1.06	
11. The generic scoring rubric helps learners to think critically in producing a problem-solution essay	Male	4.14	0.69	0.076
	Female	3.50	1.00	
12. Using the generic scoring rubric helps me to improve my assessment for problem-solution essay	Male	3.86	0.69	0.142
	Female	3.39	0.83	
13. I would recommend the generic scoring rubric to be used in the writing classroom to assess problem-solution essay	Male	1.57	1.51	0.821
	Female	1.71	1.18	

Table 4 presents gender-based differences in lecturers' perceptions of the Usefulness domain of the generic scoring rubric. The largest, though non-significant, difference was observed for the item *"The generic scoring rubric helps learners to think critically in producing a problem-solution essay"*. Male lecturers reported higher agreement ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.69$) than female lecturers ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.00$). Both groups indicated a moderate perception of this item. Although this result approached statistical significance ($p = 0.076$), it suggests a tendency for male lecturers to view the rubric as more supportive of critical thinking.

Moderate but non-significant differences were also found for items related to assessment effectiveness and professional practice. For *"The generic scoring rubric is effective to assess a problem-solution essay"*, males reported a mean score of 3.86 ($SD = 1.07$) compared to females at 3.36 ($SD = 1.06$). Similarly, for *"Using the generic scoring rubric helps me to improve my assessment for problem-solution essay"*, male lecturers again reported a higher mean score of 3.86 ($SD = 0.69$) than female lecturers with a 3.39 mean score ($SD = 0.83$). These differences did not reach statistical significance as Welch's t-test score is $p = 0.270$ and $p = 0.142$, respectively. This indicates broadly comparable perceptions across genders for this item.

In contrast, both genders reported a low agreement level for the item *"I would recommend the generic scoring rubric to be used in the writing classroom to assess problem-solution essay"*. Mean scores were similarly low for males ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.51$) and females ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 1.18$), with no significant difference ($p = 0.821$). This consistent finding suggests that, despite moderate perceptions of usefulness, the rubric in its current generic form may require further refinement before being widely recommended for classroom use.

3.3 Discussion

The findings of this preliminary study reveal a subtle yet complex landscape of gendered perceptions. The most notable findings are the highly significant gaps in Language Appropriateness ($p = 0.002$) and Goal Clarity ($p = 0.008$). Male lecturers reported significantly higher satisfaction than their female counterparts. These findings suggest that this generic assessment tool is rarely neutral; rather, it may align with specific cognitive or professional frameworks [12]. The lower scores among female lecturers on linguistic framing align with research suggesting that the communicative power of a rubric depends on how well its instructional language aligns with the user's pedagogical identity [24,27].

Furthermore, rubrics are perceived as useful tools, but the descriptions of criteria must be clear, focused, and aligned with the construct to avoid compromising their usefulness [35]. Language

educators need to note that rubrics often lack clarity, which may be interpreted differently by teachers and students [36]. Thus, communicating expectations may potentially help to overcome what a rubric is unable to communicate [3,36].

Within the Mongolian higher education context, findings reflect a tension between standardised reforms and local pedagogical values. Rapid internationalisation often creates a pedagogical mismatch where imported tools clash with traditional teaching identities [37]. As previously indicated, the language gap in rubric "buy-in" often fails to capture the feedback styles valued in diverse cultural settings [15]. Without alignment with specific educational models, rubrics struggle to support authentic assessment [3].

Similar to findings reported in previous research [37], the ESL female lecturers reported only moderate satisfaction with language appropriateness, it indicates that rubrics often lack authenticity and require localised adaptation to better reflect the specific teaching contexts. The result further indicated that without prioritising the students' contexts, it may lead students to "meet the criteria" instead of engaging in deeper learning, underscoring tensions between standardisation and enhancing local pedagogies.

Despite conceptual differences, a critical similarity emerged in the functional utility of the rubric ($p = 1.000$), indicating that the tool possesses high procedural reliability [32]. Even if lecturers disagree with the framing, the technical criteria remain well-defined [32]. This mirrors global findings, which suggest that rubrics can be effectively used for grading consistency even when graders harbour underlying conceptual dissatisfaction with the tool's design, provided the technical criteria are well-defined [32]. Similar findings by [35] indicate that there is positive evidence for grading reliability when criteria are clear, even though effects on self-regulation and motivation are more mixed. What can be concluded from the findings of this preliminary study and other studies, rubrics are one of the powerful tools in teaching and learning, as they can secure consistent procedural steps even when users are not fully conceptually on board.

However, the low mean score for recommending the rubric ($M < 2.00$) indicates "rubricisation" as state where tools are used for compliance rather than pedagogical belief [19]. Ultimately, the success of an assessment tool is measured by its ability to be embraced as a meaningful pedagogical partner [24]. Ultimately, the success of an assessment tool is measured not merely by its reliability in grading but by its ability to be embraced as a meaningful pedagogical partner by the faculty [24]. Hence, the generic nature of such rubrics is replaced with a more inclusive, locally-responsive design, this scoring rubric will continue to be viewed as an administrative hurdle rather than a catalyst for academic excellence.

The findings of this preliminary study serve as a call to action for educational leaders to recognise that, as rubrics are being promoted to reduce subjectivity and enhance objectivity in language assessment [28], there is a need for educators to integrate them into teaching practices for genuine learning benefits. Some rubric-based language learning studies stress the importance of teacher beliefs and assessment literacy in how rubrics are used, which could plausibly vary by gender and experience, even if not always measured directly [1, 25]. Therefore, further study needs to be conducted to measure the factors of gender and experience with the use of rubrics. Finally, the findings from this study agreed with [28], where gender does possess different perceptions on the rubric, and this, in turn, influenced the way they view the criteria inside a rubric.

4. Conclusion

This preliminary study investigated the ESL lecturers' perceptions based on gender of the generic scoring rubric used to assess problem-solution essays in a higher education setting. The findings

reveal a significant perception-utility paradox that, while the generic scoring rubric demonstrates remarkable functional consistency, evidenced by consistent scores for skill application across both genders, it suffers from a profound communicative divide. Male lecturers reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction regarding the clarity of goals and the appropriateness of the language used, suggesting that the current iteration of the rubric resonates more effectively with male cognitive and professional frameworks. Conversely, the more reserved perceptions provided by female lecturers indicate a disconnect with the rubric's linguistic and structural framing, highlighting that generic tools are often perceived through gendered and cultural interpretive lenses.

The research further contextualises these findings within the Mongolian academic landscape, where rapid standardisation has occasionally bypassed the need for local, gender-inclusive adaptation. The uniform lack of recommendation for the rubric underscores that functional reliability does not equate to professional buy-in. When educators feel that an assessment tool is an administrative mandate rather than a pedagogical partner, the potential for the rubric to foster deeper learning and critical thinking is severely diminished. Ultimately, the success of an assessment tool is measured not merely by its reliability in grading but by its ability to be embraced as a meaningful pedagogical partner by the faculty.

4.1.1 Recommendations for policy and practice

To bridge the identified gaps in clarity and linguistic resonance, it is recommended that institutions move away from top-down implementation in favour of a collaborative design framework. Engaging both male and female faculty in linguistic evaluation workshops will ensure that rubric criteria are articulated in a way that is clear, inclusive, and culturally resonant. This participatory approach transforms the rubric from an imposed document into a shared pedagogical tool, directly addressing the language gap identified among female educators.

Furthermore, professional development sessions should move beyond technical training to focus on broader assessment literacy. Utilising peer-led discussions can bridge the clarity gap and ensure that the rubric's purpose and specific requirements are interpreted consistently across all demographics. By standardising the orientation phase through multi-modal delivery, administrators can ensure that the goals of the assessment are equally transparent to all users, regardless of their initial interpretive framework.

For the Mongolian context specifically, rubrics should be iteratively refined to include more descriptive and formative elements that align with traditional instructional values. By adapting the tool to reflect the academic vocabulary and instructional warmth prioritised in local teaching traditions, institutions can move faculty perception from moderate utility to a higher level of professional recommendation.

4.1.2 Limitations and future research

While this preliminary study provides critical insights, it is limited by a relatively small and imbalanced demographic distribution, which may affect the universal generalisability of the findings. The reliance on quantitative data also prevents a deeper exploration of the specific nuances behind the linguistic dissatisfaction expressed by some participants. Future research should employ a larger, more balanced demographic sample and utilise qualitative interviews to explore the underlying reasons for the differences in perception. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine whether long-term exposure and iterative co-construction of these rubrics eventually close the perception gap and improve the overall recommendation rate among faculty.

Acknowledgement

This research was not funded by any grant. The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to all the ESL lecturers who participated in this study for their valuable time and insightful contributions, as well as everyone who was involved, directly or indirectly, in bringing this work to fruition.

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