

## Engaging Learners in Online Classrooms: A Case Study from Nepal

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### ABSTRACT

Since the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak compelled many teachers and students globally to shift online, several unexpected circumstances have emerged. This research contextualized a current scenario with teachers and parents working together towards achieving meaningful learning in Nepal. A qualitative case study was employed as a research design to explore how to maintain collaboration and engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Two English language teachers were interviewed to ascertain their perceptions about virtual classrooms. Similarly, two parents were interviewed separately. Parents Teacher Association (PTA) meeting was observed to triangulate the data. This study sought to gain insights into the perceptions of the participants and discovered that students' reactions to online classrooms were mixed; some were more motivated, while others demonstrated unsatisfactory concerns. However, good communication and collaboration with students using visual aids, music, and interesting topic talk related to lessons outside the textbook as supplementary teaching material helped teachers engage their students. Also observed was that teachers with digital literacy built better collaboration than the teachers struggling with digital competency.

### 1. Introduction

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, most educational institutions were forced to abandon traditional classroom-based instruction in favor of online lessons. This dramatic shift has drawn attention to the critical issue of students' engagement in online courses, which has previously been overlooked. The purpose of this study was to investigate how to keep teachers and students collaborated and engaged in online English as a foreign language learning environment. Hu & Kuh (2001) defines engagement as the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes. Similarly, engagement in the classroom is also defined as the readiness, needs, and wants of the students (Stroud, 2020; Harper & Quayle, 2009). This research article intends to shed light upon the current situation in response to online education and student's engagement along with teachers and parental role in Nepal. The review of previous research, problem statement, the gap in the literature leads to the research questions which will be answered using different tolls as explained in the methodology section followed by discussion, finding, and educational implementation.

### 2. Problem Statement and Gap in The Literature

The government of Nepal provided provisions such as the National Curriculum Framework (2007), ICT Master Plan (2013-2017), and National ICT Policy (2015) in favor of using ICT-based learning long before the pandemic was announced. However, Gnawali and Shrestha (2021) mentioned teachers as well as students still lacked the necessary access and technical abilities to fully employ and adopt these electronic resources in their classroom. Although the government has emphasized the use of technology in its official documents, no practical evidence proved that to be truly functioning. There was relatively limited literature on the effectiveness of ICT and accessibility, and student engagement in emergency conditions. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature by investigating teachers' and students' collaboration and engagement in an online English classroom.

**2.1 The study is guided by the following objectives:**

1. To explore the ways to keep learners and teachers connected, engaged, and motivated.
2. To recommend some pedagogical implications based on the Research Findings.

**2.2 Review of The Literature**

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled most institutions to abandon classroom-based in-person instruction in favor of online instruction. With the government imposed locked inside the house state, each child going to school was left with not much choice than to prepare themselves to learn online. "In online learning, students utilize an online learning platform, which is an online learning environment comprised of text materials, audio and video, multimedia courseware, and other learning resources" (Hu & Li, 2017, pp. 40). With the growth of online learning, researcher and scholar attention has shifted to student participation in online learning. Hu and Li (2017) argued that instructors could monitor and ensure student engagement in the classroom by capturing their attention through various teaching strategies. In contrast, in online learning, student engagement can be influenced by factors beyond the instructors' control, and it is entirely up to the students to choose to be engaged. No amount of online communication can substitute for the face-to-face interactions that occur in the classroom. Given the present state of lockdown caused by the pandemic, teachers and higher education institutions must engage students in online learning to "normally" operate lessons through the internet utilizing various platforms. As a result, it is critical to investigate student involvement in "imperative" online learning because of the pandemic scenario. Similarly, Paulsen and Reeve (2009) recommended that instructors and students engage in greater collaborative learning and meaningful engagement during the online study. Bolliger and Martin (2018) discovered that in online learning, students favored learner-learner engagement techniques. The level of effort students themselves put forth in educationally purposeful activities that directly lead to the accomplishment of desired learning outcomes". Hu and Li (2017) argued that instructors could monitor and ensure student engagement in the classroom by capturing their attention through a variety of teaching strategies, whereas in online learning, student engagement can be influenced by factors beyond the instructors' control, and it is entirely up to the students to choose to be engaged. As Katrina and Meyer (2014) pointed out, no online communication can substitute for the face-to-face interactions that occur in the classroom.

In another study by Matias and Wolf (2013), the result claimed collaboration, communication, and creativity have boosted student engagement in online learning in conjunction with mobile technologies such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and computers. The concept of students' engagement is a contentious and ongoing debate that pervades several areas. Jennifer, Richardson, and Newby (2006) reported student engagement must be taken seriously if it is to be utilized as a metric of accountability for students' involvement in learning or as a variable in educational research to understand student behavior during the learning process. As mentioned in, Shrestha & Gnawali (2021), this extraordinary shift has highlighted the critical concern of students' online courses engagement in Nepal.

Kahu (2013) suggested that student engagement is complicated and multifaceted, requiring consideration of several factors such as antecedents, engagement, and consequences. Trowler (2010) proposed a typology of engagement to understand better student engagement: behavioral engagement, such as classroom attendance, emotional engagement, advocating for interests in the classroom context, and cognitive engagement, such as being willing to challenge oneself. Similarly, Stroud (2020) highlighted engagement in learning could accurately be assessed using not only measures of behavioral (what learners do, as in the studies above), but also of emotional (how learners feel about the learning), cognitive (the chances learners take to dig deeper for information and better understand) and social (the degree to which learners take part in a society or group) engagement. Findings from previous research suggested that consideration of these several factors can lead to an improved understanding of how much students take part in learning and benefit positively. As motivation and engagement are inextricably linked (Reeve, 2012) reported, motivated students were more likely to participate in learning activities. The design and delivery of online courses can also have a major impact on student's motivation. A well-structured course draws students in and encourages them to participate actively. Additionally, instructors' presence and the facilitation in the classroom allow learners to participate actively in the online lesson (Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

Motivated teachers can motivate Learners, and effective learning occurs when teachers are passionate, engaged, and interactive throughout classes (Khanal, Bidari & Nadif, 2021). Supporting instructors' and students' constructivist roles in online learning settings might help them succeed. As a result, teachers should actively engage students in the learning process and foster a sense of community among learners (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Several studies have been conducted to investigate the successful learning settings, where observation was that interactive and engaging classrooms encouraged learners' autonomy, competence, and relationships. Hence, the interactive and communicative classroom is likely to engage students behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally (Stroud, 2021; Jang, Reeve, 2013). This research intends to identify specific characteristics that may support or inhibit student participation in Nepal's virtual learning.

**2.3 Online Classroom Scenario in Nepal**

Like other low-income nations, Nepal has significant disparities in terms of socioeconomic status and literacy levels among its citizens. The existing educational system and its unequal distribution of resources have frequently been blamed for widening the divide between the haves and have-nots; with the advent of COVID-19, the digital divide and uneven access to e-learning and e-resources will exacerbate the divide by increasing inequalities between advantaged and children. The current circumstances demonstrate that the epidemic affects pupils in Nepal differently (Duwadi, Giri, and Simkhada, 2021). However, few private schools have been continuing to offer online classes to offset the impact on learning.

Similarly, UNESCO (2020) expressed concern that is achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote opportunities for lifelong learning for all, as well as Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities, which signatory countries are required to accomplish by 2030, will become more difficult. To emphasize, providing fair access to e-learning for all Nepalese students is a massive undertaking. Accessibility is also divided into categories; the students going to elite ivy league schools have an ultra-modern device supporting all the functions of zoom or google classroom. Whereas the rest of the students belong to lower socioeconomic backgrounds, middle-class private schools have a device shared by all the siblings and the parents. They have access to basic functioning smartphones which do not support zoom or all other possible functions which online learning could have supported.

Since learning in the EFL classroom is generally a teacher-dominant dynamic in Nepal and other countries with similar circumstances. Enabling and supporting the students to take care of message interaction increases the appeal of classes and prepares them to build autonomous reading abilities in real-life circumstances. This study intends to explore the experiences of teachers and learners' engagement under such circumstances.

### 3. Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated after careful evaluation of previous literature.

1. Which technology (in terms of access and features) do Nepalese teachers use to engage in a virtual classroom? How?
2. How can this engagement be further improved?

### 4. Research Method

As I view the world with a pragmatic lens, where I believe the truth or the knowledge is constantly renegotiated, debated, interpreted. In this study, I employed Cohen, Manion, and Masrrión's (2011), qualitative case study as a research design. As I dig deeper into the knowledge, I don't easily get convinced listening to one side, as a critical pragmatist, I tend to look at the issue from a different angle, hence I employed various instruments to collect the data.

To collect data, I called the participants, teachers, and parents and observed a classroom with the proper formality of ethical considerations with a verbal signature of informed consent.

There was no rigid methodology employed for this research, however, multiple case study method is chosen to explore the experiences of individuals and was utilized to explain student involvement on the. The research participants were 2 teachers, 2 parents, and 3 hours of parents, teachers, and school leaders' Focused Group Discussion. Before completing the interviews, each participant was informed about the study, the interviewing method, and their rights. Through Zoom sessions, interviews were conducted and recorded. Also, for the FGD, a zoom session of three hours was recorded. As a native speaker of Nepali, I have used the direct translation method which I transcribed with the tool called Otterly. After that, the transcripts were examined and coded using content analysis. Teachers were coded as T1, T2, and T3. Classrooms were Coded C1, C2, and C3. FGD is not coded.

### 5. Data Analysis

I followed the three-step approach proposed by Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2010) which includes organizing and familiarizing then coding and reducing; and finally interpreting and representing.

### 6. Results

For the first question, the result was as follows:

T1, C1: General finding: Messenger, demotivated, negatively engaged, camera off, silence

T2, C2+C3: Messenger, Zoom, Padlet, YouTube, Gmail (highly engaged)

There was also a mention of "The Secret Game App" which was negatively engaging and distracting students from the lesson. The mention of the gaming app was complained about by both the parents and the teachers.

For the second question, the following themes were extracted as a theme, and the result is represented in fig.1.

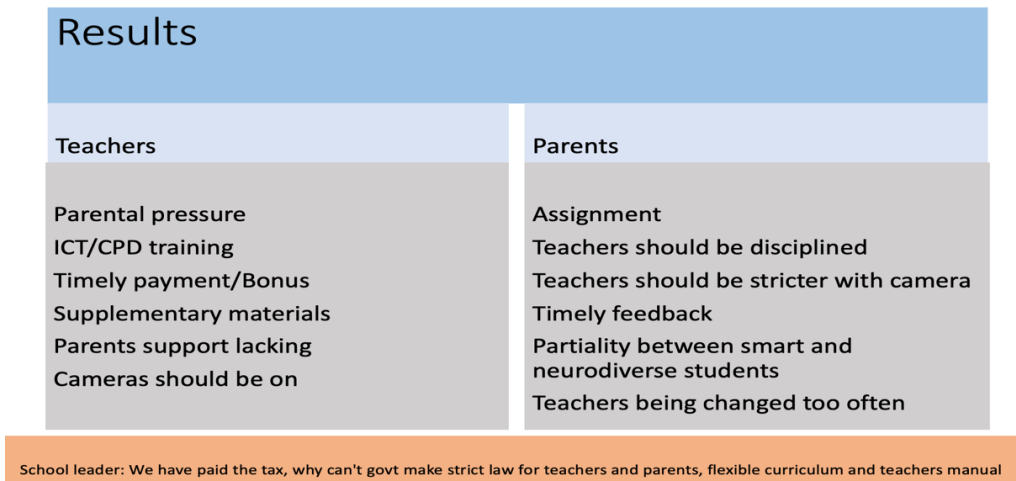


Fig 1

**6.1 Findings and Discussion**

According to the data analyzed, students encountered a variety of challenges when it comes to online participation. Inactivity associated with prolonged periods spent in front of a computer screen and a sensation of isolation is the primary physical and psychological variables that contribute to a loss of focus, motivation, and engagement during online classes. Lack of hands-on experience in laboratory courses is a significant barrier to engagement for students learning English. Additionally, videos switched off and unpleasant silence in online classrooms, technological difficulties, teachers' lack of effort and passion, and a teacher-centered approach to teaching all have a detrimental effect on student engagement. The teacher-centered method as practiced by T1 reduces instructor-student rapport. Students do not feel connected, motivated, attentive, or interested during online classes due to the absence of contact. In contrast, T2 was enjoying all the challenges as he was taking authority of his own professional development as a teacher agent. T2 also mentioned that he used extra technical and instructional approaches to increase students' motivation and engagement while taking online courses and he kept himself updated with NELTA, RELO, and British Council free Webinars as a chance to improve his professional skills. Whereas, in the classroom of T1, it was observed that each teacher must address technological challenges if successful engagement is expected. This is a continuing study, and the present findings include just 2 teachers and 2 parents with flexible FGD. It was also observed that the teacher did not provide students with clear instructions before asking them to do the activities. Also, there was no element of motivation and encouragement observed. Inadequate examples related to the task or topic were provided. No personalization or humanistic elements were observed. In T2s class, students were very relaxed with the task. Music was played, and students had their videos on; students also thanked the teacher for the music and asked for more. Both the parents expressed their satisfaction in the class of T2. As an example of a real agent for change, T2 sets an example for my research.

Hence, building teachers' agency as successful strat21st-century learners is the call for 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers as a new finding of this study, which serves as my new findings in the context of Nepal. When it comes to teachers, agency refers to their ability to act with a purpose, to direct their own professional development, and to contribute to the development of their students and colleagues. In the case of COVID19, it is the professional action of teachers based on their perceptions and experiences in order to fulfill their duties, responsibilities, and accountability in order to respond to educational dilemmas that come across their path. The greater the degree to which our teacher's agency is exercised, the better the overall learning outcome. It is recommended that teachers work on enhancing their sense of agency in the classroom. As teachers, it is our responsibility and professional skills to cater to the needs and aspirations of students, as well as to shape their personalities and play an active role in their overall development. (Langford & Uehara, 2021) for example, have suggested that ESL teachers' beliefs towards agency can originate from any of the following six possible sources: (1) teachers' past experience as language learners. For example, if a teacher has learned a second language successfully and comfortably by memorizing vocabulary lists, then there is a good change that the same teacher will have his or her students memorize vocabulary lists too. (2) Experience of what worksuggestsin their classes. Patil, (2014) suggest that this may in fact be the main source of beliefs about teaching for many second language teachers and as such many practicing teachers may not want to break an established, and perceived successful routine. (3) Established practice within a

school that is difficult to change because the school has always used this method. (4) Personality factors of teachers can be an important source of beliefs as some teachers really enjoy conducting role-play or group work in their classes while others are more comfortable conducting traditional teacher-fronted lessons. (5) Educationally based or research-based principles can also be a source of teachers' beliefs in that a teacher may draw on his or her understanding of research in the second language reading to support the use of predicting style exercises in reading classes.

## 7. Conclusion

Following the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, numerous unexpected events occurred. This research focused on how instructors and students work together to better the learning environment in Nepal. This study studied ways to keep teachers and students in EFL learning. Also examined were Nepali instructors' and learners' language learning techniques with ICT in virtual English classrooms during the COVID19. The researchers aimed to obtain insight into participants' thinking and found that some pupils reacted positively to online classes while others were concerned. Interview with two parents was interviewed separately. Parents Teacher Association (PTA) meeting was observed to triangulate the data. This study sought to gain insights into the perceptions of the participants and discovered that students' reactions to online classrooms were mixed; some were more motivated, while others demonstrated unsatisfactory concerns. However, good communication and collaboration with students using visual aids, music, and interesting topic talk related to lessons outside the textbook as supplementary teaching material helped teachers engage their students. Also observed was that teachers with digital literacy built better collaboration than the teachers struggling with digital competency

## 8. Educational Implication and Recommendation

Our issue is deep-rooted, Government should think, and act and teachers should be an agent for a change and empower students to act and not tolerate silently to all the instability and the lack of proper governance, there should be better law with employment policy, when tax is paid, there should be minimum support, access, equity, equality. ICT should be a subject in our language teacher education program as a gateway towards the development of teacher autonomy, creativity, and self-development, and at the same time, a path towards the improvement of the teaching-learning process. With all the above-mentioned concerns, teachers should understand and embrace his value as an agent for change, involving in the professional development programs offered by various organizations, or available freely on the internet. The significance of professional development platforms and a desire to grow may cause them to consider connecting with various teaching and learning platforms. This study is also beneficial for students and teachers in EFL/ESL contexts, curriculum developers, textbook authors, school administrators, policymakers, and aspiring researchers interested in researching the domain of online education and possibilities in ELT in Nepal. Hence, this research serves as a foundation for instructors who are implementing ICT into ELT during COVID19. Additionally, the findings aim to identify the needs and practices of ICT and Web tools.

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