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### EFL Teachers' Lived Experiences on Using Grading System

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#### Abstract

The Grading System, first used by Yale University in the 18th century for the purpose of descriptive evaluation of the students' achievement, has now become popular worldwide. This paper explores and analyzes the Grade nine and ten English teachers' lived experiences of using Grading System (GS) in English language teaching and testing in the institutional schools of Kathmandu. For this, we collected the required information taking phenomenological interview with the five purposively selected teachers of English from five respective institutional schools of Nagarjun Municipality in Kathmandu. The collected information was thematically analyzed using ATLAS.ti 9. The lived experiences of the concerned teachers showed the praxis of arbitrary and systematic use of GS in the researched context. The results reveal that the arbitrary use of GS has negative impact on the students' classroom participation and teaching learning environment while the systematic use of GS has motivated the students towards learning, and thereby enhanced the teachers' professional development. The study concludes that there is need for using systematic GS making it even more appropriate and scientific for the betterment of overall teaching and learning of English in particular, and thereby the system of secondary level education as a whole.

**Keywords:** professional development, systematic grading system, arbitrary grading system, students' motivation, learning environment

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## Introduction

The Grading System (GS), nowadays, has been implemented worldwide including Nepal with its contextual appropriation. Grades are viewed as “information . . . for making decisions about students, curricula and programmes, and educational policy” (Brown, 2019, p. 13). They are one of the many forms of teachers’ communication with the learners. Nonetheless, the concerned students and their parents perceive that they “just add more pressure and keep making up more and more tests” (Simon & Schusternd, 2004, as cited in Kafle, 2020, p. 625). This shows that people have different views on the GS based on its various pros and cons.

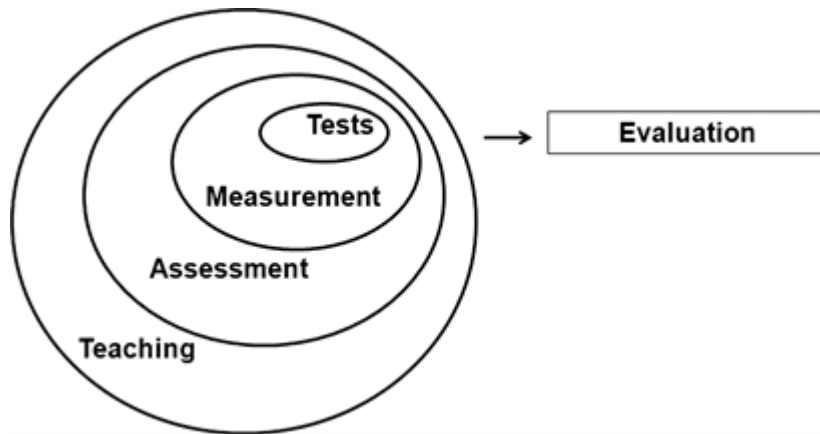
The GS of evaluation in general is also related to the concepts of test, measurement, assessment, and teaching. A test takes place at previously declared times and places making the learners aware that their responses to testing are measured and evaluated (Brown, 2003). Testing is a kind of assessment and employed at the end of an instruction while assessment is a continuous process and may occur at any time when the students respond a question, comment on something, or share their opinions (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). The other terms confused are measurement and evaluation. Bachman (1990) regards measurement as the process of enumerating the characteristics of people based on clearly defined rules and scheme. In a sense, there are quantifications such as numerical or letter grades and labels in the measurement. The quantifications provide the institutes or teachers a means for comparing students with each other. Additionally, following Bachman, mental traits and abilities including aptitude, intelligence, motivation, field independence/dependence, attitude, receptive skills are observed indirectly in measurement. Evaluation, on the other hand, is a kind of systematic collection of outputs with the aim of making judgements by the interpretation of the measurement results. It is “an attempt to understand what is going on to judge its worth and make decisions about it” (Desheng & Varghese, 2013, p. 33).

Thus, in brief, measurement and test contain quantification of monitoring. As a type of measurement, a test is designed to draw out a specific sample of behaviour. The evaluation enables decision-making about the overall issue drawing on the information provided by the measurement (Bachman, 1990). Evaluation can be classified as formative, illuminative, and summative (Richards, 2001). Following Richards (2001), the formative evaluation aims to find out how the programme works and whether there are problems or not; illuminative evaluation determines implementations of the programme in different aspects; summative assessment seeks the efficiency of a programme. Following the author, the purposes of evaluation are to decide whether teaching and learning are suitable to the programme; to make

decisions about learners' status in a programme, and to guide for teaching. The above discussed relationship between test, measurement, assessment, teaching, and evaluation can be shown as in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Interrelationship Between Different Elements of Evaluation*



(Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 6)

The essence of using GS in ELT classes has long been a controversial issue as reflected in the relevant empirical and theoretical literature. Both theorists and researchers have expressed widely varying views on it. For example, the scholars such as Acharya (2016), (Knaack et al., 2012) and Majumder (2015) reveal the positive responses of teachers and students as they argued that the implementation of GS was done with new and favourable method suitable for their circumstances. On the other hand, the scholars such as Cederqvist (2016), Michaelides and Kirshner (2005), and Paneru (2015) show that higher level of effort and stress is required in letter grading system of evaluation, and it has neither motivated the students nor solved the current education problems. Such a controversial arguments regarding the use of the GS motivated us to carry out a research that analyses and synthesizes the lived experience of EFL teachers in using GS in their classes for illuminating the essence of the phenomenon descriptively. More specifically, we aimed at exploring the EFL teachers' lived experiences of using GS in their classes in terms of the students' motivation towards learning, their classroom participation, and the teaching learning environment. Corresponding to these objectives we established the following research questions as the foundation of the research:

1. How do the teachers experience the use of GS in relation to the students' motivation towards learning?

2. How do the teachers experience the students' participation due to the implementation of GS?
3. How do the teachers experience the teaching learning environment due to the implementation of GS?

### Use of GS in Nepal

The GS has been mobilized in some universities such as Kathmandu University and Pokhara University amidst the journey of bachelor studies with four grades before its implementation in school level (Bhatt, 2018). But, after the intensive decision of the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Office of Controller of Examination (OCE) first introduced the GS in 2015 particularly in the field of technical and vocational subjects. OCE continued the grading system in the School Level Certification (SLC) result in both technical and general fields of Education in 2016. To continue GS in school education as well, the meeting of the National Curriculum Development and Evaluation Council (NCDEC) introduced GS with nine grades (Bhatt, 2018).

According to Acharya (2022), SLC students were supposed to be awarded A+ (90% and above), A (80% and below 90%), B+ (70% and below 80%), B (60% and below 70%), C+ (50% and below 60%), C (40% and below 50%), D (20% and below 40%) and E (below 20%) in the SEE (School Education Examination) results. Following the author, there is also a provision of N, which stands for zero scores, if and when an examinee submits a blank answer booklet or is expelled in exams or in case of the candidate's absenteeism. The pattern of the GS of Nepal implemented for high school can be visualized as in Table 1.

**Table 1**

#### *Grading System in Nepal*

S.N.	Interval in Percentage	Grade	Description	Grade Point
1	90 to 100	A+	Outstanding	3.6- 4.0
2.	80 to below 90	A	Excellent	3.2-3.6
3.	70 to below 80	B+	Very Good	2.8-3.2
4.	60 to below 70	B	Good	2.4-2.8
5.	50 to below 60	C+	Above Average	2.0-2.4
6.	40 to below 50	C	Average	1.6-2.0
7.	20 to below 40	D	Below Average	0.8-1.6
8	0 to below 20	E	Insufficient	0-0.8
9.	0	N	Non-Graded	0

(see Acharya, 2022)

The meeting of NCDEC held on 19th March 2016 revised the letter grading system. Grading A+, A, B+, B, C+, C remained the same. The changes were in D, E, and N as follows:

30- 40 % marks: D+

20- 30% marks: D

0- 20% marks: E

Thus, the earlier provision of the ‘N’ grade has been omitted in the revised system. This revised form of grading system also decided to divide the SEE result into nine grading groups as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Grading System in Nepal (Revised)*

S.N.	Interval in Percentage	Grade	Description	Grade Point
1	90 to 100	A+	Outstanding	3.6- 4.0
2.	80 to below 90	A	Excellent	3.2-3.6
3.	70 to below 80	B+	Very Good	2.8-3.2
4.	60 to below 70	B	Good	2.4-2.8
5.	50 to below 60	C+	Satisfactory	2.0-2.4
6.	40 to below 50	C	Acceptable	1.6-2.0
7.	30 to below 40	D+	Partially Acceptable	1.2-1.6
8	20 to below 30	D	Insufficient	0.8-1.2
9.	Below 20	E	Very Insufficient	0-0.8

(see Acharya, 2022)

### **Methods and Procedures**

As we intended to explore the lived experiences of the selected teachers on the use of GS in ELT classes, we opted Husserlian transcendental/descriptive phenomenological research design. In descriptive phenomenology, “nothing should be assumed or taken for granted when trying to understand a phenomenon” (Peoples, 2021, p. 47). Therefore, we did not use any theoretical framework to interpret the data through. Descriptive phenomenological research design aims to study the participants’ lived experiences of a phenomenon to illuminate the pure essence of the phenomenon bracketing aside any theoretical assumption and the researcher’s priory knowledge about the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021; Vagle, 2018). Since the research design was qualitative, we purposively selected only five secondary level (Grade nine and ten) EFL teachers from five institutional schools within Nagarjun Municipality in Kathmandu as the research participants. We collected the required information

taking “phenomenological interviews” (Bevan, 2014) with the participants using the interview guidelines (see Appendix) as the research tool.

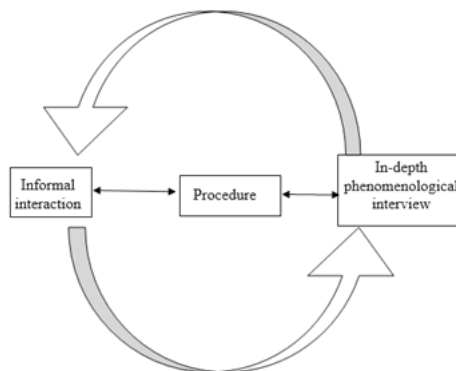
For the collection of the required information, we constructed the interview guidelines and piloted them on two potential participants. To some extent, the probing questions in the guidelines fetched the responses relevant to the research objectives and questions. Based on the relevance of the responses, we modified the tool so as to illicit as accurate and appropriate information as possible from the research participants.

We took interviews with all the selected participants twice. Each interview with each of the participants was preceded by informal interaction with them so as to establish a rapport with them for the first time, and to prepare them for the interview at the second time. We captured the audio or video record of the participants’ accounts of their experiences of using GS in ELT classes depending upon the situation. The first phase interviews were conducted online due to lockdown because of the spread of COVID 19 pandemic all over the country. Therefore, the interview videos were captured via the FastStone screen recorder software with the help of the computer. The second phase interviews with all the participants were taken face to face after COVID-19 pandemic situation coming back to normalcy. Therefore, the interviews were recorded in an MP3 recording device.

The aforementioned procedure for the collection of the required information implies that we collected the information in a cyclical way rather than the linear fashion. The cyclical process of collecting the information can be visualized as in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Information Collection Procedure*



We inductively explicated the collected information, and derived the thematic results. For this, we take help of ATLAS.ti 9—a computer aided qualitative data analysis software CAQDAS. We followed the following steps for the explication of the information using the software:

In the first step we prepared written text documents transcribing and translating the oral field data. The field data in English language were transcribed using orthographic writing while the data originally in Nepali were translated into English.

In the second step, we added all the text documents prepared in the first step to the research project created in ATLAS.ti library.

In the third step, we coded the documents using the software repeating the procedures involved and finalized the coding after several revisions.

In the fourth step, we created themes/subthemes (or code groups) from the codes inductively.

Similarly, in the fifth step, we finalized the themes and supporting codes repeatedly revising the activities in the third and fourth step.

After we finalized the themes, we created, saved, and exported networks from the project in the image form in the sixth step so that we could use them our report. They include the network for categorization of themes, and theme-codes network.

In the seventh step, we reported the theme-wise codes with comments and supporting quotations from the ATLAS.ti project.

In the final step of the data analysis and interpretation procedure, we wrote the report utilizing the output of step 6 and 7.

## **Results**

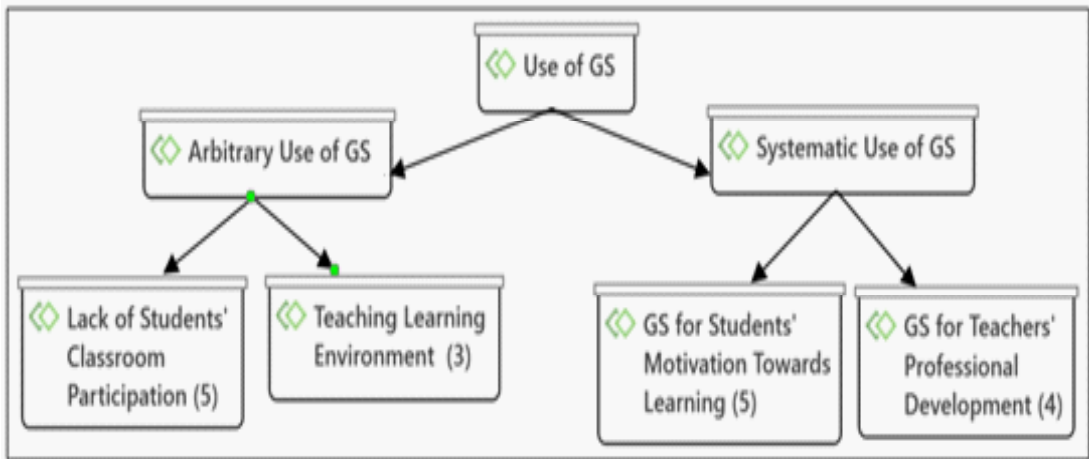
Adding and organizing the set of ten written documents, prepared from the oral information, to a project in ATLAS.ti library, and analyzing and synthesizing the information using the software as a tool, this study identifies both the arbitrary and systematic use of grading system as lived by the participants in the researched context—secondary level ELT classes in institutional schools of Kathmandu.


Therefore, in this section the overall findings from the field data have been described under two superordinate themes: arbitrary and systematic use of grading

system (see Figure 3). As shown in the figure, the first theme incorporates two subordinate themes: Lack of students' classroom participation (supported by five grounded codes) and Teaching learning environment (supported by three grounded codes); and the second theme includes two subordinate themes: GS for students' motivation towards learning (supported by five grounded codes) and GS for teachers' professional development (supported by four grounded codes).

**Figure 3**

*Overall Classification of Qualitative Themes*



Note: GS= Grading System;  = theme; the number in the parenthesis indicates the number of supporting codes grounded in the text documents.

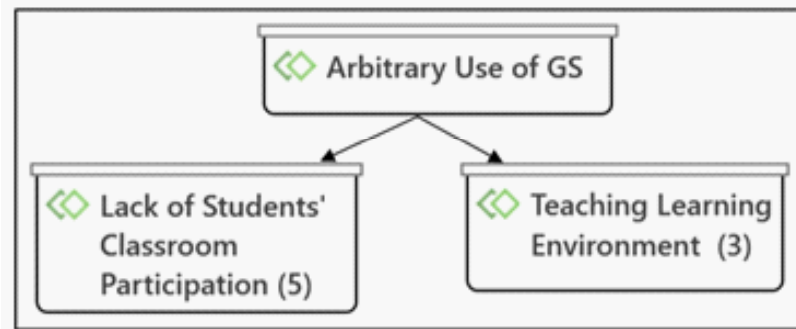
### **Arbitrary Use of GS**


Arbitrary use of GS in ELT classes refers to the evaluation of students' performance on the basis of the teachers' self-judgement rather than following the systematic procedure prescribed by MOE. Endicott (2014) asserts arbitrariness as a lack of reason which is a departure from the rule of law, in favour of rule by the mere will of the rulers. The interpretive analysis of the field information shows that the arbitrary use of GS is supported by two interrelated subordinate themes: Lack of classroom participation and Teaching learning environment and supported by five and three grounded codes respectively (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4**

*Subordinate Themes Supporting the Arbitrary Use of GS*



Note: GS= Grading System;  = theme; the number in the parenthesis indicates the number of supporting codes grounded in the text documents.

The participants shared their experience that arbitrary use of GS has led to develop misconception about its use even after giving descriptive feedback to the students. The students' response towards GS depends upon their awareness regarding the GS. In this regard, T3 for example said that, "Some students are using no failure system as a weapon just to get certificate" (T3 Int 1) because teachers are not able to update themselves as well as their students about grading system. Such situation occurs when the grading system is used arbitrarily. Weak students who have been always ignorant have started to ignore their study even more because there is no failure system in GS. This system has assured them to get at least some grades even if they couldn't perform well in exam. Similarly, evolving assignments like worksheets, pictorial works, graphic works, presentation etc. have been distracting both the teachers and students as they are used just for obtained grade but not for content knowledge. In this regard, T3 in second interview shared his experience as:

I have been giving them pictorial assessments, graphic ideas, presentation etc. to develop their communication skills and creativity but, the students just use the materials from social media to get good grades. They don't use their own capacity to prepare the project and write creative answers (T3 Int 2).

On the other hand, due to the teachers' favorable attitude instead of adopting this system properly, most of the teachers have been still using the shortcut method visualizing students' face rather than performance to grade their students. Such condition obliges the students doubt on their teachers and result which creates biased environment. Supporting this present situation in ELT classes, T1 also said that the students are biased because of "untrained teachers and traditional method of

teaching”. Likewise, T3 shared his lived experience of using GS as biased one. He said:

Sometimes, I feel like by myself and even by my colleagues, biased environment is created. We visualize the students’ face rather than their performance while grading them. Somehow, the system that I have been practicing and I am accustomed with has overruled upon our thought process. Instead of descriptive feedback that we are told to provide to the students, we emphasize on oral discussion among the colleagues to grade them. (T3 Int 2).

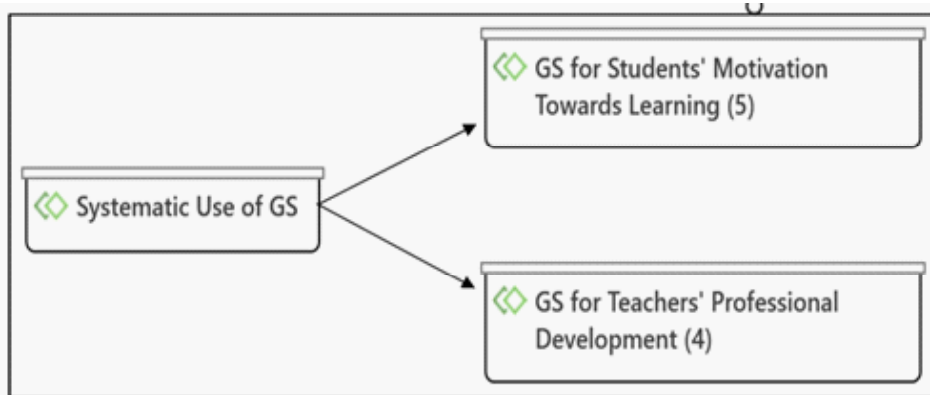
Due to the unavoidable reasons and situations mentioned above, GS doesn’t seem to be implemented systematically in the context of Nepal.


### Systematic Use of GS

The term systematic use refers to the implementation of GS according to a fixed plan or system. Systematic use of GS in ELT classes helps students to be motivated towards learning and it also develops teachers’ proficiency. The interpretive analysis of the field information shows that the systematic use of GS is supported by two interrelated subordinate themes: use of GS for students’ motivation towards learning and use of GS for teachers’ professional development which are supported by five and four grounded codes respectively (see Figure 5). The themes are interrelated in the sense of systematic use of GS motivates students towards learning and students’ enthusiasm along with expected outcome encourages teachers to work hard for their professional development.

**Figure 5**

*Subordinate Themes Supporting the Systematic Use of GS*



Note: GS= Grading System;  = theme; the number in the parenthesis indicates the number of supporting codes grounded in the text documents.

The systematic use of GS emphasizes learning over grading, reassessment opportunities are intended to “keep hope alive” (Cox, 2011) for struggling students, foster a growth mind-set and improve long-term learning and responsibility. Overall, GS alters how grades are determined by focusing on standards, isolating academic evidence, and allowing multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency. Each of these key components is designed to increase the validity, reliability, and equity of grades to ultimately improve student learning. However, the practical application of each GS component continues to clash with centuries-old evaluation traditions and deeply ingrained belief systems among parents, students, and teachers. Therefore, specific GS practices continue to evolve as motivation for the students.

GS includes regular assessment system which evaluates students in regular basis and motivates them to try again, try differently in different areas. Validation of phrase, “keep hope alive” (Cox, 2011) is supported by T1 in this research. He said: “Students are being motivated towards learning by the systematic use of grading system. It has become a plus point to the good students and an opportunity for weak and average students. It has encouraged students to try again, try differently in different areas. Students don’t have to be the victim of inevitable situations like sickness, accident etc. because grading system doesn’t evaluate only at a certain period of time” (T1 Int 1).

Even a poor child intends to work hard to achieve good grade because of holistic assessment system that should be applied while evaluating the students based on GS. Since this system includes continuous assessment system along with many other evaluation processes/tools, it helps the students to find their strong and weak points and improves themselves according to their interest. This helps them to be career oriented. The systematic use of GS gives an opportunity to the students who rigorously attempt several times to improve their grades. Similarly, the process of evaluating them in regular basis in different areas like attendance, classroom participation, assignment etc. are the motivational factors for the students to get better result. In this regard, T5 for example, said:

If a student gets B+ in written test but receives excellent grade in other variables of evaluation process, it leads to excellent grade in final. Hence, pen paper test + additional qualitative remarks leads to good grade. (T5 Int 1)

Furthermore, the finding of this study ‘GS allows for full credit’ under the major theme ‘systematic use of GS’ is also informed by (Rapaport, 2009). According to his article, full credit can be provided to the students’ performance with descriptive feedback if the item is clearly or substantially correct. The response supporting this from one of the participants illustrates clearly that GS allows for full credit:

In this system, we can evaluate the students in language subject with full grade because full grade (A+) itself includes some flaws within it. According to this system A+ doesn't mean 100% right. Even if the student gets 3.6, 3.7, 3.8 and 3.9 it's A+. Which means there is always space for improvement and progress. (T4 Int 1)

Thus, GS seems to be more advantageous through which lots of the teachers as well as the students have achieved various opportunities for further study and job placement.

The summary of the findings derived from the information under two superordinate themes: arbitrary and systematic use of GS along with the subordinate themes and the supporting codes for each of them can be visualized in Table 3. To each of the superordinate themes, we have fitted two subordinate themes along with their supporting codes.

**Table 3**

*Summary of Findings in Terms of Themes and Supporting Codes*

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes	Supporting codes
Arbitrary use of GS	GS for students' classroom participation	GS to reduce subjective biasness Students' response towards GS Standard system with weak procedure Parents' participation to implement GS No failure grade encourages weak students to become more careless.
	GS for developing interactive environment	Evolving assignments for interactive environment GS creates biased environment GS; a discomfort zone for teachers
Systematic use of GS	GS for students' motivation towards learning	GS as a motivational tool GS as an opportunity GS develops hardworking students GS for the better result GS for goal setting and career development
	GS for teachers' professional development	GS increases the teachers' responsibility GS helps to upgrade the teachers GS includes big community GS allows for full credit

Note: GS = Grading system

## Discussion

The data showed that GS has just been implemented by the MOE since 2015 in Nepal without any proper preparation, dissemination, and diffusion program in education sectors previously. Therefore, it results as the arbitrary use of GS. However, this finding is in contradiction with (Kafle, 2020) as he has presented the teachers' perception towards GS to be positively relevant, applicable, enthusiastic and appropriate for increasing the students' classroom participation in the context of Tanahu district of Nepal. Such a contradiction might be due the diverse procedures for the implementation of the system on the one hand, and due to the different perspectives of the teachers belonging to diverse sociocultural contexts.

Similarly, the finding showed that use of GS either arbitrarily or systematically determines the teaching learning environment in ELT classes. The teachers' use of non-testing devices such as project work, classroom assignment, homework, group work, practical work etc. in ELT classes have created the interactive teaching learning environment as informed by (Nafosat et al., 2019). While, the teachers' perception also showed that GS creates biased environment due to their arbitrary use of GS. This finding is in line with (Hardre, 2014) as he states, multiple factors influence teachers' grading on students' classroom performance. Hence, biased environment created by teachers themselves makes the teaching zone a discomfort one for them in the context of Nepal.

Another major finding of this research study deals with the systematic use of GS. We found even the finding related to the systematic use of GS to be conform to the existing literature. For instance, the finding drawn on the information that systematic use of GS motivates students towards learning and develops the teachers' professional skills is in line with (Knaack et al., 2012) as his finding also shows that majority of the students agreed with the fairness of the grades that were assigned to them. Teachers implemented a new way of grading that didn't allow outside factors to affect grades. Systematic use of GS in ELT classes motivates the students to work hard for the upcoming result. This finding is also in line with (McClure & Spector, 2005) as it states that, smaller differences between any two given grades give students a greater possibility of being able to improve their grade during the course of the semester. Validation of this statement would support the notion that setting higher standards in grading will increase students' success in the classroom and subsequently lead to a higher probability of achievement on professional exams.

Similarly, the finding 'teachers' professional development' under the major finding systematic use of GS shows that teachers have been enhancing their proficiency as they have to develop the self-directed, independent, lifelong learners

through their provided grades. This finding is in line with (O'Connor et al., 2018) as it states that the role of the teacher in GS is to develop, encourage, and extend learning of students through their feedback making grades as achievement so that students understand that school is about learning and not just accumulating points. The overall discussion shows that GS has played the significant role in the present evaluation system. It helps to uplift the students' success in education, to get better opportunities in the future. It has reinforced to the students for better doing their examination, homework, assignment, project work, and practical work too. It is necessary to save the students for their demoralizing experiences. However, it also seems to have a lot of challenges in evaluation. Not understanding its core concept and spreading the whims about it, learners' and teachers' reluctance in learning and teaching in GS has created many challenges have been shown in the present context of Nepal. The GS has lots of limitations but understanding it positively and its real sense and making students and parents too known about it can be seen as great challenge for teachers.

### **Conclusion**

The forgoing result and discussion of this study depicts a detailed picture of how EFL teachers feel towards the use of GS. The analysis and interpretation of the findings of this study shows that GS has established a progressive performance of students by motivating and encouraging them through descriptive feedback on regular basis. Despite the fact, it is found that teachers are not clear yet about the concept and applicability of GS smoothly. But, they are trying their best to adopt this system systematically. There seem to be some obstacles or challenges about GS via concept and importance to its implement, norms and values of GS, and satisfaction of learners. Because, it is identified that teachers cannot hold entirely its responsibilities without providing innovative knowledge of grading through the orientation programs, trainings and seminars by the National Education Board and other concerned authorities. The variety of grading categorical scale has converged upon one another in regard to their performance level of subject matter. Still, the teachers are found confused on either their students are satisfied or not by achieving their potentialities of a certain level of grade. Based on the mixed responses given by teachers of their perceptions on GS, we came to the conclusion that there is need for using systematic GS making it even more appropriate and scientific for the betterment of overall teaching and learning of English in particular, and thereby the system of secondary level education as a whole. Even though the purpose of GS is to provide a meaningful, reliable, valid, and consistent picture of students learning achievement, this type of product will be lacking in effectiveness until teachers, students, parents, and all stakeholders have a clear understanding about the use of

GS. Since the present study was limited in descriptive research design based on limited secondary schools in Nagarjun Municipality, the findings of the study cannot be generalized in a broader context. Therefore, on the foundation of this research the issue can be further researched in a different or broader perspective(s).

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### **Appendix: Interview Guidelines for the Participants**

We used the following theme based questions including many other related questions and counter questions as per the demand of the situation.

#### **Students' classroom participation**

- How is the impact of grading system on students' regular classroom activities and participation in the class?
- Does grading system effect at the holistic assessment of the students?

#### **Motivation towards learning**

- How is the response of students regarding the use of grading system? Are they stimulated by the grades and feedback?
- Is grading system an effective motivation for students' achievement? Explain your opinion.

#### **Teaching learning environment**

- How do you respond to the fact that letter grading system reduces the subjective biasness in evaluation? Does it help to identify the ability of students?
- What kind of teaching environment do you find after the implementation of letter grading system?