EFL Teachers' Assessment Practices of Students' Interactions in Online Classes: An Activity Theory Lens

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Bio-profile:

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate how EFL teachers assess students' participation and interaction in virtual classrooms. With the sudden shift of many students and teachers around the world transitioning from teaching and learning in physical classrooms to virtual ones, it is critical now to investigate how the process is functioning for teachers and their students. Utilizing a variety of methods, EFL teachers were consulted about the ways they assess and monitor university student engagement in online classes in Saudi Arabia. Activity Theory was adopted as a framework to analyze the relationships and themes that emerged from the study to better understand how each element has the potential to affect all other elements involved. The study used a qualitative approach to collect data from five male EFL teachers with different backgrounds and ethnicities in a university setting. The purpose was to gain insight into their experience of teaching, assessing, and monitoring student engagement in an online setting. The study investigates the difficulties and

challenges EFL teachers encounter when engaging and assessing students in an online classroom, what strategies EFL teachers use to engage students in an online classroom, and how EFL teachers assess students in an online classroom. The data was collected from the teachers' personal experiences and reflections on their process by collecting a written pre-reflection, a two-week journal of their teaching experience, a written post reflection, as well as follow-up interviews after submitting the data. Eight themes emerged from the data highlighting the importance of using grades as a form of extrinsic motivation by attaching points to tasks and assignments to encourage participation, implementing teacher training sessions to ensure all teachers are prepared to teach and conduct their lessons online, and the reconciliation of teacher/student expectations in an online environment. By understanding how different elements involved in teaching, assessment, and engagement are interconnected, it is possible to change the outcome in a particular context. The study takes the stance that assessment for learning (AFL) as opposed to assessment of learning (AOL) would be more beneficial for students and teachers, especially when teaching and learning online. Assessment for learning encourages more teacher/student interaction and helps to motivate student participation. Assessment for learning encourages collaboration between teachers and students and creates a more open and democratic atmosphere. Teachers are able to provide clear targets to assist students in meeting their goals. The study also offers recommendations and pedagogical implications for the EFL context in assessment of online interactions and engagement.

1. Introduction

This article frames and examines the online assessment practices of EFL teachers in online classrooms. It focuses mainly on how EFL teachers assess students' interactions, engagement, and participation in an online setting. I take the position that despite the emergence of different forms of EFL assessment practices today, including (Belanoff and Elbow 1997; Messick, 1996; Shohamy, 1998, 2001; Tollefson, 1995), more research needs to be conducted pertaining to the assessment and engagement of online students during the Covid-19 pandemic. A deeper investigation and reflection as to the best practices for accountability and performance will help to

improve online classroom interactions for both teachers and students in contemporary higher education (HE) settings.

Before examining ways to better assess and teach in an online environment, let us consider the complex issues surrounding assessment in general. To illustrate the issues, it is important to recognize assessment as a key component of education which comes in many forms and practices. Assessment is often a complex web charged with unequal-power relations and other social consequences (as noted in Shohamy, 1998; Madaus, 1991; Noam, 1996). Shohamy has explained the role that language tests play in society, how tests define linguistic knowledge, how they can be used to determine membership, classify people, as well as signify the success and failure of people from individual groups. Madaus supports these views of tests as social technology is deeply embedded in education, as well as in government and business. Ultimately, they are the mechanism used to enforce power and control. Noam is also in agreement and views tests as having the power to support or destroy someone's career. Tests can place an unfair burden on individuals by placing unnecessary obstacles in their path to success. Now more than ever, it will be important to reevaluate the ways we are assessing students in an online environment. Many educators and students around the world have suddenly transitioned from learning and teaching in a classroom to an unfamiliar and new way of teaching, learning, and assessing online. As students and teachers adjust to the sudden changes inflicted upon them during the era of Covid-19, it is an opportunity to consider whether assessment for learning or assessment of learning might be more suitable.

Generally, and for the purposes of this study, I will be looking closely at what it means to teach and assess students in an entirely online environment. Traditionally the definition of assessment is, "The process of gathering, interpreting, recording, and using information about pupils' responses to an educational task" (Harlen, Gipps, Broadfoot, & Nuttall, 1992, p. 217). However, Shohamy (2001) defines assessment in a more democratic way. The traditional way that tests have been used is seen as more of an abuse of power, which in essence goes against democratic practices. Shohamy suggests a number of democratic principles to safeguard vulnerable groups against the agendas of people in various positions of power in traditional testing. One way to safeguard students, in a more democratic and interactive way, is the use of assessment for learning (AFL) to promote learning as opposed to assessment of learning (AOL) in an online setting.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study uses Activity Theory to highlight the different themes that emerged from the teacher interviews in order to interpret and analyze the data. Activity Theory shares connections with Sociocultural Theory in that teaching, student engagement, and assessment are all part of a social construct. The goal of Activity Theory is to encourage dialog among different perspectives within a system. Activity Theory can be used to better understand the current context of assessment and engagement in online classrooms. Newton et al. (2018) have stated that in order for assessment to be successful, one must first take into consideration all of the elements involved. Assessment in any form requires multiple areas of involvement, such as teachers, students, the institution, the curriculum, and so forth. Jeffery & Wilcox (2014) are also in support that assessment is both socially and culturally situated. Assessments rely heavily on the communication involved among all elements in the context. Elmberger et al. (2018) believe that Activity Theory can be used as a framework for improvements and changes within a system. By utilizing Engeström's (2001) Activity Theory to analyze the current situation in online teaching, assessment, and engagement, possible recommendations can be made for educational changes and improvements in the future.
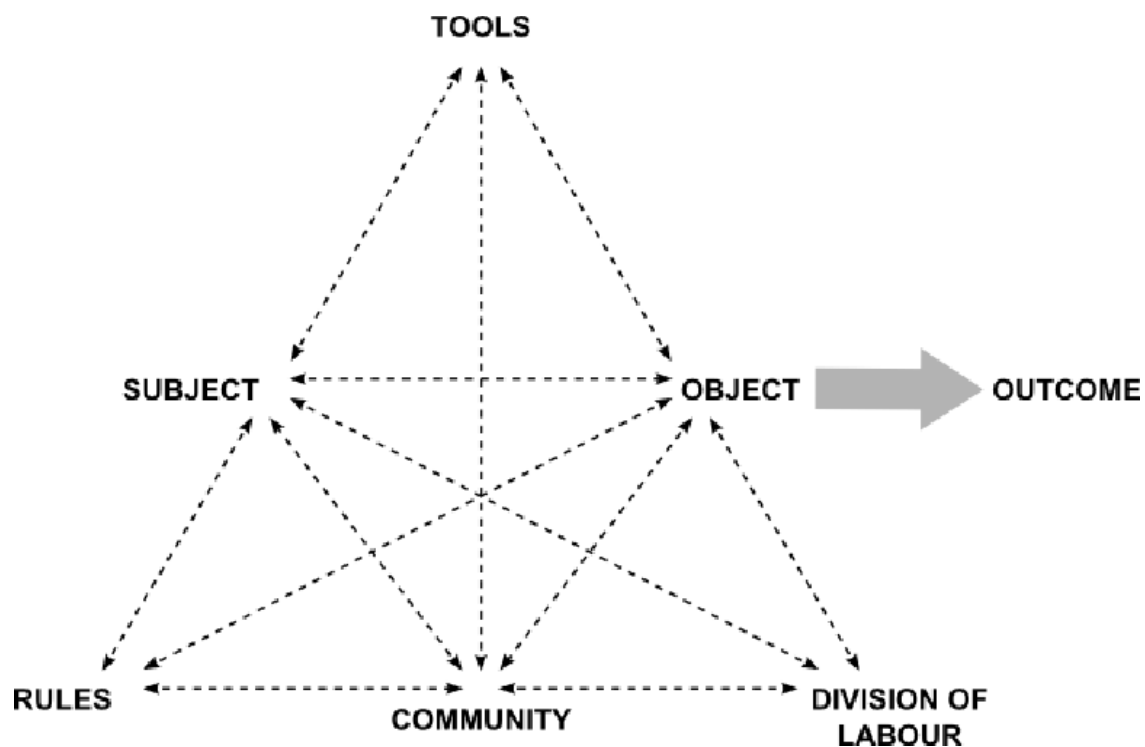
Fig. 1. Engeström's (2001) Activity Theory Diagram

2. Literature Review

The process of learning a language is certainly complex and involves a myriad of factors and influences on the learner. Learning English can be supported through communicative language teaching (CLT) where the process of learning is very social in nature. CLT involves not only learning from the teacher, but as well from their peers. The teacher is not viewed as the only form of knowledge, and students are encouraged to take authorship and responsibility for their learning (Richards, 2006).

In recent years there has been a shift from face-to-face classroom instruction to learning languages online through a variety of platforms and resources. Currently many classes around the world have suddenly shifted from in-person lessons in a classroom to learning a language in an entirely online format due to the pandemic of Covid-19. In order for both teachers and students to be successful, changes must be made from how we used to teach, learn, and assess in a traditional classroom setting, to a modified and adapted new approach (British Council, 2020). When we try to apply traditional classroom techniques and ways of assessment in an entirely different format, we are not setting ourselves and students up for the best opportunity of success. The delivery of information and content, as well as the way we receive work from students has changed. We must adapt and readjust our expectations to best support students in their online classes (British Council, 2020). Teachers cannot simply ask for students to submit assignments, take tests and quizzes, and perform in the same ways that they used to in the classroom. Moving forward, this new approach will need to be interactive and engaging to keep students interested and active participants in their online language learning experience.

Many teachers and students around the world have suddenly found themselves in unfamiliar territory. Moving forward, it'll be important for teachers to think how they can motivate and engage students in untraditional ways (British Council, 2020). Students and teachers no longer have the classroom as a physical space to get to know one another and interactively engage with each other in person. Not only is it more difficult for the teacher to get to know the students more personally, but the same challenges are there for students as well. Learning a language is not well supported by isolation. Learning needs to be communicative, interactive, and engaging. The former ways of traditional classroom instruction and assessment will need to change. Teachers will need to consider assessment for learning instead of assessment of learning in these new environments. Green et al. (2005) are in support of a redesign for online teaching and learning.

They have suggested four key ways in how to go about reforming the online teaching and learning experience. First, it is critical that learners are able to make informed decisions about their education. Second, we must recognize and diversify different forms of knowledge and skills. Third, we must create environments which are diverse. Finally, we must include forms of feedback and assessment which are learner focused. The challenge will ultimately be to focus on less prescriptive forms of teaching and be open to new tools and strategies.

Bañados (2006) is also in support of online learning and the many benefits that afford both students and teachers. Bañados has focused on three main areas: interaction through tasks, feedback, and a change in teachers' and students' roles. Interaction through tasks focuses on three main ways to engage learners through tasks: interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, and learner-computer interaction. As for roles for teachers and students, teachers can be viewed as guides who are able to support students through collaboration and feedback. Students need to become active learners who participate in the learning process and are responsible for their learning. One way educators can help meet the needs of students in an online setting is through the use of assessment for learning as opposed to the more traditional classroom use of assessment of learning.

Assessment can be viewed in two distinct ways: assessment for learning (AFL) and assessment of learning (AOL). As described by Lee & Coniam (2013), assessment for learning allows teachers to use what they know about students' knowledge to better understand and inform their teaching practice. Instead of focusing on students' mistakes, teachers focus on providing feedback to students about their learning in order to improve. Assessment for learning is a continuous process where not only the teacher is involved in the assessment process, but the students as well. The teacher and students are able to work together to improve learning and increase motivation. Assessment for learning provides students with clear learning targets and helps students to differentiate the quality of their work (Alshakhi, 2018). A key aspect of assessment for learning is that it is not entirely the teacher who assesses students' work, but a collaboration of both teacher and student.

Assessment of learning allows teachers to assess students' achievements against standards and goals. Examples are typically seen in the way we traditionally have assessed students through the use of tests, quizzes, and exams. This type of assessment does not involve the students input directly. Assessment of learning assesses what students have learned and allows teachers to assess to what extent students have achieved an understanding of the concept being assessed. However,

assessment of learning does not emphasize improving students' learning, but it does try to account for responsibility to meet previously established standards. The teacher is the primary person responsible for assessing students' learning and lacks the collaboration between student and teacher which is seen in assessment for learning (Lee & Coniam, 2013).

Ultimately, the educational world is at a pivotal point in history. As more and more classes move online for the unforeseeable future, it is essential now to examine what are the best practices moving forward. Specifically, this research is going to focus on how EFL teachers assess engagement and interaction in online classrooms.

2.1 Assessment for Learning in Online Classes as a Form of Alternative Assessment

McLoughlin & Lee (2008) have recommended an innovative learning paradigm that the authors have named Pedagogy 2.0. It is a set of teaching and learning strategies that enables greater engagement of learners. It allows students to actively shape the education they receive by personalizing their voice, providing options for participation, as well as the opportunity for co-production with other students. Some of the practices involved in innovative pedagogy include: areas that focus on performance and creativity, meta-learning strategies, learning that includes aspects of learner-driven content and collaborations, as well as peer-to-peer learning. This style of learning is less concerned with the knowledge of the individual learner, and is more concerned with collaboration, connection, and social interaction. Maintaining and promoting these skills is essential for lifelong learning within societies that are socially and digitally connected.

The notable characteristics of Pedagogy 2.0 include generating knowledge and learning through diverse opinions, the process of learning by making connections, combining emotions and cognition into making meaning. The three Ps of Pedagogy 2.0 stand for Personalization, Participation, and Productivity. In Personalization we find learner's choice and agency, customization, and self-regulation and management. In Participation we seek community, collaboration, and connection. In Productivity there is opportunity for learner-created content, an active contribution to knowledge, generativity, creativity, and innovation.

McLoughlin & Lee (2008) argue that we need to move away from the traditional classroom of "closed classrooms" which emphasized teachers and institutions and move towards more socially-based examples which are more engaging for both teachers and students. Inherently within

Pedagogy 2.0 there is less focus on a prescriptive curriculum and more focus on teachers and students working together where teachers are also seen as co-learners.

Here we can see the importance of moving away from what we know about "traditional classroom" environments and moving more towards what Lee (2005, p. 17) has described here for online settings:

> [W]e have already managed to overcome the confines of the physical classroom, but … still remain unknowing prisoners of the instructor centered online classroom. To move further ahead, we will need to demolish these virtual walls so as to create social learning spaces, in which learners and … [teachers] … become associates in a community of practice, participating in networks of interaction that transcend the old-fashioned constructs of institutions and organizations (p. 17).

2.2 Research Questions

1. What are the difficulties and challenges EFL teachers encounter when engaging and assessing students in an online classroom?
2. What strategies do EFL teachers use to engage students in an online classroom?
3. How do EFL teachers assess students in an online classroom?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research is a qualitative study which closely examines the data received from teachers currently teaching EFL in an online environment. It is important to note that this method was chosen to closely investigate and identify assessment practices that are being used in an online environment. According to Dörnyei (2007), language acquisition and its use depends on many factors, including social, cultural, and situational. These factors allow us to use qualitative research in order to investigate and reveal insights of these conditions. Dörnyei also notes the importance of qualitative research in the investigation of language testing and in the field of applied linguistics. According to Dörnyei, it is also common to use interviews as one of the main methods in qualitative research. Qualitative research was selected as an appropriate method for this paper to understand and discover how EFL teachers assess students' interactions, engagement, and participation in an online setting.

3.2 Participants

Five male EFL teachers working in the English foundation program at the university were selected to participate. The teachers represent different nationalities. All of the qualified teachers hold MA TESOL degrees and have 3 or more years of teaching experience. The sample size is considered adequate for this study as qualitative research seeks to provide deeper, more in-depth information from fewer participants than a quantitative survey or study. The instruments used were rigorous in the attempt to emphasize the depth of information collected from participants. Co-constructing knowledge between participants and researcher allowed for a deeper investigation and understanding of answers. Follow-up interviews with participants provided an opportunity to more deeply understand and explain the responses provided.

By using more than one instrument for data collection, this allowed the data to become more robust through the triangulation of journal keeping, reflections, and interviews. The importance was placed on the quality and depth of the data as opposed to the quantity. Due to time constraints and length of commitment from participants in this study, it was also difficult to recruit and retain a larger number of participants. Morse (2000) has suggested that qualitative studies can adequately range from 5-50 participants. Morse mentions the difficulty in providing a blanket statement for what is an appropriate number of participants, but instead recommends for researchers to consider factors, such as the quality of the data and the study design. Similarly, Kırkgöz (2013) selected six participants in the study of novice teachers of English while Luchini & Garcia (2007) used only four participants for their EFL research.

3.3 Instruments

The research consisted of four key areas which helped gain a better insight over a two-week period. The key areas were: a pre-thought reflection of EFL teachers' online assessment experience so far; a written journal for two weeks where teachers recorded their reflections and provided feedback revolving around the topic of "evidence of learning"; after the completion of the two-week journaling process, teachers wrote a post reflection on their experience; and after collecting feedback from the previous three areas, teachers were invited to participate in a brief follow-up interview.

The pre-thought reflection was selected to better understand the view and position of teachers with their experience of online assessment up until this point. The questions sought to understand areas

that were difficult or troublesome for teachers, areas of strength and aspects that were going well for them, as well as recommendations they had for the improvement of online assessment tools. The two-week written journal that teachers kept was chosen to allow teachers to report on different aspects of their online classes. Teachers had the opportunity to write about the types of activities they selected, the motivation of students and what type of activities they found motivating for them, how they assessed and graded different assignments, and how they assessed the quality of student participation.

After the two weeks of journaling and reporting of their online teaching practice, the teachers then wrote a post reflection. The purpose was to find out their thoughts and feelings compared to what they wrote in the reflection prior to beginning this process. The teachers compared their feelings before and after the process, noted any changes or similarities, and gave their final recommendations for how to improve the quality and participation of online teaching in the future. This stage of the process was a critical stage that allowed teachers to convey their personal experiences from the past, present, and make recommendations for the future.

The final stage in this process was to conduct personal one-on-one interviews in order to gain a deeper and better understanding of the teachers' experiences. This was an important stage in the process which allowed teachers to elaborate on their experience of teaching and assessing students in online classrooms. By using narrative inquiry, it allows the research to better understand a particular situation. Narrative inquiry is a collaboration between participants and researchers in a particular setting or context over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

3.4 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by using qualitative methods. Stake (2010) has emphasized the importance of human perception and understanding as the basis of qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) stress the importance of the process and how reality is socially constructed along with the relationship between researcher and what is being studied. Creswell (2007) states the importance of the research design which involves multiple procedures. Initially research begins with an assumption, an inquiry into the situation to discover and reveal social and real-world problems, then an interpretation from the research includes the voice of participants which ultimately calls for change in the real world.

Narrative inquiry was primarily chosen for the data analysis process as it allows the researcher to utilize multiple forms of data in order to identify meaningful information. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have suggested various sources, such as journal records, interviews, field notes, and personal philosophies as appropriate forms of narrative inquiry. In conducting my narrative inquiry research, I employed the following for analysis: pre and post written reflections from teachers, teaching journals, and follow-up interviews.

Marshall & Rossman (2011) have recommended the use of "digital storytelling" for self-reflection. In this case, the reflections were written and were not done orally nor digitally recorded. Teachers wrote pre and post reflections of their feelings and described how they assessed students in an online setting.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have recommended the use of journaling as an appropriate form of narrative inquiry in qualitative research. By allowing the teachers to keep written records of their experiences throughout the two-week process, they were able to record and reflect upon their experiences following their lessons. The ease of being able to quickly jot down some notes and ideas during a lesson to later come back to and expand upon was selected so teachers could easily keep track of their thoughts throughout this process.

Follow-up interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way as described by Patton (1990). This way allows for the researcher to be more flexible and is quite common in qualitative studies. By not strictly controlling the interview process, this potentially allows for richer narratives to unfold. Upon receiving the data from the teachers, it was then coded and categorized into themes. Using the analytical procedures as identified as guidelines from Marshall & Rossman (2011), I analyzed the data through five stages. First, the data was collected and organized. Second, I read through and familiarized myself with the data from the teachers in order to get a better understanding of what each teacher had reported. Third, I identified preliminary categories in order to identify and give meaning to larger themes. Fourth, the identified categories and themes were then coded appropriately. Finally, upon examination of the coded themes, I was able to offer interpretations of the themes that emerged. According to Patton (2002), making inferences, drawing conclusions, attaching meaning, and offering explanations is all part of the reflective process in order to identify and code data.

Finally, Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001) was used to analyze the data from teachers in regard to the research questions. The following themes that emerged were then examined using Activity

Theory as a basis for identifying and examining the current state of data reported by the teachers in regard to their online teaching experiences. By examining how the different elements are interconnected and ultimately have an influence on the potential outcome, recommendations can be made for future implementations and improvements within this context.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

While the minimization of ethical considerations involved in research should carefully be assessed, I have used what Lincoln and Guba (1985) have identified as four key areas to consider when conducting research according to their trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

In regard to credibility, Schwandt (2007) addresses the issues surrounding the participants' input and the interpretation of the researchers' reconstruction based on their own understanding of the situation. Taking this into consideration, I tried to remain as faithful to the participants original meaning and input as possible.

In terms of transferability, the use of thick descriptions should be used to allow readers to decide if the information and conclusions made can be applied to other contexts (Creswell, 2007).

Dependability regards the importance and responsibility of a well-documented and logical process of the inquirer (Schwandt, 2007). I too was reflective in my own practice on recording and interpreting the data at each step of the process.

Finally, Schwandt (2007) discusses the importance of confirmability. The interpretations of an inquiry should not simply be the imagination of the inquirer, but rather that the inquirer has established them based on the facts of the data.

4. Results and Discussion

With the sudden shift teachers and students encountered when switching from teaching and assessing students in a traditional classroom environment to an entirely online one, several issues became apparent. Teachers noted the difficulty in engaging students online, as much of their materials and previous experience had been conducted in person in the classroom. The reported issues from teachers ranged from technical issues due to a lack of internet or poor connection, to students not having the required resources to attend online classes. Several teachers noted the difficulties they encountered due to a lack of teacher training and familiarity required when

conducting classes entirely online. Cultural issues seemed to play a role in students not being able to fully participate in their lessons as other family members were present in the room at the time of the lessons. Teachers also reported students not feeling fully motivated to participate unless there was a grade or points strictly attached to the task at hand. Teachers mainly assessed students following a standard rubric provided by the department which did not reflect any changes from teaching in person to online, while another teacher created his own participation rubric to use in the newly found online setting. It was reported that due to the lack of face-to-face teaching and learning, it is important to try and maintain motivation and joy from both teachers and students as this was noticeably lacking in the online setting.

Teachers used an array of strategies to engage students online from trying to make the material more personalized to students interests and backgrounds, to creating friendly, open, and personal relationships with students, and also being available to provide quick feedback to students when they had troubles studying online or in response to their assignments. One teacher reported using random elicitation of students in order to keep them prepared and ready to participate when called upon. All teachers reported that implementing a participation grade that is highly weighted in the course could help contribute to students actively participating and being prepared to engage in their online classes.

Teachers assessed students following the rubric provided by the department as well as implementing some of their own strategies in the online classroom. Several teachers mentioned the use of different writing assignments to assess student's participation, engagement, vocabulary, grammar, etc. The use of concept checking questions was used to immediately determine if students were closely following along and participating in the class. Other teachers reported monitoring students during breakout sessions and pair work in order to assess their engagement and work conducted in the online lessons.

Finally, Engeström's (2001) Activity Theory diagram was adapted to fit the needs of this study.

Figure 2 represents the system before analyzing the data from the teachers and Figure 3 represents Activity Theory after applying the data.
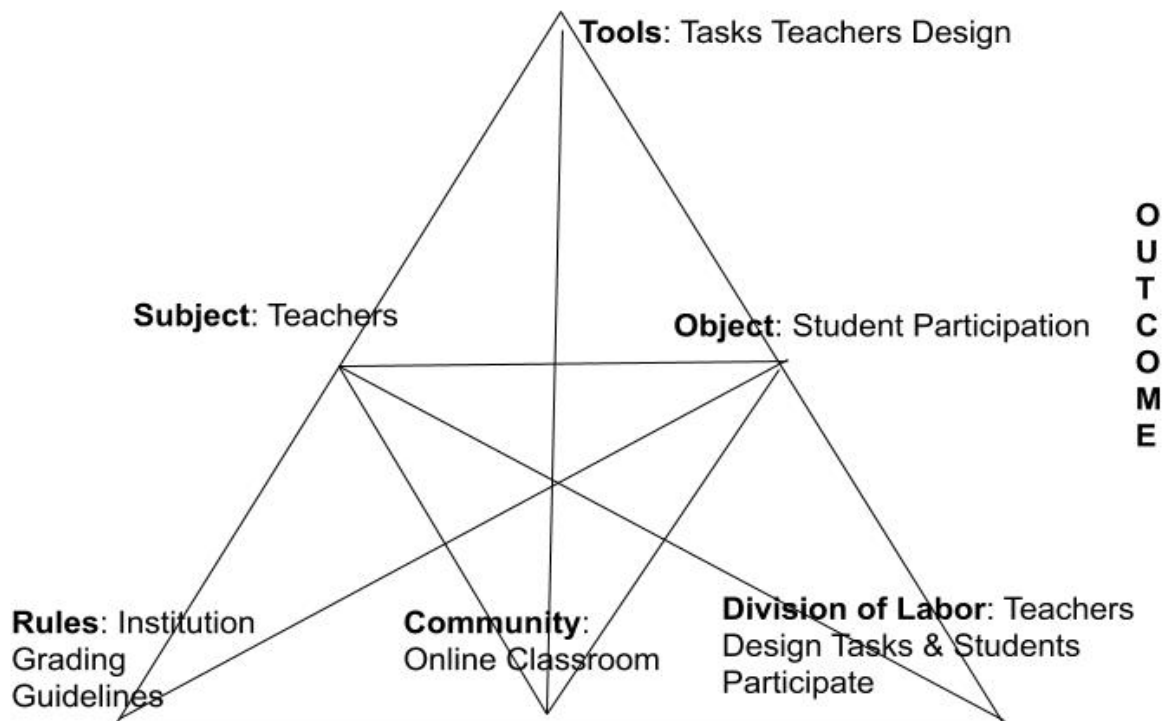
Fig. 2. Engeström's (2001) Activity Theory Diagram

4.1 Grades as a Motivational Stick

All of the teachers reported that their students did not appear to be highly motivated to participate in the online version of their classes. Many teachers noted that students were not motivated to participate unless a grade or a score was directly tied to their participation. Adam reported:

> For the majority of students, obtaining marks is learning. If they know by doing a particular thing/activity their percentile will improve, they are "motivated" to do it. Anything else that doesn't help them score marks is of no consequence to them at all.

Adam noticed that the students appear to be extrinsically motivated. By attaching grades to their participation, this could be a solution to having students be more engaged in an online setting. However, Adam also commented on the importance of working towards motivating students by other means, such as intrinsic motivational factors:

> In my opinion, the students' sense of responsibility and their true involvement in the process of learning emanates from their concept of education and learning. We need to enrich our students' concept of education and make them understand that learning actually begins beyond their sense of scoring marks. They should not be complacent with or be blinded by marks.

Brian, Kenny and Charlie also made supporting comments on students' motivation in regard to not being highly motivated unless a grade was attached to the task or activity. Brian noted, "The students are not motivated to learn. Most of them are extrinsically motivated to learn in order to pass or get good grades." Charlie specifically commented on students' intrinsic motivational factors, "...one single point keeps its prominence at the top all the time and it is students' intrinsic motivation." He went on to note, "...classroom participation grades can be a real extrinsic motivational factor. I believe classroom participation grades are a vital point to motivate students in online settings. It will help teachers to engage students." By preparing and training teachers to use both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational strategies in their online classrooms, this could help to resolve immediate participation and engagement issues with students, and work towards building long-term motivational skills in the students' education.

The teachers also noted the importance of creating materials and lessons that are both relevant and interesting to students. Brian noted that he, "...strived to make course material relevant to the students' writing exam and CBT needs." If students do not find the material relatable, helpful, or useful, they might not see the importance of participating or completing such activities. By helping make the connections for students to see the importance of what they are doing, this may motivate them to be more fully engaged and active in the online classroom.

By using Activity Theory to analyze the first theme under the category of "tools", it appears quite clearly from all of the teachers that students were more motivated to participate when a grade was assigned or attached to a task or assignment. To motivate students extrinsically through the use of grades, students could be more motivated to participate when they know their grade will be directly affected. As one of the teachers pointed out the importance of moving towards more intrinsic motivational factors in the future, this is an area to take into consideration for future studies and assessment involving other forms of motivation.

4.2 Enhancing Teacher/Student Relationships

The importance of the relationships teachers have with their students simply cannot be overlooked. Take a moment to reflect and think back on the teachers you had who were supportive, friendly, knowledgeable, and open to having discussions with their students? Now take a moment to reflect if you've ever experienced a teacher who was not like this? Brian specifically devoted time at the end of the online lessons to address any needs, concerns, or questions that the students had. He also made sure to provide students with personalized feedback after assignments and quizzes, as well as remembered to actively praise students for their work. He tried to take a personal interest in the students' lives outside of the classroom, especially during these challenging times in the world due to the worldwide pandemic of Covid-19. Brian summed up the ways he worked towards enhancing and creating positive teacher/student relationships in the following quote:

> ...teacher/students relationship is important as students feel a sense of belonging. This can be achieved if teachers can take care of students' emotional and social needs, treat them equally, avoid deception, develop one-to-one relationships, and be polite and positive.

By examining teacher/student relationships through the conceptual framework of Activity Theory under the category of "community", we can see the importance of creating and fostering teacher/student relationships in an online classroom. Many teachers would likely agree and have also probably worked towards establishing positive and open relationships with their students in their physical classrooms. However, it is even more critical to remember to take the extra time to do so in the online classroom. With all of the changes and adjustments both teachers and students have gone through with the rapid shift from in-person lessons to an online setting, taking the extra time to establish open and communicative relationships with students has the potential to be very beneficial for both students and teachers. It is interesting to note that only one teacher involved in this study mentioned taking the time to specifically develop these relationships. In future assessments, it would be worth noting if teachers could make time to get to know their students more personally and to incorporate this into the curriculum. Do better teacher/student relationships ultimately affect the outcome of student participation and grades?

4.3 Participation Grade

All of the teachers surveyed for this study were in support of implementing a participation grade which would account for a substantial percentage of students' grades. Each teacher commented that their students did not seem to be highly motivated unless a grade or score was attached to the task or assignment. Often when the teachers assigned a task to the students without specifically mentioning that it would be graded, students usually didn't attempt it or complete it. Adam acknowledged that, "...participation is important and more important than that is the quality of participation." Brian, on the other hand, noted the importance of when and where to attach participation grades:

> ...explorations of knowledge through enquiry, experimentation, discussion, debate and problem-solving in class help students to form ideas and understandings which are useful to their ongoing learning and, on this basis, they can be linked to assessment where grades come into play. I think in our learning and teaching scenario attaching a grade to the discussion board or participation could work. This is true for those students who never bother to reply even when the teacher asks them repeatedly.

Charlie believes that participation grades could substantially shift the online teaching and learning environment in a positive direction for both students and teachers:

> I believe that classroom participation grades can augment the overall online learning paradigm. It will not only lift student's motivation and also help teachers to engage them in different classroom activities. I think the overall online teaching practices can be augmented by introducing the classroom participation grades.

David used his own approach when it came to participation in his online classroom by randomly nominating students during the lesson and marking their participation throughout the session. David was also in agreement with all the other teachers that, "...a substantial weightage in participation in the overall grade could enhance learner involvement and learning experience."

By also analyzing participation grades through Activity Theory under the category of "tools" we can see the importance of linking grades to participation. All of the teachers were in agreement that a higher percentage of students' grades needs to be tied to participation. If there are not any consequences for not participating, such as a grade reduction, students are not as likely to engage. If teachers are able to inform students that their participation will be graded and count towards their final grade, we are likely to see an increase in student engagement and participation. This

adjustment would need to be agreed upon by the department, and likely the institution, as to how much of an increase they would like to implement. As it currently stands, the participation grade is not high enough to encourage adequate student participation. A substantial increase in graded participation is likely needed in future studies to see whether this has a significant effect on student participation.

4.4 Teacher/Student Expectations

Both Adam and David expressed different perspectives on this topic when it came to teacher/student expectations. Adam expressed his concern with the system of evaluation. He noted, "Our mode of assessment is not the most reliable way of measuring the learner's knowledge and/or ability to communicate in speech and writing." He elaborated that he has accepted the mode of assessment as "...a product of administrative and logistical wisdom and many other unspoken requirements of the entire scheme of the ELT our service providers advocate." David, on the other hand, shared his concern that students seem to expect high or passing grades from teachers with little to no regard for their output or work. He expressed his concern for finding the difficult balance in his position to manage both student and teacher expectations placed upon him, "Frankly speaking, most of the students expect us to give them high grades disproportionate to their performance, which causes strain between the teacher and the students. This is a challenging balancing act."

By examining teacher/student expectations through the framework of Activity Theory and the category of "division of labor", we can see two very different perspectives reported by the teachers. One teacher is concerned with the system of evaluation, but has accepted that this must be the best way of assessment since it was provided by the administration. From the sound of it, it appears that maybe not enough valuable teacher input was taken into consideration when creating the system of evaluation. By creating an open and communicative dialog between teaching faculty and administrators, creating a more fair and democratic form of assessment might be able to be achieved.

The other teacher reported difficulties in regard to the expectations students have and that many of them simply expect higher grades than they are producing. One recommendation could be to show students examples of what different types of work looks like at different grades. For example, showing students what an "A" paper or participation looks like, what a "B" looks like, and so on.

By clearly defining and showing students what they will need to produce in order to achieve the grades they want, this could help reduce the difficulties teachers face when it comes to mismatched teacher/student expectations of grades.

4.5 Technical Difficulties and Time Constraints

Several of the teachers commented on the lengthy amount of time it took to adjust to the new process of teaching online. Other teachers commented on the technical challenges they feared and had to overcome while teaching online. Others mentioned the amount of time and effort they had to commit to adapting the materials and tasks for an online environment. While they all faced different challenges unique to their own experiences, they all agreed it wasn't an easy or quick process. Brian expressed the anxiety he felt specifically when it came to online assessment, "...the greatest fear for me was technology failure during assessment." Brian also noted the amount of extra time that was needed to provide ample feedback to students. He expressed, "Most of the time, I felt overwhelmed with the amount of reading this online assessment required."

Kenny explained that it felt "bizarre" when he first began teaching online, "I felt as if I was talking to a machine. It took some time to overcome this bizarre feeling and be myself during these online classes. He commented on some of the technical issues students encountered during the process as well, "The most difficult thing is to truly engage the whole class, which is often not the case in a face-to-face interaction. Learners have multiple excuses such as, bad Internet, broken microphones, etc." He also commented on the amount of time it took to prepare materials from an in-person classroom to an online environment, "It takes a lot of time to adopt a question from the book for online settings. It consumes too much time. It is particularly pertinent for multi-stage activities. In the same line, Charlie shared some of the difficulties he encountered specifically when teaching and assessing listening activities:

> ...listening skill was a bit problematic. Principally, it is because of the Internet and technical problems at the students' side. A few students lost their attention or had a technical glitch during listening, and they interrupted during the feedback stage. As a result, the rest of the students lost the track.

Analyzing these problems through Activity Theory and the category of "requirements", many teachers reported on the different difficulties they encountered when it came to teaching online. Many teachers reported on the extra amount of time it took to prepare for their lessons, adapt

materials to an online environment, as well as the extra time it took to provide adequate feedback to students. Technical difficulties were also reported by teachers in terms of students not having the proper tools to study and learn online, as well as internet connection issues. In order for teachers and students to be successful in an online environment, it is vital that they have all the appropriate tools to learn and be successful, not to mention having a stable and reliable internet connection. Putting in place protocols of what to do during different emergency situations, such as poor internet connections, or students not having the required tools to participate, could help alleviate some of the stress felt by teachers. Compiling a "minimum requirement" list of resources for both students and teachers can help everyone to be able to perform to the best of their abilities. As for the amount of time it takes to adapt to new areas and provide adequate feedback, maybe the department or institution could initially allow for a certain amount of time dedicated to this as teachers transition into their positions of teaching online.

4.6 Teacher Training

Both teachers Brian and Charlie shared their concerns about implementing appropriate teacher training sessions in order to effectively teach students online. Brian discussed the idea of teachers being able to share and teach each other effective tools and strategies they use online. The idea is that colleagues can share what works well for them and their students in the online classrooms. He also noted the importance to, "...create confidence among our teachers that they have the right methods, criteria and opportunity to reliably assess the respective knowledge, skills, or dispositions." Charlie was in agreement with Brian that teachers must be accurately and effectively trained to teach online:

> "The whole process of learning and facilitation can be negatively affected, if the teacher has not been trained suitably. Knowing technology is not enough as an online competent teacher; one has to utilize all technological tools appropriately and effectively. Teachers' technology efficacy is fundamental for the creation of an effective online classroom setting."

Analyzing teacher training through Activity theory and the category of "teachers as subjects" of this study, it is absolutely critical that teachers be trained and capable of performing the necessary functions of their job. Two of the teachers reported how teaching and learning is negatively affected when teachers have not been adequately trained to teach their classes online. It is simply

not enough to assume that teachers will figure it out, or that teaching online can simply be conducted the same way teachers taught in the classroom. Specifically, designed workshops and practice sessions should be developed and implemented for all teaching faculty to be prepared and confident in using all the online teaching resources available to them. Workshops should be held where teachers can share with each other what type of activities and tools are working well for them, as well as brainstorming, discussing, and implementing new tools and techniques in their online classrooms. In the current situation, it sounds as if teachers are barely treading water and have been presented with a "learn as you go" attitude. This simply must not be overlooked in future studies moving forward with online teaching.

4.7 Rubric Guided Assessment and Concept Checking Questions

While most of the teachers references, they used the provided rubric as a guide for assessing their students, other teachers revealed the importance of using concept checking questions as a form of assessment as well. Charlie specifically mentioned his use of this during his assessment process, "Instruction check and concept check questions are much easier and effective to measure learners' understanding." He also mentioned that, "There was not any provision to record student participation. However, I assess their class performance through monitoring and concept checking questions. It helped me to address these points in the upcoming sessions." He also went on to elaborate on the challenges he faced when monitoring students during breakout sessions, "It is very difficult to monitor during different interaction patterns. During 'breakout', when I move from one group to another group learners either go quiet or switch over to something else."

Analyzing this theme through Activity Theory with a focus on "goals" revealed that teachers assessed their students using a rubric provided to them by the department. One teacher supplemented his assessment through the use of concept and instruction checking questions in order to tell if the students understood and were prepared to participate. A rubric should be developed for teachers to use in order to keep track of students' participation during the lessons as well. Establishing clear guidelines and expectations of what students should be doing during "breakout" sessions and what is expected of them should be communicated to students and teachers.

4.8 Long, Boring Sessions

Brian and Charlie both cautioned against the burnout both teachers and students face when engaging in classes in an online environment. Brian suggested maximizing time spent together online in engaging ways and that students should prepare for their sessions ahead of time:

> Students can't be kept online in front of their computer screen for hours; therefore, some shorter micro lessons are advised. Students can watch the videos on their own and then the time with the teacher in class can be spent in doing interactive, creative and problem-solving task.

Kenny addressed the strengths and weaknesses of attending these long sessions. For some students it may be too long and unenjoyable, while for others they appear to enjoy the extended screen time:

> Attending these long virtual classes can be boring, so sometimes students may lose attention. They hardly have any opportunity to move around, which is not the case in a physical classroom. Although attending long virtual classes can be boring, many learners enjoy working on computers and using technology. I think online learning experience may not be really beneficial for kinesthetic learners.

Finally, the analysis of this theme through Activity Theory under the category of "community" is clear that both teachers and students are easily exhausted by long hours spent sitting in front of their computers. Students should be prepared to interact as much as possible during the lessons in order to maximize communicative and interactive learning. Time spent together should not simply be used for things that students can do to prepare for their lessons outside of class. Brainstorming sessions among faculty and department heads should be held in order to make online classes as interactive as possible. The amount of time students are required to attend classes should also be taken into consideration along with the length and amount of breaks. Incorporating some physical movements and activities throughout could help to re-energize students and engage them to the topic at hand. Incorporating online applications and tools that help to stimulate and engage learners should also be considered as potential tools to help break up long lessons spent studying online.
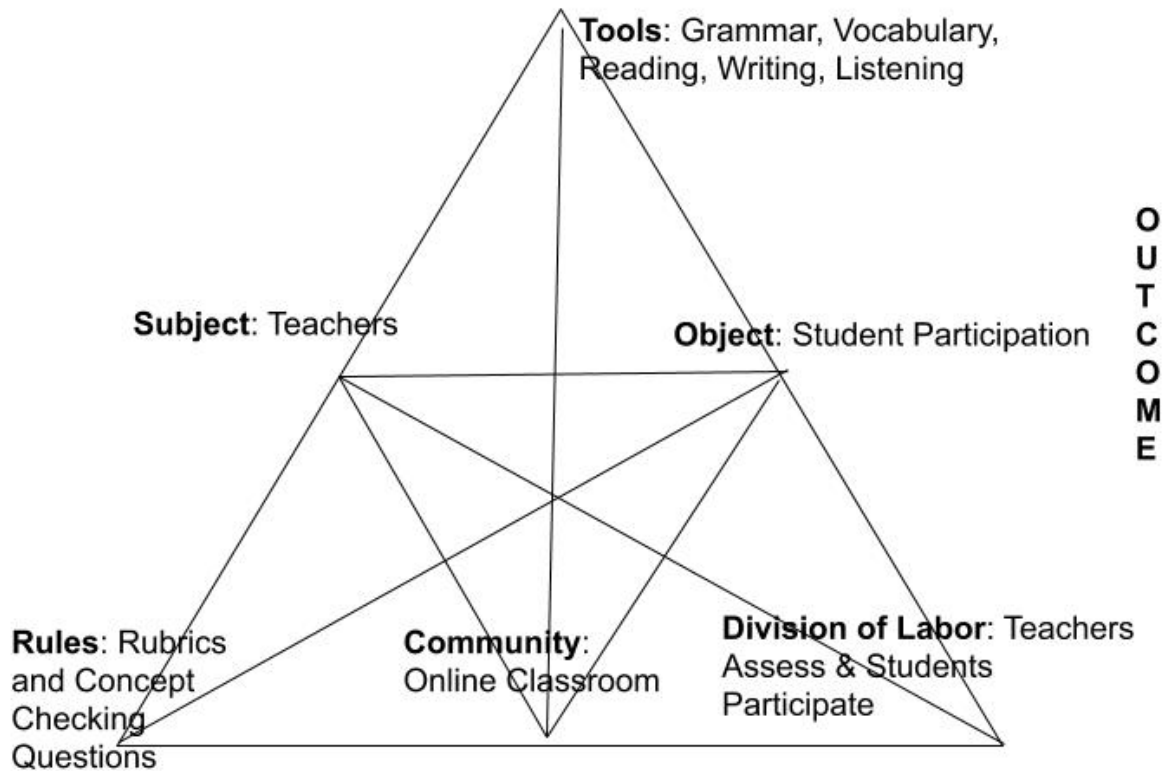
Fig. 3. Activity Theory adapted from Engeström (2001)

5. Discussion of Themes

After analyzing the different themes that emerged through the use of Activity Theory, three themes presented themselves as highly critical areas to investigate further in future research: Grades as a Motivational Stick & Participation Grades, Teacher Training, and Teacher/Student Expectations. It is important to realize that all of the elements under consideration have an effect on all of the other elements. When one element is affected, how does it affect other areas, and ultimately, how does it affect the outcome?
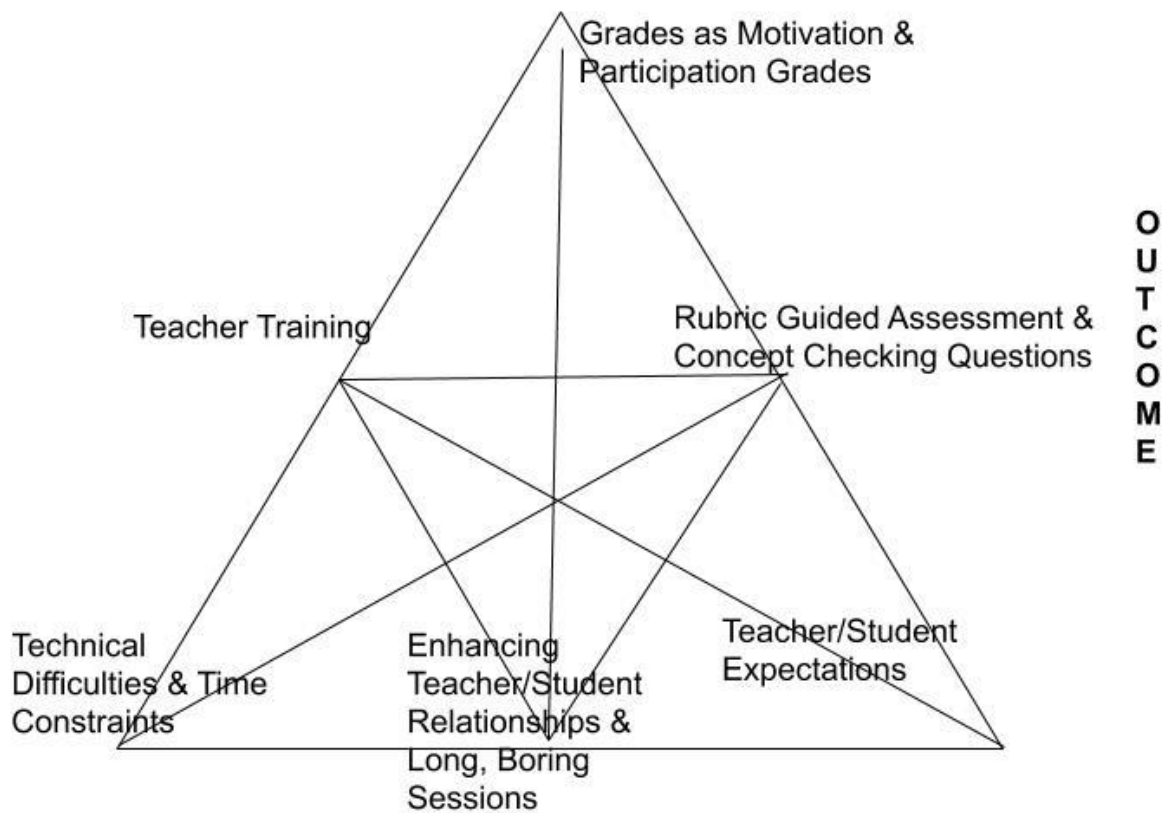
Fig. 4. Activity Theory adapted from Engeström (2001) with themes from the data.

First of all, by using grades as a form of motivation and attaching a highly weighted percentage to students' grades, how will this affect the outcome? It is worth noting and investigating if changing and enacting clear rules for students and teachers in their online classrooms is enough to encourage students to be more engaged and to participate more than they used to.

Secondly, establishing and holding teacher training sessions must not be overlooked. This element surely has one of the greatest opportunities for success or failure in an online teaching environment. If teachers do not feel comfortable, supported, and trained to perform at their best, how can we expect students to perform at their best as well? This quickly raises another question about whether students feel supported and trained to perform online as well. Therefore, training and support must be continuously offered and available to all teachers. This element has the ability to severely affect all of the other elements in regard to Activity Theory, and thus, must be carefully discussed and reevaluated within the department and institution.

Thirdly, within the element of Division of Labor (Teacher/Student Expectations), two distinct areas here need to be reevaluated and discussed in order to see how they can influence greater positive outcomes. Regarding teachers, they should be consulted and asked to provide input on ways they see grading and rubrics being used more fairly to assess students in an online setting. Teachers are directly involved in the process and their input should be listened to and considered for making improvements to rubrics and grading policies. As for student expectations, by clearly defining and providing examples to students of what is expected of them to earn a particular grade, this should help reduce differences in teacher/student expectations of grading. The department needs to help teachers educate students on what is expected of them in order to lessen the burden that has fallen directly on the teachers. By implementing department-wide standards of what is expected of students, teachers will have resources available for them when it comes to a difference of perspective of students and their grades.

Finally, the other elements of this study should also carefully be investigated to see how they can affect better and greater outcomes with future adjustments. By simply altering one aspect, it has the potential to affect all other areas as well. Small changes could result in very positive outcomes for everyone involved.

6. Conclusion: Activity Theory and Online Interaction Assessment

The utilization of Activity Theory to make adjustments and changes in educational settings has the potential for greater outcomes for everyone involved. Activity Theory takes into consideration all the elements which are at play in a given context from the tools, subjects, and objects, to the rules, community, and division of labor. All of these elements have the potential to greatly affect the outcome of a particular situation.

To address the first research question regarding difficulties and challenges EFL teachers encounter when engaging and assessing students in an online classroom, all of the teachers reported the trouble they had in engaging students to participate. By addressing the concern and establishing a higher participation grade for students, teachers will hopefully see a shift in students' behaviors towards participating. By altering this element of the triangle in Activity Theory, it is likely that this will result in a positive outcome as students should want to participate more when it has the potential to positively or negatively affect their grade.

To address the second research question about what strategies EFL teachers use to engage students in an online classroom, it was reported that teachers use a variety of strategies. Some teachers chose to build rapport and closer relationships with their students, while others tried to adapt materials that were more personalized and of interest to their students. It was noted that students were more likely to engage with material online when they knew it was going to be graded or assessed. Ensuring students are aware that their participation is required for all tasks and assignments should increase student participation as they appear to be extrinsically motivated. The strategies used to engage students have the potential to affect better outcomes for students and teachers as they are all interconnected with the elements within Activity Theory. By adjusting or modifying one element within the triangle, it has the possibility to affect change and result in better and greater outcomes.

Finally, to address how teachers assess students in an online classroom, most teachers reported only using the pre-established rubrics provided to them. One teacher took the initiative to create his own rubric and also used concept checking questions to assess whether students were following along and actively engaged. One of the teachers commented that he wasn't sure the way students were being assessed was the best possible way, and this should lead to more discussion and dialog among teaching faculty and administration. By actively taking into consideration the different elements involved in grading and assessment, the potential for more democratic and fairer outcomes is possible.

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