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## **METACOGNITIVE APPROACHES AS KEY INGREDIENTS FOR ESSAY CONTENT EVALUTION**

## **МЕТАКОГНИТИВНЫЕ ПОДХОДЫ КАК КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СОСТАВЛЯЮЩИЕ ОЦЕНКИ СОДЕРЖАНИЯ ЭССЕ**

### **Abstract:**

Nowadays, the necessity of transition from lower order thinking skills (LOTS) to higher order thinking skills (HOTS) has become a prized asset in tertiary education. To make this linear progression smooth it is required that the whole process be regulated by meta-cognitive activities which are characterized by the dual function of regulating and monitoring cognitive processes. The paper highlights the importance of evaluating students' higher order thinking skills in academic writing through two criterion-based scoring rubrics (Model A and Model B) at two intricately linked levels (the object level and the meta level). The analytic rubrics, though superficially similar in design, considerably vary in the assessment perspectives and the criteria against which essay content evaluation is to be performed. Model A is designed for beginner and intermediate writers who have the "what-how-why" writing style primarily guided by the Gricean conversational maxims, whereas Model B is designed for upper-intermediate and

experienced writers whose writing style stands out by its “why-how-what” nature. The latter showcases writers’ metacognitive knowledge of successfully regulating their own way of thinking through rhetorical appeals, the right and effective use of which enhances the development of students’ writing skills, in the meantime facilitating the assessment process which is carried out by two assessment models. These models are labelled as “from the outside in” intended to evaluate content from the pragmatic perspective at the object level and “from the inside out” designed to evaluate content from rhetorical perspective at the meta-level.

**Keywords:** analytic scoring rubric, higher order thinking skills, lower order thinking skills, cognition, metacognition, metadiscourse, conversational maxims, rhetorical appeals, golden circle, hedges, criteria

### **Introduction**

The philosophy of assessment and teaching strategies is one of the central issues in academic writing discourse research. Despite the extent of research done in the area of academic writing assessment culture, there are still unsolved issues relating to one of the main educational requirements of the 21st century, that of developing and promoting the students’ higher order thinking skills while evaluating the content of their academic writing.

It is an irrefutable fact that the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning has opened up wondrous opportunities for students to enhance their academic performance and become better learners. The possibility of grasping these opportunities primarily depends on the extent to which students are ready and willing to embrace the new educational challenges insofar as the implementation of anything new implies undergoing a number of difficulties. The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said: “The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order.” Indeed, academic progress may steadily be achieved only when we modify the one-size-fits-all approach to learning and enable more flexible and innovative approaches to occupy their rightful place in teaching and evaluation methodology, in the meantime, preserving all the worthwhile so far achieved and adding anything new required to meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners’ needs and expectations.

Since the 21st century has seen a drastic change in the assessment culture the main requirement of which is assessing students’ higher order thinking skills, it is quite natural that there should be an overhaul in the way students’ academic performance is evaluated. As a corollary, there should be another no less important shift in the assessment culture: the shift from “assessment of learning” to “assessment for learning”. This shift is very important

inasmuch as “assessment for learning” carries out a two-fold function incorporating both assessment and teaching, the latter being achieved through constructive feedback. Having identified all these important priorities, requirements and challenges of the 21st century learning and assessment, we embarked on making a kind of breakthrough in our work, thereby creating some new techniques and strategies which would enable us to assess our students’ writing skills, more specifically, their essays in a more objective and productive way.

### **Theory**

Performing in compliance with today’s learning demands and expectations is not as easy as it seems to be, especially when it comes to acquiring higher order thinking skills. Being considered as the key component and requirement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, these skills are necessary to acquire and any unreasonable attempt made in this direction is doomed to failure unless there is a smooth transition from lower order thinking skills (LOTS) to higher order thinking skills (HOTS). According to Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956), which is hierarchical by nature, the former is related to knowledge acquisition, the level of remembering and understanding, whereas the latter relates to knowledge creation, the level of evaluating and creating. In this LOTS-to-HOTS progression, the transitional stage of “knowledge deepening, the level of applying and analyzing, is of paramount importance since it has a kind of regulatory function. Straddling the boundary between knowledge acquisition and knowledge creation, the “knowledge deepening level” draws a clear-cut demarcation between LOTS and HOTS, in the meantime creating a solid base for each level to be built on, in the first place and making the transition from LOTS to HOTS possible, in the second place. In pursuit of this goal, it is required that teachers adopt a new approach to existing methods, techniques and strategies and inculcate the continuum from LOTS to HOTS on the onset of course development so that the learning process isn’t geared to the remembering and understanding level only. The progression from rote learning to analytical learning is vitally important which entails reducing the number of remembering and understanding level objectives and prioritizing metacognitive activities instead. There are a myriad of definitions of metacognition in dictionaries which include, but are not limited to, the awareness or analysis of one’s own thinking processes (Webster’s dictionary), thinking about one’s own mental processes (Collin’s dictionary). Of all the definitions and explanations of meta-cognition found in scientific literature, Nelson and Narens’ (1990) Model of Metacognition stands out from all the others for its deep and thorough explanation of cognitive and metacognitive processes. According to their model, meta-cognition is defined as the monitoring and control of cognitive processes at two inextricably

intertwined levels: the object level and the meta level. The object level is responsible for all cognitive processes that regulate “one’s own thinking” while the meta level is responsible for higher-order cognitive processes that regulate “thinking about one’s own thinking”. By this view, metacognition is a rather complex phenomenon and may be used as a powerful means to supervise our thoughts, ideas and actions in most, if not all, teaching and learning processes.

This article is an attempt to study metacognitive approaches to essay content analysis which would undoubtedly enable learners to use their knowledge more strategically, present the topic clearly, and interpret the meaning of the topic accurately. These methods would consequently result in a higher degree of understanding, accepting and further on negotiating the meaning of the message. We assume that the pragmatic dimension of essay content analysis should be associated with the pragmatic category of metadiscourse, which regards the language as a mediator, including personal feelings and personality, on the one hand and the forms of interaction with the participants, on the other hand. In one word, it is something that helps the writer to establish his credibility and reliability. Not only does the metadiscourse help to say “what” but rather “why”, i.e., it does not only involve the factual, informative and logical description of the topic but also the reflective and interpretive interplay with the participants. Presumably, this kind of two-fold interaction would enable the writer to help the readers to connect, analyze, evaluate and ultimately develop more realistic and objective attitudes towards the topic. Thus, the metacognitive approach adopted for this research incorporates pragmatic devices and rhetorical appeals which are equally important for content evaluation in terms of transparency and objectivity.

Another issue that teachers are constantly faced with is the objective assessment of essay content which is considerably hard as compared with that of other performance categories such as formatting, mechanics, organization, grammar, style and vocabulary. Towards this end, it is required that teachers from the outset of their writing courses employ evolutionary approach to essay writing, thus assuming responsibility not only for the content they teach, but also for the positive attitude they instill in their students towards writing. Students expect and demand transparency in assessment, and the right choice of criteria will guarantee an impartial and reliable assessment. Any inadvertent choice of assessment ingredients will bring about a number of problems and may even deteriorate the relationship between students and teachers. Similarly, any unreasonable correction or subjective evaluation may increase the number of questions to which teachers sometimes find it difficult to give justified or precise answers. Those questions posed by students include, but are not limited to, “Why did you grade me that way?”, “How did it come about that my grade and that of my friends are different in case we

made the same mistakes or the same number of mistakes?” Not being given definite answers to these and similar questions, students lose their interest towards the subjects and, what is worse, they lose their faith towards their teachers’ professionalism or impartiality. So, we, teachers, are responsible not only for what we teach, but rather for what kind of attitudes we develop and provoke, what is the borderline between” what”, “how” and ”why”; how we connect and convey meanings in our daily explanations and presentations of the fundamentals of the academic writing, and what is most essential ingredient; why we evaluate a certain piece of writing this or that way; what are the criteria that are crucial for the impartial and reliable assessment. In this respect, analytical scoring rubrics with their explicitly defined criteria are an optimal solution to such problems; they are also effective means to boost the objectivity level and satisfy students’ expectations of fair evaluation.

The analytic rubric presented in the paper is divided into two rubric models: Model A designed for beginner and intermediate writers and Model B designed for upper-intermediate and experienced writers. The former is aimed to assess content from pragmatic perspective at the object-level; the latter is aimed to assess content from rhetorical perspective at the meta-level. The marked differences between these two rubric models are determined by cognitive and metacognitive approaches to content evaluation.

### **Data and Methods of Research**

In correspondence with a number of studies conducted in this area and with a view to realizing the use and impact of cognitive and metacognitive strategies while progressing from the object level to a higher and more analytical assessment and teaching level techniques in academic writing, more specifically in essay writing, the following research questions were proposed:

1. To revise cognitive and metacognitive approaches to essay content analysis which would undoubtedly enable learners to use their knowledge more strategically, present the topic clearly, and interpret the meaning of the topic accurately.
2. To revise the context of communication in essay writing.
3. To examine the distinctions between the pragmatic devices and rhetorical appeals.
4. To elaborate on the reverse “why-how-what” attitude towards writing in contrast to “what-how-why” attitude through designing rubrics A and B which demonstrate the level of comprehensibility of students’ writing guided by the four Gricean maxims (maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner), on the one hand and the students’ HOTS level through rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos), on the other hand.

As a prerequisite for designing the two rubrics we have used the findings of our previous research the central idea of which is that in academic writing students need to have linguistic, rhetorical and socio-pragmatic awareness. Of these three types, linguistic awareness is the core element in academic writing since it covers the wide range of language forms including the organizational level of the language. As far as rhetorical and pragmatic awareness is considered, it deals with the conventions of the language. This is undoubtedly a higher level of awareness with the help of which students are able to decide on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the use of certain words, politeness forms in a specific situational context. It displays greater sensitivity to the ways in which conventions of the language can be used since conventions of the language are not so resistant to change as the forms of the language are and are consequently exposed to change from one audience to another.

Another no less important prerequisite that we have used while designing the rubrics includes the major factors or perspectives that influence any type of communication, and in this respect, academic writing is not an exception. It is so-called rhetorical situation or context of communication which focuses both on the rhetorical and communicative features of the writing with its main factors: the occasion situation for writing; the purpose of communication; the topic; the audience; the writer and the writer's voice.

In the light of all these findings that have served a really solid base for our research, what we are inclined to do at this point is to draw a borderline between the pragmatic devices and rhetorical appeals used as effective content assessment descriptors in the two rubric models, to identify the extent to which these descriptors coincide and diverge in terms of the functions they perform, and to decide on the scoring criteria against which content is evaluated at the object and meta levels.

As for the main distinctions between pragmatic devices and rhetorical appeals, we don't intend to elaborate on the detailed description of each of the dimensions as they both comprise rather rich and fundamental theoretical heritage. But the elaboration on the cornerstone dimensions of both is crucial to reveal the main content and organizational properties of each rubric model. In writing, like in other aspects of language, pragmatics mainly focuses on the communicative aspect of the language covering both the linguistic and extra-linguistic layers of communication. However, when we express thoughts and emotions aiming at influencing, convincing and persuading others, we deal with rhetoric. Rhetoric is mainly and very often a one-way communication and it is designed to influence and alter viewpoints and convictions more than to inform (Smith, 2002). Hence, in order to identify the similarities and differences between the pragmatic devices and rhetorical appeals, it is important to define the specific

nature of the two assessment and writing models designed in the rubrics. Surprising as it may seem, the idea and terminology of labelling the assessment and writing models stems from the concept of “golden circle” introduced by Simon Sinek in his inspirational TED talk “How great leaders inspire an action”. In his persuasive speech, Simon Sinek, a leadership expert and management theorist, who is also the author of the classic “Start with why”, with the help of three simple but powerful words what, how, why explains why some leaders are able to inspire, convince and cause to act whereas others aren't. In his estimation, ordinary leaders who have the “what-how-why” leadership style think, act and communicate “from the outside in”, that is, they “go from the clearest thing to the fuzziest thing”. But the inspired leaders think, act and communicate “from the inside out” due to the leadership style they evolve. And that style is “why-how-what”. We fully support the “revolutionary” ideology of the “golden circle model” and think that it holds true for beginner and experienced writers, too. Many, if not all, beginner writers are mainly concerned with “what to write” and, consequently, express their thoughts, ideas and arguments from the “what-how-why” perspective. However, the reverse “why-how-what” approach to writing is more workable for more experienced writers whose writing style explicitly and implicitly showcases their idiosyncratic characteristics.

Now let's describe each rubric model presented below separately.

**Model A: Analytic scoring rubric for essay content evaluation at the object-level**

Performance Category		Scoring Criteria	Total Points	Score
<b>Assessment Model: “from the outside in” Lower-Order-Cognition Writing Model: “What-How-Why”</b>	<b>Content (20 points)</b>  <b>Pragmatic devices: (Grice’s maxims)</b>	<b>Maxim of quantity:</b> <i>(make your contribution as informative as required; do not make your contribution more informative than is required)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• essay successfully fulfills the requirements of the assignment;</li> <li>• there is one clear, well-focused topic;</li> <li>• main ideas are clear and are well supported by detailed and accurate information;</li> </ul>	5	
		<b>Maxim of quality:</b> <i>(try to make your contribution one that is true; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• each part of the essay is adequately supported with accurate, relevant evidence;</li> </ul>	5	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• details chosen are clear and intelligible; they consistently establish and maintain a particular mood;</li> <li>• precise words, vivid sensory details, and appropriate figurative language create clear images and impressions;</li> </ul>		
		<p><b>Maxim of relation:</b> <i>(be relevant)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• every sentence is important and relevant to the topic;</li> <li>• all details are clearly related to the topic;</li> </ul>	5	
		<p><b>Maxim of manner:</b> <i>(avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; be brief; be orderly)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• essay shows that the writer used care and thought;</li> <li>• essay is written in expressive, plain language</li> </ul>	5	

As is seen from rubric A, beginner writers have the “what-how-why” writing style, and Grice’s cooperative principle (CP) with its four maxims serves as a helpful guideline for them to organize their thoughts and ideas in a logical and coherent way. We fully espouse the core ideology of the cooperative principle according to which writers are expected “to make their conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted direction or purpose of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice, 1975:45). This cooperative approach to writing substantially enhances the level of comprehensibility of students’ writing which is guided by the four maxims proposed by Grice. Each of these maxims (maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner) carefully regulates the amount of information required for each piece of writing, the adequate evidence of the truthfulness of that information, the relevance of that information to the topic, and, finally, the coordinated manner of presenting that information, all of which ensure the optimal level of coherence of the whole utterance. As far as the scoring criteria are considered, they are designed to provide students with helpful guidelines the adherence to which will facilitate the writing process.

The next step is the transition from the object-level to the meta-level writing. To make this step smooth and clear, let’s go back to Sinek’s speech in which he compares leading “inside-out” with leading “with heart and soul”. This explanation comes to signal a very important message to us: the content starts from the heart and feelings and then goes to the head. Experienced writers very often use their personal experiences, observations, perceptions, interpretations of and doubts about the world as a premise for unfolding and developing the

topic. This very approach to writing has served a solid ideological foundation for us to design the second analytic scoring rubric (Model B) which aims to analyse students' HOTS through rhetorical appeals: ethos, pathos, logos. This rubric given below displays writers' metacognitive and intellectual performance; it also showcases their urge and aspirations to convince the reader in their truth and viewpoint.

**Model B: Analytic scoring rubric for essay content evaluation at the meta-level**

Performance Category		Scoring Criteria	Total Points	Score
<b>Assessment Model: "from the inside out"</b> <b>Higher-Order-Cognition Writing Model: "Why-How-What"</b>	<b>Content (15 points)</b>  <b>Rhetorical appeals: (ethos/pathos/logos)</b>	<b>Ethos:</b> <i>(appeal to the writer's credibility)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• writer's purpose of writing is very clear;</li> <li>• writer's extensive knowledge and experience with the topic is evident;</li> <li>• there is abundance of evidence of critical thought, analysis, and insight</li> </ul>	5	
		<b>Pathos:</b> <i>(appeal to emotion or to an audience's values or beliefs)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• essay fulfils its purpose and is appropriate to its intended audience;</li> <li>• writer's tone is clear, consistent, and appropriate for intended audience</li> </ul>	5	
		<b>Logos:</b> <i>(appeal to logic)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• essay is logically organized; writer's points build logically upon each other;</li> <li>• central idea is well-developed; clarity of purpose is exhibited throughout the paper</li> </ul>	5	

As is seen from the rubric, each of the rhetorical appeals has a certain goal to attain, the ethical appeal being the most essential, though. Establishing and advancing one's insightful position on a particular topic throughout the whole essay is the "heart" of well-thought-out content. Agreeing or disagreeing with existing viewpoints is not enough to build one's position as an experienced writer. What is really needed for this position is putting forward pro and con arguments to make them well-reasoned or justifiably-opposed. Such a balanced approach to writing shows the level of writers' extrinsic and intrinsic ethos which, depending on the way they support their position, challenge or withdraw objections, and offer or reject alternate interpretations, may be either strong or weak. The prevailing description of the two types of ethos in existing literature is as follows: "Ethos comes in two forms: extrinsic ethos which is related to the writer's or speaker's authority, education and experience and intrinsic ethos which

is related to the writer's or speaker's ability to create trust and credibility within the speech.” However, in this context, by saying extrinsic ethos we mean the knowledge and expertise that the writer has in the very field or aspect that the topic is related to. And it is to the writer's advantage that he/she has profound and not superficial knowledge of that subject. In this sense, let us call extrinsic ethos “outward protection”, something needed to write confidently “with the head”. However, even more importance is attached to intrinsic ethos since it showcases the writer's inner, intrinsic abilities as a writer. This is what matters most while expressing one's viewpoint about a particular issue. We call this kind of ethos “inner protection” which is needed to write “with the heart and soul”. These two types of ethos may be projected differently and analyzed from different angles; however, what is looked upon as an indispensable element for each type in academic writing is students' awareness and competent use of metapragmatic devices, namely, hedges or self-protection devices (as we call them in our research). The most effective devices of all are verbal and adverbial expressions through the right use of which writers distinguish between facts and claims and purposefully use “interactive elements which serve as a bridge between the propositional information in the text and the writer's factual interpretation (F.Salager-Meyer 106). These devices help students moderate their propositions without imposing them on readers' mind so that they wouldn't look or sound “Mister or Ms.-know all” to the audience. Towards this end, it is required that students express different degrees of possibility which does not mean, at all, lack of certainty in the issue; rather, it shows a respectful and polite attitude to the audience's viewpoint which will not only build up reader-writer trustful relationship but will also reduce the most common thinking errors that include, but are not limited to, overgeneralizations, bias against minority or majority, labeling, personalizing, emotional reasoning. In one word, hedges contribute to regulate and manage our thoughts, curb our emotions and behave properly, respectfully and productively in writer-reader interaction. As for the evaluation of students' extrinsic and intrinsic ethos, it is carried out on the basis of clearly-defined rubric criteria which are aimed to assess students' content awareness, clarity of purpose, evidence-based knowledge, confidence in their position, sincerity and honesty in their argumentation, down-to-earth reasoning, critical thinking as well as concern-driven approach to audience's apprehensions and objections. All of these criterion-referenced ingredients determine whether the ethical appeals used are strong or weak which heavily depends on the extent to which the writer's trustworthiness and sincerity is accepted by the reader. This in turn depends on the emotional language used by the writer. Emotional appeals, though subjective and un sober they may seem at times, are powerful rhetorical devices that may be labeled as “emotional triggers” or “emotional trigger words” that have tremendous

impact on the audience, and the words writers choose to use definitely influence the audience's perception of and reflecting on the message. We know that language is arbitrary and the meaning of the word is not in the word itself; it derives from the context, from the socio-cultural system of the audience, and it largely depends on the experiences, emotions and feelings people associate with the words when they use or hear them. In this very respect, without going into details, we would just like to briefly mention what kind of language elements the writers should select to formulate their hypothesis, express ideas and opinions, reflect attitudes, make claims and finally draw conclusions. With all their powerful impacts on writing, emotional appeals may sometimes be misleading or imposing when writers fail to decide on the right amount of illocutionary force appropriate for a certain audience and situational context. Any attempts of dismissive or indifferent attitude towards the audience's feelings and thoughts, on the one hand, and any unreasonably exaggerated concern to or vitality of the topic, on the other hand may result in misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the message and goal initially set by the writer. It is, therefore, preferred that students shouldn't be driven away so far by their emotions, instead they need to choose writing techniques and strategies required to make a reasonable claim and offer solid proof in support of that claim. Though emotional appeals can buttress and reinforce any argument, the "heart" of sound argument is the argument's logical appeal that is responsible for the clarity of the claim enabling the reader "to walk alongside the writer".

## **Results**

This criterion-referenced approach to assessment makes the shift from "assessment of learning" to "assessment for learning" possible especially when it is accompanied by teachers' constructive and timely feedback. Feedback, being an integral component of "assessment for learning", helps students to identify their strengths and weaknesses as writers; it also helps to boost the level of assessment objectivity and fairness.

The findings of rubric A have shown that for the assessment at this level, it is of "from outside in" nature and assumes knowledge-based assessment prioritizing the required level of content intelligibility and comprehensibility. All these results have been attained through adherence to Gricean maxims chosen in this rubric model as the main scoring criteria.

Once students acquire the basic writing skills required to write with confidence at the object-level, it is recommended that they proceed to the next level the most essential ingredient of which is writing persuasively. Having a full control and monitoring over one's own way of thinking enables students to write "against the grain"; that is, to write by posing challenges to their own claims. And the right substantiation of the claims of fact, value and policy forms a

strong base for students to establish their credibility and style by expressing self-directed judgment and objective evaluation of their own writing and by convincingly arguing for their own position as a writer. Thus, Model B embraces not only what the writers are supposed and want to say but also how they comment on what they are trying to say, to what extent they are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence they present, how they apply their own opinion and facts to expose the topic of the essay.

Our research has resulted in the assumption that an effective piece of writing characterized as a higher-order-cognition writing model with “why-how-what” organizational pattern is to be guided by the abovementioned rhetorical appeals so that they could correspond to the rubric criteria set for each appeal.

### **Conclusion**

We opt to conclude that “why-how-what” pattern may be considered a diagramic reflection of the above mentioned two-fold interaction since it entails two interrelated processes between the reader and the writer: the interactive process of attitude molding and developing nature aiming at conveying the subject in an ethical and rational way with a strong appeal to the audience’s emotions and feelings, on the one hand and the interactive process of informative nature aiming at transmitting the overall message, both overt and covert, in an interest- and thought-provoking way with an obvious appeal to the audience’s situation and topic awareness, on the other hand. This pattern proves one more time that reader-driven academic writing reflects the writer’s personal touch and attitude, his voice and tone, his credibility, reliability, and rhetorical correctness to the reader and the topic. These methods would consequently result in a higher degree of understanding, accepting and further on negotiating the meaning of the message.

Hence, we dare say that these two rubric models can be viewed as linguo-pragmatic, meta-pragmatic and rhetorical dimensions for essay content assessment which will measure students’ higher order thinking skills, attitudes, and adherence to the system of socio-pragmatic, rhetorical and discourse conventions that has to be followed in academic writing.

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