

Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language in Nepal: Past and Present

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author reviews the history of English language teaching English as a second or foreign language in schools and colleges in Nepal. Teaching English language and literature in Nepal is of about a half a decade, starting from the mid of twentieth century. English learners in Nepal do not have enough exposure to various techniques of language learning opportunities. Rather, it is exercised in limited form in an academic, technical and public affairs in the nation. The professional educators of English in Nepal mostly rely on traditional approaches of teaching English-lectured method and grammar translation method-owing to large number of students in postsecondary educational institutions. Besides, teaching English depends on several educational factors e.g. classroom, course, teachers, curriculum, need of the society, and cultures in Nepal. Instructors of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) find it difficult to implement necessary lesson plans in the classroom. From high school to university English classes, educators face a similar challenge both affected by physical and technical facilities. The educational institutions may not have language learning labs, the computers and the Internet use may be limited, enough audio and visuals aids may not be in the class, text books and resources materials may be difficult to find. These situations, furthermore, push instructors to adopt translation method in English language teaching. Students at public and private learning institutions of Nepal may not get an opportunity to learn English from any native English instructors.

English Education in Nepal

The history of English language teaching in Nepal is about a half a century. The first English language education opened to the people in 1951. Earlier education was limited to the members of the royal family and there were not any public schools across the country. After restoration of social equality in the nation, Tri-Chandra College started teaching English courses under the supervision of Patana University, India in the early fifties.

The first university of the country, Tribhuvan University, was established in 1959 which gave high priority to its curriculum in English. But after a decade, a national wide master plan know as The National Education System Plan (NESP 1971-76) was implemented that brought a drastic change in the system of curriculum, textbook, examination and so on from primary to the university levels of education. First, this plan reduced the weight age of English courses (from 200 marks to 100 marks) set up by earlier system. Second, it reduced the credit hours of English from 15 to 10 from high school to university levels (Mall, 1977). The Plan made English no longer a compulsory school subject but made a provision to opt for any of the United Nations languages such as Chinese, French, Spanish, German-not

necessarily English. Awasthi (1979, p.64) mentioned that majority of educators and students were in favors of "continuing English in secondary level." Meanwhile, the government made its decision to "switch over from English to Nepali" as a medium of instruction in schools (Malla, 1977, p. 69).

Later in 1981, Tribhuvan University brought a change in the structure of English syllabi allotting weight age of 200 marks instead of 100 to the campus level English. The university also discontinued the semester system and reintroduced the annual system of teaching and assessment (Mall, 1977).

In last three decades, English language teaching has been improved largely in Nepal. The change can be noticed in terms of structure of Education, pedagogies and institutions of higher learning.

The school level of education consists of five years of primary, three years of lower secondary, two years of secondary and two years of higher secondary teaching. Likewise, in tertiary level, three to four years of Bachelor's degree, two years of Master's Degree and a research based three to five years terminal doctorate degrees are offered in the colleges and universities in Nepal.

At present, out of total 31,156 schools, 30,924 are primary (99.3%), 10,636 (34.1%) are lower secondary, 6,516 (20.9%) are secondary and 1,556 (5.0%) are higher secondary level (Flash I, 2008-09, p. 13). The total post secondary institutions constitute 456 colleges and 5 universities in Nepal (Education Statistics, 2008). The school level English course has 5 to 6 hours of English language teaching per week whereas the university level English has 6 to 10 hours of teaching each week (Curriculum Development Center, 2008). At the master's and Master's of Philosophy levels, the Faculties of Education, and Humanities of Social Sciences at Tribhuvan University and Purbanchal University offer a two-year specialization in English Education and English Literature, respectively.

Languages Spoken in Nepal Other than English

Nepal is a multilingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. The people of Nepal speak different languages that belong to various ethnic groups (Tobin, 2011). The latest study has shown that 92 languages are spoken across the country (Nepal at a glance, 2011). Nepali is the national language which is spoken by nearly half of the total population. It is the language of legal affairs, business transactions, mass media and administration. It is also used as a medium of instruction in public schools and universities. The *Ethnologue* (Lewis, 2009) published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Texas, USA, offers a total figure of 120 extant languages in Nepal.

In addition, Nepali is the only official language of Nepal. According to Central Bureau of Statistics (2002), Nepali is spoken as a mother tongue by 48.61% of the total population and Maithili is spoken as a mother tongue by 12.3% of the total population. The most numerous mother tongue languages spoken by indigenous peoples are Tamang (5.19%), Newar (3.63%) and Magar (3.39%), as reported in the 2001 census. However, the census (2002) reports that only 1037 people speak English as mother tongue in Nepal. Besides English and Nepali, Maithali, Tharu, Bhojpuri, Doteli, Tamang, Tibetan and Awadhi languages are widely used as a means of communication and instruction in classroom, especially in the primary grades in Nepal (Flash I, 2008-09).

Is English A Second or a Foreign Language in Nepal?

English is not a second language in Nepal (Shrestha, 1983; Shrestha, 2008). In Nepal, English is not an official language, not an international language, nor a language of wider communication or a language of group identification (Shrestha, 1983). However, it has been used as a medium of instruction in many private schools, colleges and universities. But, it has not received the same status in public institutions of higher learning in Nepal.

English is considered as a foreign language for the speakers of Nepali. It is taught as a school subject. In earlier decades, the purpose of English in Nepal is to give students a foreign language competence that may use to listening radio, to understand dialogue in the movies, to use language for communication.

In recent days, English has taken a new dimension in the higher learning institutions of Nepal. Private schools and universities have begun offering several courses in English whereas state-owned higher education schools and colleges deliver education in Nepali medium. The trend of sending children to English medium schools and or colleges has begun as an English mania today in Nepal. Shrestha (2008) mentioned 28.3 % of secondary schools are privately owned and the figure in higher education is considerably higher (83.1 %). In these private schools and colleges today, Nepali is taught as a subject.

However, it has been a controversial issue among the educators whether English is a second or foreign language in Nepal (Shrestha, 2008; Karn, 2009; Malla, 1977, Kansakar, 1977). Many private and public institutions of higher learning such as Kathmandu Model College, Khowpa Engineering College, National College, Himalayan White House College, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University and Purbanchal University in Nepal have been providing English language and literature courses as core and elective subjects. Some degree leading programs such as bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctoral degrees are also offered in these institutions.

Need for English Language Teaching in Nepal

The need of English language teaching has greatly felt in all dimensions of learning in Nepal. Jha (1989, p.76) focused that the purpose of teaching English in Nepal can be "... seen as an effort to enable them [learners] to exchange their ideas and views with those who use English and the same time to acquire knowledge, ideas, skills and techniques imparted formally and informally through English...." Although the majority of people in Nepal speak Nepali, it is enough for "establishing effective channels of communication with the rest of the world" (Malla, 1977, p.12).

The medium of instruction in science, engineering, medicine, and technical institutes in the universities of Nepal is exclusively English. More importantly, it is the only language of communication used to promote Nepal's increasing diplomatic relations with the outside world. As Malla (1977, p. 16) mentioned that English is used as a "library language-language to have an access to textbooks, lectures, and journals...on the one hand, as a language to express one's thoughts and ideas in written and academic exercise on the other." Khaniya (1990) expressed the use of English for educational and occupational purposes. In recent study by Shrestha (2008), English teaching in Nepal has viewed from the perspectives of English for specific purpose and English for academic purpose.

However, there is not any extensive study or use of English in vocational professions of a doctor, engineer and other callings. From an economic point of view, English has become inevitable to foster tourism and international trade in Nepal.

The urgent need of English learning has added a further dimension with growing number of English medium schools across the nation (Bhattarai & Gautam, 2005). The majority of parents like to send their children to English speaking schools. Those students who did not have chance to go to English speaking schools prefer joining language institutes to increase their level of English proficiency. Not only high school graduates but also college graduates prefer improving their level of English to pursue either higher study in abroad or to start a job in foreign settings.

ELT Professional Network in Nepal

In past decade (after 2000) in Nepal, some publishing houses have started printing texts books and other educational materials prepared and written by Nepali speakers of English. The English curriculum preparation and publication is carried by the Curriculum Development Center. The Linguistics Society of Nepal, Literary Association of Nepal, The Society of Nepali English Speakers, and the Himalayan Pen Society have published a handful of materials in English in past years. There are few beginner vocational and language training institutes such as Orbit International, Universal Language Institute to provide Basic English Courses (BEC) to young and adult learners in Nepal.

Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) established in 1992 in Nepal. It is a professional network of teachers, educators, trainers, researchers and materials developers of ELT in Nepal. They share their experience and expertise. NELTA has also started researched on English language teaching and learning in a close association with British Council, American Center, and Ministry of Education, Nepal. NELTA has organized an international conference in English language teaching in Nepal in 2011.

English Language Teaching in Nepal: Problems and Their Causes

In the context of global education, English language teaching in Nepal has been taking its position progressively. However, a number of challenges in English education have noticed in terms of curriculum, textbooks, methodologies and use of teaching resources both at schools and college levels. Importantly, there is not any extensive study of English Language Teaching (ELT) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to address the existing problems of English learning in Nepal (Shrestha, 2008, Bhattarai, 2000).

ELT Teaching at School Levels

a) The Curriculum

The school level curriculum in Nepal is designed and implemented by Curriculum Development Centre (DDC). The centre is responsible for training, implementing, evaluating and reviewing the curriculums. After the revision of literature-oriented English curriculum in 1981, the present curriculum has focused much on the oral-structural-situation approach. It has an aim of developing students' ability to use English effectively in real life situation.

b) The Textbooks

The Curriculum Development Centre prepares the textbooks for all school levels. Nepalese educators/experts prepare English and other subjects text books in all public school levels. However, private schools use textbooks approved by the CDC. The problem in textbooks

prepared in the early seventies was "...heavy emphasis on English reading texts specially written to illustrate specific grammatical points" (Davies et al. 1985, p.25). Although the textbooks are frequently changed and revised, they are not appropriate on the basis of diverse learners of Nepalese context.

c) Teaching Learning Method and Situation

The majority of teachers in the high schools still follow grammar translation method (Malla, 1977; Awasthi, 2007; Shrestha, 2008). The structure of the classroom, as the benches and desks are fixed in the classroom, renders group work (Fleck, 1999). As a form of teacher centred, instructors mostly lecture the subject matter even in primary level that proved more practice to the teachers than to the students. Classrooms are mostly big with fifty to hundred students in a class and that make difficult for instructor to impart skills and knowledge among learners in a crowded and noisy environment. ELT methodology may not bring desired results unless learning and teaching environment smooth and supportive for both the instructors and the learners. Irregularity (absence) of the teachers in the classroom is also seen a major problem in the public schools and university of Nepal (Khaniya, 1990. p.82).

English language classes, at school levels, include frequent and considerable use of Nepali language, and students hardly get exposed to English. In private schools, teachers speak more English focusing on various language skills; however, the participation of students in English is very low. Feldman (1989, p.11) has keenly observed this situation in Nepal that a student "...does not speak English for even ten minutes in ten years of studying the language." Kerr (1994, cited in Awasthi, 1979, p.14) has mentioned a candid assessment of how English is taught in Nepal:

Teaching instruction consists of grammatical dissection and rote memorization of the text. This gives children no opportunity or encouragement to use the language. Further, the physical conditions of the schools and large student number are not conducive to good teaching and learning. Teachers who are able to make additional teaching materials have no place to either store or display them.

In short, ELT in schools of Nepal is in a despicable condition owing to poor physical facilities, improper teaching methods and materials.

d) Teachers and Teacher Training

In ELT entrepreneur, there is a distinct need of English teacher training to raise English proficiency among teachers to enrich with comprehensible input. A report by Kerr (1994), cited in Awasthi, 1979 p. 14) found that "...the standard of written and spoken English amongst government school teachers ranges from Grade two to Grade four native speaker, with only a few exceptions." This situation has further addressed lately to some extent from the training and seminars run by NELTA and some foreign based educational organizations like The British Council and the American Centre.

According to UNESCO report (Country Basic Information, 2006), at the primary level, about 95% of teachers have the minimum required qualifications, but only 45% are academically qualified and trained. At the lower secondary level, these percentages are 93% and 31%, respectively. At the secondary level, about 90% of teachers have the required qualifications, but only 41% are academically qualified and trained. However, this figure does not match with the report published from Ministry of Education and Department of Education of the Government of Nepal. The official publication of the Ministry of Education (Flash I, 2008-

09, p.14) recorded, "the percentage of fully trained teachers in all types of schools are 67.1% at primary level, 54.0% at lower secondary level and 71.3% at secondary level respectively." Both reports show that in-service teacher training is a high priority for teachers, especially for ESL teachers, in Nepal. The Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP) and Secondary Education Development Project (SEDP) offer in-service training to English subject teachers and other subject teachers in Nepal.

Untrained teacher may not be as innovative as their trained counterparts are in Nepalese ELT world. McCafferty (1969 as quoted in Malla 1977, p.15) finds that "On average, an untrained primary teacher will get five out of six English patterns wrong and a secondary teacher will get two out of three wrong." This statement further focuses on the real need of ELT training in Nepalese schools. However, an update in this matter is further required as a research.

e) Evaluation

The success of school education (up to grade 10) is assessed on the basis of a pass per cent of School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination. Students after passing the SLC exam pursue their college level programs in Nepal. The study by Malla (1978, p.2) shows that "...80 to 90 per cent fail SLC examination because they fail in English." In 1983, as Davies et al. (1984) mentioned, 61 % students failed in 1983 SLC examination. A comparative study on the average marks that SLC English in 1987 was 33.83 out of 100, and it reduced to 22.06 out of 100 in 1991 (Malla, 1978). This tremendous per cent of failure has unique underlying cause that lies in the design of question sets. The SLC questions evaluate only the memory power of the students but do not give an opportunity to them to articulate their creativity (Mathema, & Bista, 2006). Feldmann (1989, p. 28) evaluates acutely this situation, "I...wonder why the students are never given the opportunity to think for themselves, to come up with fresh, completely individual and thought provoking essays instead of regulating ideas they had read in a story."

Of 2, 34,602 total students appeared in the examination in 2009, 68.47 % of them passed SLC examination. The percentage of passing students in 2006 and 2005 were 63.73 and 77.19 respectively (At glance, Ministry of Education, 2009). Although the trends of pass per cent varies each year, there is not any further study about the passing rate of students in English or in any particular subject.

Teaching of English at Higher Education in Nepal

The ELT programs and their outcomes are below the satisfactory level in the institutions of higher education in Nepal. There is a gap in terms of curriculum, texts, and methods of teaching between public and private institutions of post secondary institutions of Nepal. Private colleges and campuses have given high priority on English instruction where as public institutions have chaotic situation in terms of syllabi, materials and instruction.

a) The Curriculum

The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) of Tribhuvan University prepares implements and evaluates the ELT curriculum for all the faculties/institutes for all levels i.e. Bachelor's and Master's levels.

The main objective of teaching English, for example, at the Bachelor's level is to enable the students "...to possess a fairly advanced command of English so that they can use the language for higher education, communication and in a variety of jobs outside the academia

with accuracy, efficiency and fluency" (Course of Study, BA First Year, Tribhuvan University, 2005, p.2). The English courses expose students to advanced contemporary writing, reading materials, communication and use-oriented materials. But these courses are still ineffective and do not reflect the needs of learners. They are based on some arbitrarily chosen literature focused materials.

b) The Text Books

The college level text books are selected, printed and imported from international publications. Only very few text books are compiled and edited in Nepal. The textbooks prescribed for the Bachelor's level compulsory English and Master's level cover a wide range of literary genres for example essays, stories, plays, poetry and novels. The communicative English in these levels highlights varieties of language learning and teaching skills. This course is designed to teach the language through literature in Nepal but it has not been effective in all levels due to the lack to appropriate methods, the goals, methods and materials for the lesson.

c) Teaching Learning Method and situation

The English curricula at higher education (undergraduate and graduate levels) do not mentioned specific teaching methods and learning activities. Higher Secondary Education Board (HSEB), a new organization of intermediate college in the higher education of Nepal, adopted "the same curriculum for grades 11 and 12 borrowed from Tribhuvan University" (Khaniya, 2007 p. 54). Like in school level, the classroom environment did not permit instructors to give ample practice to the learners. The facilitators, in most cases, translate the texts in Nepali or lecture on the lesson and ask the students to do exercise themselves. Students in many public colleges did not form a class but a crowd of uninterested youngsters (Khaniya, 2007, Felck, 1997, Shrestha, 2008).

It is essential to have a suitable numbers of students, not more than 20 to 25 students in the ELT classes to monitor learners' spoken and written English language. An average class of undergraduate English course at public campuses of Tribhuvan University has 150 to 200 students. It may not appropriate to expect an English language teacher to teach students all language skills in such a big class. Instead, an instructor may talk about the 'history' of English language. Next, the public higher learning intuitions, in both urban and rural settings, do not have any modern form of teaching materials/aids like computer, TV, over head projector, copy machines and course materials.

This researcher also did not have these basic materials of higher education in his undergraduate and graduate levels of study in Nepal. Mostly students have to prepare themselves for the course and exams without understanding what skills they gain or do not gain. As a result, English language learning in Nepal is only learning for the sake of earning a degree and a social status rather than achieving skills and application of English (Fleck 1999).

d) Teachers and Teacher Training

A master's degree qualification in English Education (M.Ed.) or in English Literature (M.A.) in Nepal is considered a passport to teach English in college and university levels (Mall, 1977; Awasthi, 1997). There is no pre service or entry level training for university teachers, and they hardly get an opportunity to go for any in-service training. There are not any examinations or criteria to evaluate the adequate linguistic competence of these English instructors in the university.

e) Evaluation

There are annual written examination to evaluate students' achievement in the tertiary level classes in the Institutes of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences in Nepal. The success rate in English is below the level of satisfactory in public institutions at higher learning. Students are unable to express their knowledge and information in exact words and sentence structures in the exams (Matthies, 1988). There are several underlying causes of students being failed in English courses such as materials, lessons, pedagogies, assessment etc. However, there are not any published records in the university and its associate campuses focusing on the performance of students in English at higher level.

Instead of blaming students for poor performance in examinations, the university and its campuses should evaluate existing system of teaching and learning to bring an effective output in Nepalese ELT.

Conclusion

English as a second/foreign language is a demanding course of Nepalese academia. English has been taught and spoken in Nepal for past half a decade in schools and colleges along with other several local and regional languages. The problems of ELT have noticed in English syllabi, textbooks, policy matters, classroom environment are major components to change in Nepal (Malla 1977; McCafferty, 1969; Davies et al. 1971; Shrestha, 2008). The studies have found that there was a strong need for English in Nepal and the country needed well-trained teachers, improved textbooks, enough supplementary materials, and better evaluation system (Anderson & Lindkvist, 2000). The study by Matthies (1988) suggested English educators in Nepal to have teachers' manual, small class size, audio-visual materials, workshops, in-service training and incentives to the teacher. Advanced program packages with student-centered teaching methods, materials, trainings and structural design are recommended to improve existing trend of teaching and learning English in Nepal.

(Note: Some information of this article is published in the author's book, *An application of cooperative learning to teach English as a second/foreign language in Nepal.*)

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