

CHALLENGES FOR COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHERS AS ASSESSORS*

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Abstract: The present case study aims to explore the challenges that the teachers in a Vietnamese university have faced with in the role of language assessors in their outcome-based English courses. In order to fulfil this aim, the study employs Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015) as the theoretical framework and narratives as a data collection tool. It is revealed from the three selected teachers' narratives about their personal and professional background, the experienced reality in their assessment work that their challenges are related to inadequate assessment literacy, lack of shared knowledge and unclear assessment identity, inadequate professional training and discussions. In light of the theoretical framework (i.e., Activity Theory), these challenges result from the tensions between the subject and the rules, between the mediating artifacts and the rules, and within the division of labor. With such findings, the study is expected to raise the teachers' and the educational managers' awareness of the contextual conditions for better teacher assessment competence and the assessment quality in the current education reform context. Accordingly, the study proposes a framework of college English teacher professional development.

Key words: teachers as assessors, challenges, teacher professional development

1. Introduction

There has been an increasing concern about teachers' roles as well as teacher identity in recent years (Beijaard, Merjer & Verloop, 2003; Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006; Pryor & Crossouard, 2010). Besides the teaching and facilitating role, teachers have been attached to other certain roles such as developing courses (Shawer, Gilmore & Banks-Joseph, 2009; Shawer, 2010a; Shawer, 2010b; Shawer, 2017; Zeegers, 2012) and assessing learners (Adie, Stobart & Cumming, 2013; Looney, Cumming, Kleij & Harris, 2017; Mogashoa, 2013). Moreover, many of the authors and

scholars focus on defining the role of teachers as assessors or teacher assessment identity and examining the factors affecting teacher assessment identity (e.g., Beijaard et al., 2003; Day et al., 2006; Pryor & Crossouard, 2010; Xu & Brown, 2016) while the challenges teachers face with in such a role and the resolutions to those challenges have not been received much attention.

In Vietnam, testing and assessment, especially assessment as part of outcome-based courses, has addressed more concern. Simultaneously, research in testing and assessment has been increased. However,

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much of the research has been on standardized tests (Bui, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2021; Carr, Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, Thai & Nguyen, 2016; Dunlea, Spiby, Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, Thai & Bui, 2018; Nguyen, Nguyen, Tran, Nguyen, Bui, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020), assessment tools with an aim of improving learners' competence (Hoang, Nguyen & Duong, 2016; Ngo, 2019; Nguyen, 2019), or challenges for language assessors in standardized tests (Nguyen, Tran, Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen & Bui, 2019; Thai, 2019). Some other studies have focused on developing teacher-trainees' assessment competence before they start their teaching career (Duong, Nguyen & Pham, 2017a; Duong, Nguyen & Pham, 2017b) or developing in-service school teachers (Nguyen, 2020). It can be seen that little research has been conducted on teachers as language assessors in classroom as well as the challenges they may face with while performing that role.

Therefore, this study aims to explore what challenges teachers as classroom assessors face with and how they overcome the challenges in the hope for a better understanding of the teachers' situations. In order to fulfil these aims, the study focuses on the following questions:

- 1.1. What do the targeted teachers in this study do in the role of English language assessors?
- 1.2. What challenges do the teachers encounter in the role of English language assessors?
- 1.3. What do the teachers as English language assessors do to overcome the challenges?

It is noted that the focus of the study was on English language teachers' challenges in the role of assessor in the outcome-based English courses. The challenges other than those related to assessment in such courses can be

mentioned but not concentrated as the findings of the studies. Moreover, research question 1 aims to investigate the activities or tasks the teachers fulfil as well as the actions the teachers may take to facilitate their role of English language assessors. Research question 3 does not aim to get the teachers' recommendations for solving teachers-as-assessors' difficulties but explores what they themselves do to tackle their challenges. All in all, answers to the three research questions are expected to reveal the landscape of teachers working in the role of assessor, thereby proposing recommendations relevant to their current situations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The role of Assessor in a Teacher's Job*

As aforementioned, a teacher's roles other than teaching and facilitating students have drawn more attention from the scholars and researchers, especially the role of assessor. Assessment is understood as "the process of collecting information that is used to make decisions" (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 2). Sharing the same view with these authors, McMillan (2014) emphasizes it is "the reason for the assessment" (i.e., to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses, to monitor students' progress toward achieving objectives, to assign grades, to determine instructional effectiveness, to provide students feedback, to prepare students for high-stakes tests, or to motivate students) that determines "what the assessment should look like". In other words, assessment can be conducted in various forms, including tests, to collect information for a specific purpose. Accordingly, playing the role of an assessor, teachers are expected to fulfil any activity or task during this process, such as designing assessment tools, marking, interpreting the results, and giving feedback (Zhang & Burry-Stock, 2003).

Importantly, effective teachers-as-

assessors are those who are well aware of what, how, and why they are making use of assessment practices (Stanford & Reeves, 2005). It is necessary to note that teachers' assessment competence is significant to ensure the quality of the assessment practice (Looney et al., 2017, p. 1), hence quality of the instruction and learning (Ölmezer-Öztürk & Aydın, 2019, p. 374). Therefore, it is recommended that the role of assessor go beyond what has been established. That is the reason why many authors have recently put more emphasis on clarifying assessment literacy as an influencing factor that possibly determines teachers' assessment decisions. A study conducted by Ölmezer-Öztürk and Aydın (2019) in Turkey to explore voices from English language teachers related to their assessment work reveals that a number of teachers felt they could not assess students' ability efficiently because they lacked essential knowledge (p. 381). Such a difficulty is also witnessed by teachers in Korean schools which experienced an innovation in assessment practices. It is reviewed by Namgung, Moate, and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2021) that "the

Table 1

Assessment Literacy (Nguyen, 2021)

Dimension	Components
Conceptual knowledge dimension	knowledge of what assessment is, why assessment is conducted, and what needs to be assessed
Praxeological dimension	knowledge and skills of assessing tools, assessment quality assurance, assessment result analysis and interpretation, assessment-based feedback
Socio-emotional dimension	awareness of the role as an assessor, effective cooperation with colleagues as assessors, awareness of ethical aspects and impacts of assessment work
Contextual dimension	awareness of norms, institutional regulations, national policies, and classroom-based contexts

Noteworthy, although assessment literacy is significant, it is not the only factor that exerts an impact on teachers' assessment decisions or assessment quality. It is how they feel or how confident they are in the role of assessor that also leads them to

discrepancy between the assessment orientation directed by the new national curriculum and conventional assessment characterized by standardization and performativity appears to confuse Korean secondary English teachers when implementing actual classroom-based assessment" (p. 50). To put it differently, the differences between the required knowledge of assessment and teachers' regular practices challenged them in their work.

This view is in line with that of many other authors (e.g., Adie et al., 2013; Mogashoa, 2013; Nguyen, 2020; Stiggins, 1999); however, the authors do not only stress on the need of assessment knowledge but any element of assessment literacy. As reviewed by Nguyen (2021), definitions of assessment literacy vary, but it is agreed to be a multiple-dimensional concept, involving both knowledge and skills that facilitate the assessment work in a specific context. Particularly, assessment literacy has four interrelated dimensions shown in Table 1.

a satisfying or unsatisfying decision (Looney et al., 2017). The authors propose all of these dimensions build up a teacher's assessment identity which interacts with the broader social conditions in which they are situated. In other words, a teacher's assessment

identity can influence how they perceive the given knowledge and practices, and in turn, it can be affected by what they experience in specific contexts.

It is evident from this view that whether teachers can clearly define their assessment identity may result in difficulties in performing their assessment work. Such difficulties are proved through a qualitative case study by Nguyen (2020) in which the teacher participants majorly defined them as teachers who attempted to finish the task of developing a new course. Even though assessment was part of their task, they did not strive to resolve the related problems; instead, they resorted to an easier way of assessing students to reduce the burden to the teachers (pp. 520-524). Pryor and Crossouard (2008, as cited in Looney et al., 2017) postulate that:

The different identities of the educator as assessor, teacher, subject expert and learner all involve different divisions of labor and rules shaping their interaction with students. The educator, therefore, teaches different definitions of themselves to the students and develops different relations with the students through them... (p. 4)

These interwoven versions of

teachers may cause them to face “significant dilemmas in their assessment practices, sometimes torn between their role as facilitator and monitor of language development and that of assessor and judge of language performance and achievement” (Looney et al., 2017, p. 4). Xu and Brown (2016) share the same view with these authors; they even add:

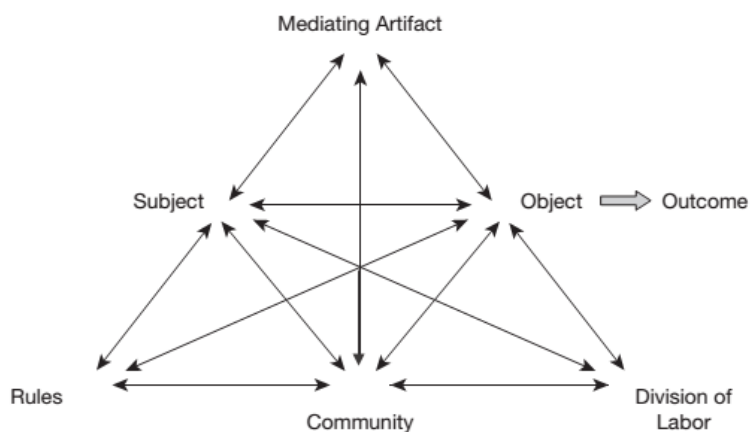
Identity construction can play a powerful role in provoking teachers’ thinking, promoting dialogues and shared meaning, and shaping their professional judgments. (p. 158)

2.2. Activity Theory

Activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015), an extension of Vygotsky’s framework, has been employed in a large number of studies that seek to investigate the participants’ activities in a relationship with their social resources, involving their historical background, existing experiences, surrounding communities, and the tools they use to interact with the outside world (e.g., Dang, 2013; Hashim & Hoover, 2017; Hashim & Jones, 2007; Tsui & Law, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009). Figure 1 portrays the six components of Activity Theory and the relationship among the components.

Figure 1

Human Activity System (Engeström, 1987, 2015)



In the upper triangle, “subject” refers to an individual or a group that carries out an activity which is driven by the “object” with the help of “mediating artifact”. The base area represents the social and cultural context that is likely to facilitate or inhibit the activity. Specifically, a community indicates one or more groups who share the same object and possibly regulate the subject’s performance. Division of labor refers to the roles of the subject as well as the subject’s relationship with the other stakeholders. Rules are defined as the explicit and implicit regulations, norms, and conventions that have controlling influences on the activity system. The highlighted feature of Activity Theory is its components do not bear a linear relationship but interact with each other during the course of transforming the raw object into a culturally more advanced object, in other words, the expected outcome of the activity. In this sense, contradictions or tensions within and between the components of the activity system are significant as sources of changes and development. Engeström (2001) explains:

As the contradictions of an activity system are aggravated, some individual participants begin to question and deviate from its established norms. In some cases, this escalates into collaborative envisioning and a deliberate collective change effort. (p.137)

It is indicated from the quote that when the contradictions or tensions are recognized, there is a likelihood of them being resolved. Equally importantly, when there is an appropriate and timely response to the contradictions or tensions, there is a likelihood that the subject of the activity system (that is the teachers in this study) is transformed into a higher developmental level.

Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015), therefore, fits the purpose of the

present study, which examines the challenges teachers as assessors encounter in their assessment work. Moreover, it is likely to help conceptualize a professional development framework that involves both personal and sociocultural contexts. How this framework is used for the present study will be presented in the section of data collection and analysis method.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. The Cases

The present study adopted a qualitative case study approach in which three cases were selected from two different English faculties. Although these teachers come from different faculties, they are all in charge of teaching students in outcome-based courses in which students are required to reach a certain level before they graduate from their program. Students are required to take periodical tests organized by the teachers in their divisions and an English proficiency test delivered by a specialized within-university institution as an outcome requirement of their program. Periodical tests refer to online progress tests (in Faculty A), mid-term tests and end-of-term tests (in both Faculty A and Faculty B). Specifically, non-major English students are required to reach level 3 (B1) or level 4 (B2) of English proficiency according to their learning programs while major English students are required to reach level 5 (C1) when finishing their academic years. Besides the outcome of English proficiency, students are required to master a number of soft skills (e.g., teamwork skills, time management skills, and presentation skills) for future study and work.

Teacher 1 has been working in the faculty in charge of teaching non-major English students (Faculty A) of the university for eighteen years. She holds a master degree in English teaching pedagogy, and little training on testing and assessment was provided during her teacher education

program. During the time as an in-service teacher, she has attended several training sessions on testing and assessment organized by the faculty and the university. Teacher 1 is married with two children, one in secondary school and the other in primary school. Apart from the period of an official leave for health improvement, she has participated enthusiastically in the tasks she has been assigned in Faculty A and in the university.

Teacher 2 has been working in the same faculty with Teacher 1 for thirteen years, and she is an academic administrator of a division in the faculty. She holds a master's degree in English teaching pedagogy, and little training on testing and assessment was provided during her teacher education program. Apart from teaching English to non-major students, Teacher 2 has also been in charge of a course of study skills which prepares soft skills for students to learn successfully in the university. Moreover, she worked as an examiner for young English learners and has been a part-time academic officer in an educational joint stock company. Teacher 2 is also married with two children, one in primary school and one in kindergarten. Although she is busy with her family, she has not let family-related matters interfere her work.

Teacher 3 has been working in the faculty in charge of teaching major English students (Faculty B) for six years. He is a single male teacher who holds a master's degree in English education. His master's program included introductory modules on testing and assessment. He has also attended several training sessions in this field in the university where he has been working. He is a devoted teacher who has participated in a variety of workshops in which he has trained secondary and high school teachers how to use new textbooks and how to apply new teaching techniques.

According to Engeström (1987,

2015), the author of Activity Theory used in the present study, the relationship between individuals' development and their social resources, involving their historical background, existing experiences, surrounding communities, and the tools they use to interact with the outside world possibly exerts an influence on their learning, development, and resolutions to the challenges they have to face with. Moreover, this is an exploratory case study which aims to examine the challenges of the teachers in a variety of contexts. It is agreed that years of teaching experience or the academic year that a teacher is in charge of is part of a context, but other contextual factors can also be taken into consideration. Those were the reasons why three cases with different backgrounds (i.e., male versus female, married versus single, staff versus division's leader, programs for non-major English students versus for major English students, more experienced versus less experienced) were selected for the study.

This idea of selecting cases follows Stake (1995) who emphasizes the importance of "balance", "variety", and "opportunities to learn" about the cases. He states:

It may be useful to try to select cases which are typical or representative of other cases, but a sample of one or a sample of just a few is unlikely to be a strong representation of others... Even for collective case studies, selection by sampling of attributes should not be the highest priority. Balance and variety are important; opportunities to learn are of primary importance (pp. 4-5).

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis Method

The data consisted of written narratives and oral narratives (either in English or Vietnamese) as introduced by Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik (2014). The selected teachers were informed that their

narratives about their background, interests, conditions, and assessment experiences would be used as the research data. In order to keep them focused on the objectives of the study, a set of guiding questions for both of their written and oral narratives was provided (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 44). Importantly, Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015) was adopted as the framework for data collection and analysis, so the guiding questions were built upon the six components of Activity Theory (i.e., subject,

object, mediating artifacts, community, division of labor, and rules). Moreover, so as to keep the teachers staying away from answering the guiding questions one by one, the teachers were noticed that they did not need to provide the answer to a question at a time and that they could tell a story about the given topics in the time order or upon their feelings for the relevant events. Table 2 briefly summarizes the data collection procedure in the present study.

Table 2

Data Collection Procedure

Method	Aim & Guiding questions	Time
Written narrative – part 1	To get to know about teachers’ personal life, academic background and interests, as well as personal and institutional conditions.	The teachers were provided with a set of guiding questions and wrote their narratives within two months. It was known that the teachers were quite busy with various tasks, and two months was expected to be enough for them to provide stories as detailed as possible.
Written narrative – part 2	To investigate what teachers knew or believed about assessment and where that knowledge or belief came from, what they experienced in the role of assessor, their challenges and what they did to overcome the challenges.	
Oral narrative	To collect further information for interpretation about the teachers’ challenges and the related issues. Some guiding questions for written narratives were repeated for oral narratives in case the teachers’ written narratives were unclear. Other guiding questions for oral narratives were generated based on the contents of written narratives.	The teachers were contacted for interview arrangements at least two weeks after they sent the written narratives back. An initial analysis of teachers’ written narratives was made before the oral narratives. The oral narrative was conducted once for more than 90 minutes with each teacher. Further questions were sent afterwards via email or Zalo for information to be added or clarified.

The data analysis and interpretation went through a number of steps: (1) transcribing the oral narratives; (2) coding (both written and oral narratives); (3) inducing themes (pre-determined and emerged themes) as postulated by Duff (2008).

As the data analysis and

interpretation were guided by Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015), the data of this study were coded on the basis of the activity components (i.e., subject, object, mediating artifacts, community, division of labor, and rules). Specifically, the coding categories were generated as in Table 3, with reference to the categories presented in Nguyen (2020).

Table 3

Coding Categories (Adapted From Nguyen, 2020)

Components of an activity	Definition from an activity theory perspective	Categories from the data set of the present study
Subject	Refers to persons or a group with agency, acting toward the object	The teachers undertaking the assessment work: - their language assessment literacy - their experiences as assessors for multiple purposes - major(s) in their career path
Object	Drives the subject’s activity, derived from the motive to achieve an outcome	Raw object: the finished assessment work
Mediating artifacts	Refers to the tools that mediate the subject’s actions towards the object	The tools and artifacts the teacher could use, including reference materials, language assessment literacy, experiences in assessment work, collegial talks, and trainings
Community	Refers to the communities in which the subject is involved and which may regulate the subject’s performance	The community includes their students, colleagues, trainers, and managers
Division of labor	Refers to the role the subject takes within the activity as well as the work relationships	Their roles as teachers and assessors
Rules	Refers to the explicit and implicit rules that regulate the activity	Within this context, rules include professional rules (expectations for the teachers in their roles), organizational rules (the regulations and incentives given by the faculty/ university), collaborative rules (the ways the teachers cooperate with each other/ their colleagues), the nature of the assessment work

Table 4 presents an example of coding results on the basis of the coding

categories mentioned above.

Table 4

Coding Example 1

Excerpt	Keyword/ phrase	Category	Activity component
We have been assigned to write test items, but we lack essential knowledge and skills to actually write good	assigned to write test items	organizational rules (i.e., what the teacher needs to do in their role)	rules
	lack essential	language assessment	subject

test items. How can we really compose a completely new text? What we have done is to compile what is available here and there as long as students cannot find the sources. (Excerpt 4)	knowledge and skills to actually write good test items	literacy (i.e., praxeological dimension)
	compile what is available ... as long as students cannot find the sources	reference materials (i.e., mediating artifacts used in the test papers) finished assessment work raw object

After the data were coded following the activity components and the categories presented in Table 3, the contradictions

within and between the components were identified, as an example in Table 5.

Table 5

Coding Example 2

Contradiction	Definition	Evidence	Resolution
subject – rules	lack of language assessment literacy vs. fulfilment of a task under organizational rules	We have been assigned to write test items, but we lack essential knowledge and skills to actually write good test items. How can we really compose a completely new text? What we have done is to compile what is available here and there as long as students cannot find the sources. (Excerpt 4)	<i>mediating artifacts</i> were involved in the resolution to the contradiction between <i>subject</i> and <i>rules</i> , but it just resulted in <i>the raw object</i> (i.e., the assigned assessment work was finished) instead of improving language assessment literacy for the assessor’s role fulfilment. In other words, <i>the challenge was not resolved by means of mediating artifacts</i> .

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1. Teachers as English Language Assessors

Three teacher participants have been working in a Vietnamese university and assigned to do the tasks for assessment since they started working in their faculties. These teachers have been arranged to rate the students’ speaking performances and writing papers. Except for Teacher 1, Teachers 2 and

3 are to mark the assignments or projects that students work on during the courses. Besides rating various classroom performances and test papers, the teacher participants have been assigned to write items for certain tests as well as review the items written by the other teachers.

Table 6 summarizes the tasks that the teacher participants have experienced in the role of English language assessors.

Table 6

Teachers’ Tasks in the Role of Assessor

Tasks	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
Marking online progress tests	✓	✓	
Marking speaking tests (end-of-term tests)	✓	✓	✓
Marking writing tests (both mid-term and end-of-term tests)	✓	✓	✓

Marking assignments/ projects		✓	✓
Giving feedback to students (on progress tests)	✓	✓	✓
Giving feedback to students (on writing portfolios, presentations, project-based assignments)		✓	✓
Writing/ Compiling test items	✓	✓	✓ (seldomly)
Reviewing test items	✓	✓	✓ (seldomly)

The findings are in line with the idea of expected activities for an assessor, which is pointed out by Zhang and Burry-Stock (2003). The findings are not new but confirm an expectation for teachers in this role. The noted thing is that the tasks (Table 6) are compulsory for all teachers working in any faculty of the university even at the very early stage of their career. Teacher 1, the oldest among the teacher participants, said:

... I started working in the role of assessor in 2003, but I had no basic knowledge about testing and assessment then... What I did then to accomplish the role was to imitate what other teachers were doing... (Excerpt 1)

Teacher 3, the youngest among the teacher participants, also said:

I started performing the tasks for assessment when I started my teaching career... and there were a variety of tasks to fulfil. (Excerpt 2)

Meanwhile, as reviewed in the literature, assessment competence is indispensable and it goes beyond conceptual knowledge in the field (Looney et al., 2017; Namgung et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2021; Ölmezer-Öztürk & Aydın, 2019). This scenario poses a question whether teacher participants have adequate expertise to fulfil the tasks.

Another noted thing is that since they started taking the role of assessor, the teacher participants did not initiatively take any actions to better their performance in

that role except for the shared experience or the given training. This leads to another question whether they are well aware of what they need to do for such a role. Further information and discussion relating to these emerging questions will be presented in the next sections.

4.2. Challenges in the Role of English Language Assessor

4.2.1. Inadequate Assessment Literacy

Two out of three teacher participants, Teachers 1 and 2, admitted that they had no official background knowledge of testing and assessment when they started their teaching career. They explained that their teacher education program mainly focused on teaching pedagogy; testing and assessment was just a short module within a course. This was the reason why they always found tasks for assessment challenging. Even though they followed the practices of the teachers with more years of teaching experience they still felt unconfident in accomplishing these tasks. Unlike the other two teachers, Teacher 3, the youngest one, was offered an official course on this field in his teacher education program. However, he was officially taught about basic concepts, and for him, although these concepts facilitated him to work in the role of assessor, they are not enough to help him be confident in the role. He said:

Most of the content about testing and assessment in my undergraduate and

graduate programs seemed to be superficial, which did not much impress me... It was until I was officially trained by the specialized within-university institution, it was clearer to me as an assessor. (Excerpt 3)

Actually, the teachers were required to take the role of assessors as part of their teaching job, and they performed to the best of their knowledge and practical experience shared by their colleagues. Being put into the framework of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015), this scenario revealed a conflict between the teachers' language assessment literacy (Nguyen, 2021) and the institutional expectations for teachers in the role of assessor (i.e., professional rules). To be specific, while the teachers' language assessment literacy was limited, they were expected to do different tasks for assessment such as rating students' productive skills, writing and/ or reviewing the periodical tests. This conflict undoubtedly resulted in challenges for teachers as assessors.

Although these teachers received certain on-job training in the field, they still found it hard to accomplish the tasks owing to inadequate assessment literacy. Teacher 1 admitted:

We have been assigned to write test items, but we lack essential knowledge and skills to actually write good test items. How can we really compose a completely new text? What we have done is to compile what is available here and there as long as students cannot find the sources. (Excerpt 4)

She added that even though she learned certain knowledge and skills after attending some training courses as well as working with the colleagues specialized in the field, she did not have the capacity to perform the task of test item writing in an expected way. Teachers 2 and 3, in contrast, seemed to be more confident in applying

what they learned; however, Teacher 2 expressed her dissatisfaction with her colleagues' performance. She said:

... The test quality is not very high. It is somehow tiring to review and revise such tests... I am responsible for the final stage before the tests are delivered; I have no choice but stand the current situation. (Excerpt 5)

The study findings are consistent with those of the previous scholars and researchers (e.g., Adie et al., 2013; Mogashoa, 2013; Namgung et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2020; Stiggins, 1999) that the lack of assessment literacy is likely to challenge teachers in the role of assessor. Although the present study does not feature all four dimensions of assessment literacy (i.e., conceptual knowledge dimension, praxeological dimension, socio-emotional dimension, and contextual dimension) as mentioned by these authors, it indicates that even the inadequacy of one dimension of language assessment literacy is likely to cause challenges.

4.2.2. Lack of Shared Knowledge and Unclear Assessment Identity

All of the teacher participants were aware of the necessity of being fair when rating students' performances. They claimed that assessors need "to ensure to give fair judgement to students, but it is a complex story" (Teacher 1), "to be trained to rate consistently and fairly (Teacher 2), and "to be aware of how subjective we [assessors] might be in giving marks" (Teacher 3). However, they found rating a challenging task due to the inconsistent interpretation of the rating scales, which was visible to both faculties. Teacher 1 revealed:

Before 2015, we did holistic ratings based on our own judgement... We did not have any competence framework to base on... Then although we utilized analytical rating

scales, we still resorted to our holistic judgement to make the final decisions... We were not quite confident because the rating scales had not been explicitly explained... (Excerpt 6)

Teacher 2 shared the same idea, saying: "Periodical tests were not properly and professionally administrated." The situation was quite the same in Teacher 3's faculty where its divisions built up different rating scales to assess their students' speaking and writing performances. Teacher 3 said:

... In the rating scales used for the English test of proficiency [as an outcome requirement], there is a criterion that is different from that in the rating scales used in the faculty... This difference confuses me as a rater... Or specifically in speaking rating scales appears a phrase "attempt to use academic words and phrases". This is for assessing the speaking competence of first-year students who aim at B1 level, but it requires students to have competence in using academic words. Such a phrase in rating scales also confuses me. (Excerpt 7)

He added even though the raters had a certain discussion on giving marks to difficultly-marked cases, the marks were sometimes given just as a compromise between the raters. In other words, the raters might not be quite sure whether they really shared the same understanding of the rating scales or whether the marks really reflected the students' competence.

This scenario might be due to the fact that the teachers put more focus on their teaching role, considering the role of the assessor as a supplement to the teaching work. Evidently, the teachers explained how both classroom and standardized assessment assisted them in teaching and giving

feedback to students. To put it differently, the more focus the teachers put on their role of teacher, the more quickly they might make decisions in the role of assessor. The role of the teacher might cause a challenge to the role of the assessor in another sense that the teachers' assessing decisions could be affected in the periodical tests of competence owing to their previous knowledge about the students. Teacher 3 said:

The tests administered for classes I am teaching are on a small scale. I mean I already know the students who take the tests... The majority of students in one class are somewhat at the same proficiency level... This leads me to giving a restricted range of scores to the students. (Excerpt 8)

The present findings are in line with the view by Looney et al., (2017) and Xu and Brown (2016) that different roles of a teacher may be interwoven at a time, which may lead the teacher to facing difficulties in making decisions on judgement as well as assessment-related learning. For the teachers in the present study, it is evident that they encountered difficulties in understanding the rating scales constructed and used in their faculty as well as in making assessment decisions in reference to their knowledge of the students' abilities in class. Being put in the framework of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015), these challenges resulted from the contradictions within the division of labor.

4.2.3. Inadequate Professional Training and Discussions

The teachers revealed that some training courses on English language raters were officially organized by an institution specialized in the field. What they practiced in and after the courses built up their conceptual knowledge as well as skills of assessing students and using the assessment results for teaching and consulting purposes.

For instance, Teacher 1 repeatedly shared how beneficial the training was to her:

At the beginning of innovation in testing and assessment, I met difficulties in following the new approach as the training was so short and segmented... It was until I attended the training by the specialized within-university institution and officially approached the academic knowledge in the field, I could reflect what I had experienced as an assessor and had a clearer mind about what I needed to do... When I practice rating frequently, I can be consistent in my ratings. (Excerpt 9)

In other words, the conceptual knowledge dimension and the praxeological dimension of their assessment literacy, according to Nguyen's (2021) categories, were enhanced while they were taking the role of raters. However, not all of the training was effective; one example of ineffective one was given by Faculty A on how to review and revise test items. Teacher 1 revealed:

... The training was too short, just one day. It was not enough to address all of the problems that we had faced... Another training by one so-called expert did not give us any benefits as whatever we asked, she could not give any clear suggestions but asked us to carry out a piloting... It was not practical in our context. (Excerpt 10)

It is shown from the excerpt that teachers wished to have more practical training which should have been long enough to help them tackle the problems. Teacher 1 also admitted that there were no further discussions on what they were trained and that the teachers' practices in Faculty A were unchanged after the training. This scenario indicated a shortage of

professional follow-ups after the training in Faculty A, which was apparently similar in Faculty B where Teacher 3 worked. He said:

When rating students' performances, I met difficulties in giving marks to the students who do not show the competence completely at one level... However, because of the time limit, I could not have a chance to share and consult my colleagues about those cases. (Excerpt 11)

It is indicated from the case of Teacher 3 that if the university or the faculties does not initially plan professional discussions, the teachers could hardly find an opportunity to share their observations and the ways to address the problems emerging from their assessment practices. In this case, the organizational rules both facilitated and inhibited the resolution to the teachers' challenges. Additionally, the teachers did not seem to actively seek help from their colleagues. They talked to their colleagues about the problems as a means of sharing without a desire to address the challenges. This revealed unclear collaborative rules among the teachers as assessors; they mostly performed their tasks for assessment individually rather than form a close-knit community to deal with them.

Similarly, Teacher 2 shared her experiences with two communities of practice in the field, both of which were out of her faculty. She was dissatisfied with the community of young learner assessors on account that no professional discussions were arranged among the assessors; all of them worked individually to assess the learners based on the given guidelines.

I was not very satisfied... Even though we needed to go through a regular assessment by senior assessors to ensure that we had the capacity to rate young learners, the raters worked individually all the time without any interaction... No

feedback was given... I felt alone in the community. (Excerpt 12)

Meanwhile, Teacher 2 was quite happy to work with the community of adult learner assessors in which she could regularly discuss with the other assessors about her views as well as her products. Those discussions were so meaningful to her as she could learn from the working community. She added:

... The discussions occur regularly, which prevents me from forgetting professional knowledge in the field... The training I attended was conducted long ago; the information given in the training was so general and the training was so short... So up to now, I have been learning continuously through those discussions... Unfortunately, I do not have such a community within my faculty. Meanwhile, I need to make important decisions as an academic administrator. (Excerpt 13)

As shown from the cases of Teachers 2 and 3, professional discussions are likely to facilitate the teachers' work and learning; in other words, lacking those discussions might lead to certain challenges while they perform the tasks for assessment. Being put into the framework of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015), this scenario revealed a conflict between the mediating tools the teachers could use (i.e., mediating artifacts) and the regulations given by the faculty/ university (i.e., organizational rules). Specifically, even though the faculty or the university provided training opportunities for the teachers, what they really needed to facilitate their work might still be missed.

4.3. Resolutions to Teachers-As-Assessors' Challenges

It is revealed from the teachers' narratives that they considered professional

training and discussions as well as regular practices in the field to be resolutions to their challenges in the role of assessor (Excerpts 9, 10, 11 and 13). However, none of them read extra materials in the field of testing and assessment. It cannot be said for sure whether or not they were really aware of what they needed to do to overcome the challenges, but it seemed that they relied on the external tools more than doing something about it by themselves.

As mentioned in Section 4.2.1., the teacher participants met the challenges caused by the conflict between teachers' assessment literacy and the institutional expectations for teachers in the role of assessor. By attending the training given by their institution (i.e., their faculty and the university – Excerpt 9), the challenges were partially resolved. However, the challenges were not completely resolved because the training, to a certain extent, did not meet the teachers' needs (Excerpts 10, 13) and there seemed to be a shortage of professional follow-ups after the training (Excerpts 11, 12). To put it differently, even though the teachers were experiencing favorable organizational rules (i.e., the provided training opportunities or the faculty managers' attempt to address the teachers' needs) the needs were not critically analyzed to be satisfied. In this case, the contradiction between the teachers' language assessment literacy and the organizational rules was not resolved. It is indicated that even the teachers sought help, their challenges might not be resolved when their needs were not well communicated with the managers. This finding would expectedly raise the awareness of both teachers and managers about what and how they should discuss the unresolved issues.

Regarding other challenges mentioned in Section 4.2.2., even though the teacher participants clearly recognized them, they were also not resolved as the teachers did not seek help from any resources, either

the field experts or the professional materials. Instead, they “did as the colleagues who had more frequent practices had done” despite knowing that “they might not professionally learn or understand about testing and assessment” (Teacher 1). Teacher 3, the youngest teacher participant, confessed that he “knew something should be done about that” but he “had not done anything specifically to solve the problem”. In other words, external mediating tools could only be part of the resolution, and it is the teachers themselves who were expected to pro-actively address their own challenges.

Additionally, these challenges could hardly be resolved when the teachers did not clearly separate these two roles in different assessment events. It seemed that they just really played the role of assessor when they acted as the raters in the standardized tests in which they “did not know or did not need to care where the test takers came from or what program they had finished” (Teacher 3). However, in an outcome-based English program, the periodical tests were also considered as tools to assess students’ competence at different periods of time. That the teachers could not do as professionally as in the standardized tests, the assessment results could be affected to a certain extent.

It is shown in Figure 1 that the components (i.e., personal factors – the subject, mediating tools, social-material factors – the communities and the rules that govern them) of an activity system dynamically interact with each other (Engeström, 1987, 2015). It is believed that the way these components interact can cause tensions and can also resolve the tensions. The present study reveals the interaction of different components in the activity of assessing learners and developing assessment tools, which resulted in the challenges for teachers in the role of assessor (Section 4.2). Even though certain components (i.e., organizational rules, training courses as a mediating means, a

community of teachers working in the field of testing and assessment) of the activity involved in resolving these challenges, the resolution was not much effective, possibly because of lacking the interaction between the internal factors (i.e., actions taken by the teacher participants themselves) and the external factors (i.e., conditions or opportunities given by the faculty or the institution).

5. Implication and Conclusion

The present paper reports the tasks the teacher participants do as assessors within the outcome-based English courses they are in charge of, the challenges they encounter when doing those tasks, and what they do to resolve the challenges. It is shown in the data that the challenges are more related to the rating task and that they do not seem to actively take action to overcome their challenges.

In light of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015), these challenges result from the conflict between the different roles the teachers take (i.e., conflict within the division of labor), between the tools teachers could use and how the tools were provided by the institution (i.e., the conflict between mediating artifacts and rules) between teachers’ language assessment literacy and different aspects of rules (i.e., the conflict between the subject and the rules). The analysis of these conflicts reveals the relational aspects that help resolve the teachers’ challenges.

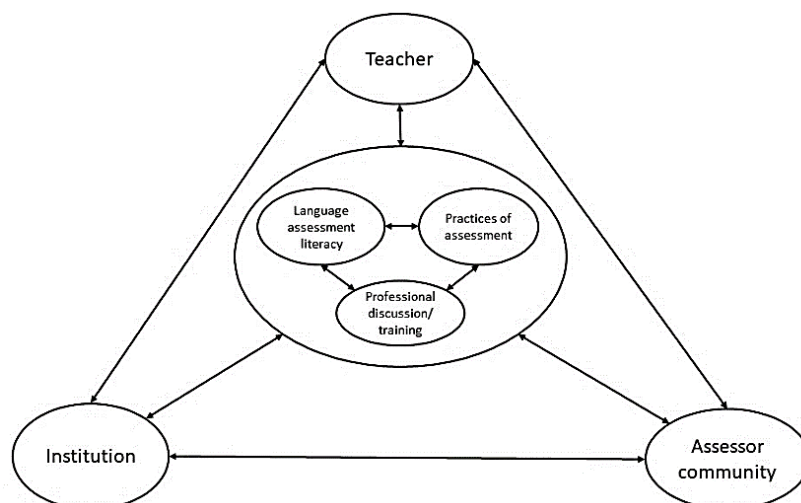
Specifically, the study findings indicate that one activity component (i.e., subject, mediating artifacts, community, division of labor, or rules) sometimes cannot help to resolve teachers’ challenges, but the interaction within or between the components works. It is also revealed from the findings that individual teachers, their institution, and the available assessor community are likely to exert an influence on each other and that all of these

stakeholders have a role to play for the improvement of language assessment literacy, practices of assessment, and professional discussions or training. As a result, a professional framework for teachers as assessors involving these aspects (i.e.,

teacher, institution, assessor community, language assessment literacy, practices of assessment, and professional discussion/training) is proposed and illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Proposed Professional Framework for Teachers as Assessors



The framework suggests that the individual teacher, the assessor community, and the institution have a role to play in the process of developing teacher assessment competence and that these stakeholders exert reciprocal influences. Particularly, when the teacher's competence develops, he is likely to make a positive contribution to the assessor community and his institution. In turn, when the institution refines the rules that possibly facilitate teacher professional development, both the individual teacher and the assessor community take the advantages. Also, the more professionally developed the assessor community become, the more it facilitates the development of the individual teacher and ensures the assessment quality in the institution. Additionally, the findings of the present study reveal the necessities that foster teacher professional development of assessment competence, including language assessment literacy, practices of assessment, and professional discussions or training. The

relationship among these components should not be linear, but in a cycle in which one can promote the other. To be more specific, without knowledge of testing and assessment and an understanding of the social context in which the language assessment is implemented (i.e., language assessment literacy), teachers may not have proper practices. Nonetheless, without practical experiences, teachers may encounter difficulties in comprehending the conceptual knowledge, hence difficulties in applying the knowledge in different situations. Professional discussions and/ or training can serve as a mediating tool in case the individual teacher cannot figure out the emerging problems on his own, but how this tool is effective also depends on what knowledge the teacher possesses, how he interprets the knowledge as well as how much he practices assessing students.

On the one hand, the proposed framework resembles Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2015) in that it illustrates

the reciprocal relationship among the elements and that it involves all six components of Activity Theory. Rules and division of labor are incorporated both in the elements of institution and assessor community in the proposed framework. On the other hand, the proposed framework is valuable in that it illustrates the relationship among a number of essential mediating tools for teacher professional development (i.e., the inner circle). The quality of teacher professional development is believed to improve once that relationship is promoted.

In conclusion, the study presents the challenges of teachers as language assessors, thereby proposing a framework for teacher-as-assessor professional development. It is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to teacher professional development generally in the context of educational reform and specifically in the university where the study was conducted.

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THÁCH THỨC ĐỐI VỚI GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH BẬC ĐẠI HỌC VỚI VAI TRÒ LÀ NGƯỜI ĐÁNH GIÁ*

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Tóm tắt: Điển cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu những thách thức hay vướng mắc của giáo viên tiếng Anh đang công tác tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam với vai trò là người đánh giá trong khóa học tiếng Anh hướng theo chuẩn năng lực đầu ra. Để thực hiện mục đích này, nghiên cứu sử dụng thuyết hoạt động (Activity Theory, Engeström, 1987, 2015) làm khung lý thuyết và câu chuyện của giáo viên làm dữ liệu nghiên cứu. Dữ liệu từ câu chuyện của ba giáo viên được lựa chọn về cuộc sống cá nhân và công việc cũng như những trải nghiệm thực tế của họ trong công tác đánh giá cho thấy những thách thức mà các giáo viên này gặp phải liên quan đến việc thiếu kiến thức kỹ năng trong lĩnh vực kiểm tra đánh giá, thiếu kiến thức chung khi thực hiện các nhiệm vụ kiểm tra đánh giá, và thiếu cơ hội học tập, thảo luận về vấn đề này. Dựa theo khung lý thuyết được lựa chọn cho nghiên cứu này, giáo viên gặp phải các thách thức trên là do sự tương tác giữa chủ thể của hoạt động với các quy tắc, giữa các công cụ hỗ trợ chủ thể hoạt động với các quy tắc, và sự tương tác nội tại trong sự phân công lao động. Hi vọng rằng những kết quả nghiên cứu này sẽ giúp bản thân giáo viên cũng như các nhà quản lý ý thức được các điều kiện đảm bảo năng lực đánh giá của giáo viên và chất lượng đánh giá trong bối cảnh cải cách giáo dục hiện nay. Theo đó, nghiên cứu đề xuất một mô hình về phát triển chuyên môn cho giáo viên tiếng Anh bậc đại học.

Từ khóa: giáo viên với vai trò là người đánh giá, thách thức, phát triển chuyên môn giáo viên

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