

Learning English Through Non-English Subjects: A Survey on Nepalese EFL Students

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Abstract

In Nepal, students are taught various subjects using two different mediums of instruction. The majority of teachers prefer using English as the medium of instruction, but there are still some who opt for their mother tongue. This research aimed to investigate the impact of teaching English through non-English subjects on the vocabulary development of Nepalese EFL students. A total of seventy-four students participated in this study and were divided into two groups: one group learned English through non-English subjects (SLETNES) as the experimental group, while the other group learned non-English subjects in their mother tongue (SLNESMT) as the control group, based on teachers' preferences for the medium of instruction. Both groups of students completed a questionnaire, and the data collected were analyzed to determine which group exhibited better vocabulary learning outcomes. The study spanned four sessions, with each session lasting 40 minutes. The data analysis revealed a significant difference between the two groups, with SLETNES students being exposed to a more extensive vocabulary.

Keywords: non-English subjects, mother tongue, EFL, vocabulary, exposure

Introduction

Despite my 18 years of teaching experience, I found it challenging to comprehend how students effectively learn English. Various scholars worldwide have proposed numerous methods for learning English, but teaching English in a non-English-speaking community like Nepal presents its own set of challenges. In Nepal, teaching English as a foreign language is significantly more demanding than teaching it as a second language in other contexts.

The term "ESL" has been criticized by some for implying that English holds a subordinate role, particularly in multilingual countries where English is used as a lingua franca. This term may also be misleading for students who have already acquired several languages before learning English. Alternative terms such as English language learners (ELLs) or simply English learners (EL), have emerged (Villegas, 2018), emphasizing the importance of students' native languages and cultures in the learning process (Wright, 2010).

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English language learners are often expected to make errors in syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which are attributed to the influence of their first language (L1). These errors may include incorrectly applying grammatical patterns from their L1 to the target language (L2), mispronouncing certain sounds, or encountering vocabulary confusion, often referred to as “false friends”. This phenomenon is known as L1 transfer or language interference. However, it’s important to note that these transfer effects tend to be more pronounced in the language production of beginners. Research in second language acquisition (SLA) has identified errors that cannot be solely attributed to the L1. For instance, learners from various language backgrounds may exhibit errors like failing to apply the third person singular -s to verbs, saying “he make” instead of “he makes”.

I hold the belief that English can be effectively taught through non-English subjects such as Health Education, Population Education, Environment Education and Social Studies, which are written and taught in English. These subjects offer students ample opportunities to learn English. In Nepal, English is taught as a foreign language, and several factors hinder the learning potential of English students, including limited exposure to English, limited prospects for using English, and the overall scope of English usage.

Though the space of English in education has been expanded in Nepal (Phyak & Sharma, 2020), English language exposure is limited in Nepalese society as there are few contexts where English is used. This scarcity of opportunities to engage with the English language makes it challenging for learners to become familiar with English vocabulary and structures. Consequently, students may not have sufficient exposure to a diverse range of words, which can impede their language learning efficiency. It is well-established that increased exposure to vocabulary enhances learning. Accessing a variety of words becomes more attainable through non-English subjects written and taught in English, rather than relying solely on English subject books. Teaching non-English subjects through the medium of English can expose students to numerous words from various fields.

Furthermore, language learning is most effective when it is practiced frequently. However, the limited applicability of English in the Nepalese context restricts its regular use. There are only a handful of environments where English can be effectively employed. In contexts where language use opportunities are scarce, the potential for learning diminishes. Teaching non-English subjects in English medium addresses this issue to some extent by providing learners of the English language with more opportunities for language use.

Additionally, the duration of language use significantly impacts the language learning process. The longer a language is used, the more easily learners acquire its vocabulary and structures. Extended usage of a language in daily communication solidifies its foundations. However, in Nepal, English language usage is limited due to the constraints of the academic curriculum. English is used sparingly in schools, colleges, and universities. This limited exposure hinders the development of English language proficiency. Nevertheless, some private schools in Nepal offer extended English usage through the instruction of non-English subjects in the English medium.

This study emerged in response to a perplexing issue observed in a typical English medium school classroom: why students were struggling to learn the English language in an environment where English was the medium of instruction. This inquiry led to the following research questions that guide the entire study:

- i. How effectively can students learn English through non-English subjects?
- ii. What strategies can be employed to teach English through non-English subjects?

Literature Review

Ellis (1999) emphasizes the significance of employing specific strategies for learning vocabulary. However, it's essential to distinguish between "strategy" and "technique". Learning strategies refers to the overall approach adopted in learning a language (Adhikary, 2020), encompassing various observable learning techniques (Sternberg & Powell, 1983).

A language learning strategy is a set of techniques that students can use to learn a language (Kumar et al., 2022). In the context of language acquisition, learning strategies encompass techniques, approaches, and purposeful actions taken by students to enhance the acquisition and retention of both linguistic and content-related information (Chamot, 1987). These strategies play a vital role in facilitating the language learning process.

Furthermore, language learning strategies encompass behaviors and actions employed by learners to make language acquisition more effective, self-directed, and enjoyable (Oxford, 1989). Study by Goulden et al. (1990) suggested that educated native English speakers typically possess knowledge of approximately 20,000 word families. A word family consists of a headword and its closely related inflected and derived forms. It's worth noting that these estimates may be conservative, as they do not include proper nouns in the count.

A rough rule of thumb suggests that native speakers, during their formative years, acquire an average of 1,000 new word families annually. While these goals are attainable

for non-native speakers of English, particularly those learning English as a second language, they pose significant challenges for learners of English as a foreign language. It is unclear how many words are necessary for EFL learners, but we can approximate their vocabulary needs by considering ESL learners as competent benchmarks.

When it comes to non-English students, Iftanti and Maunah (2021) opine that they take English language as a two-faceted coin which they find difficult while being meaningful and exhilarating and important for getting in touch with all walks of life throughout the world. So, they find it essential to learn it for globalization purpose as well.

In the context of Nepal, where the mother tongue is typically different from English, the question arises as to how this can be achieved. The author posits that it is feasible by maximizing inputs through teaching non-English subjects to EFL learners in English. Relying solely on English language instruction may not provide EFL learners with an adequate vocabulary base, making the integration of English into non-language subjects a potentially effective approach.

Methodology

Participants

In this study, a total of 74 participants were observed. These participants are currently enrolled in grades 9 and 10 at ABC School (pseudonym) located in Lalitpur, Nepal. To assess their preferences and attitudes towards language learning, they were randomly presented with questions regarding whether they preferred to learn English through non-English subjects or if they favored learning English exclusively through English-language subjects.

Based on their stated preferences, the students were subsequently divided into two distinct groups. The first group comprised 57 students who expressed a preference for learning English through non-English subjects (referred to as SLETNES), serving as the experimental group. The second group consisted of 17 students who preferred learning non-English subjects in their mother tongue (referred to as SLNESMT), and they constituted the control group for the study.

The study's focus primarily revolves around the effectiveness of English language learning, particularly with regard to vocabulary acquisition. As such, the study has intentionally concentrated on vocabulary-related aspects to guide its research in a specific direction.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Data for this study were gathered through the use of a questionnaire. The questionnaire sought insights into various aspects; attitudes toward vocabulary learning, commonly employed vocabulary learning strategies, challenges encountered during English vocabulary acquisition, perceived effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies, perceived differences between learning English through non-English subjects, learning English exclusively through English subjects etc.

The survey was thoughtfully designed to yield a diverse range of responses, enabling meaningful comparisons. The questionnaires were distributed to students within their regular classroom settings, ensuring that they did not perceive any distinction in the process. Students were requested to respond to the questionnaire items based on their individual circumstances.

The questionnaire was administered to a total of 74 students from two different grade levels. The participants were divided into two distinct groups: grade 9 (referred to as SLNESMT) and grade 10 (referred to as SLETNES). The questionnaire administration occurred over the course of four class sessions, with one class session conducted each day.

Following the completion of the questionnaire, the respondents were instructed to carefully review each item to confirm that they had not omitted any questions and that they had a clear understanding of each item's content. This step aimed to ensure the accuracy and completeness of their responses. Similarly, the comprehensive approach expected to provide a holistic understanding of students' perspectives and experiences related to vocabulary learning in the context of English language acquisition.

Limitations

This study does have certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First and foremost, the research solely relies on data gathered through questionnaires. While the questionnaire data provided valuable insights into students' perceptions of ABC's SLETNES program, the study could have been strengthened by incorporating in-depth interviews with students, teachers, SLETNES practitioners, and relevant authorities. Such interviews could have served to validate and enrich the findings of this study.

A second limitation pertains to the temporal scope of the research. Longitudinal studies tracking the perceptions and expectations of ABC school students regarding SLETNES over an extended period would have been valuable. These studies could provide a more

comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and evolution of the process of learning English through non-English subjects.

Furthermore, gaining insights into the challenges faced by English teachers, students, and administrators, as well as their strategies for addressing these challenges at various stages of teaching SLETNES, would have added depth to the study.

Lastly, it's important to note that the focus of this study is primarily on vocabulary acquisition. To conduct a more comprehensive investigation in the future, it would be beneficial to address the mentioned limitations and explore English through non-English subjects in the Nepalese context more extensively. This would enable researchers to draw more robust and consolidated conclusions.

Survey Result and Analysis

Surveying Attitudes Towards Vocabulary Learning: Five specific questions were included in the survey to assess students' attitudes and perceptions regarding vocabulary learning.

Observation of Language Learning Strategies: The study observed and analyzed six distinct language learning strategies employed by the participants. This observation provided valuable insights into the strategies students commonly used in their language learning endeavors.

Comparison of Learning Approaches: The study also explored and compared the differences between two approaches to learning English: learning English exclusively through English subjects and learning English through non-English subjects. This comparison served as a parameter to evaluate and understand students' learnability and preferences.

By incorporating these diverse elements into the research methodology, the study aimed to comprehensively investigate students' attitudes, strategies, and preferences related to vocabulary learning and the acquisition of English in different contexts.

Attitudes Towards Vocabulary Learning

The initial section of the survey focuses on assessing attitudes towards vocabulary learning and comprises five questions, numbered from one (Q1) to five (Q5). The primary objective of these questions is to explore the attitudes of Nepalese EFL learners toward vocabulary acquisition in the context of English language learning. Additionally, these questions aim to gauge how participants perceive the relationship between their

English language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge, considering both the SLETNES and SLNESMT approaches.

Initially, both participant groups were presented with the same set of five questions:

- Q1. Do you believe that learning vocabulary plays a vital role in acquiring proficiency in English?
- Q2. Are you of the opinion that increasing your vocabulary will enhance your overall English language skills?
- Q3. Do you actively seek out various sources to expand your vocabulary for improved English proficiency?
- Q4. Do you believe that learning non-English subjects in English medium frequently exposes you to new words and enhances your vocabulary?
- Q5. Do you make an effort to incorporate newly learned words into your own sentences?

These questions collectively serve to gauge participants' attitudes toward the significance of vocabulary acquisition and its impact on their English language proficiency, taking into account the different approaches of SLETNES and SLNESMT.

Table 1

Attitudes Towards Vocabulary Learning

Questions	Response Percent				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q 1	81	18	1	0	0
Q 2	79	19	2	0	0
Q 3	13	69	14	3	1
Q 3	96	4	0	0	0
Q 4	84	12	4	0	0

The analysis of the data presented in the Table 1 reveals several key findings such as:

Positive Attitudes: The majority of EFL learners in Nepal exhibit positive attitudes toward language learning, particularly vocabulary acquisition in the context of English. This is evident from the high percentages of “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” responses for Questions 1, 2, and 5.

Importance of Vocabulary: A significant number of respondents acknowledge the importance of vocabulary in enhancing their overall English language proficiency, with a high percentage of “Strongly Agree” responses for Questions 1 and 2.

Willingness to Learn: The data indicates that learners are actively willing to seek out various sources to expand their vocabulary (Question 3) and make efforts to incorporate newly learned words into their own sentences (Question 5).

SLETNES Enthusiasm: Among the SLETNES group, there is a notably higher level of enthusiasm and positivity regarding learning vocabulary from non-English subjects taught in English. This is particularly evident in Question 4, where 98% of SLETNES respondents answered “Strongly Agree”, indicating a strong preference for this approach.

Overall, the findings suggest that Nepalese EFL learners generally value vocabulary acquisition and are receptive to the idea of learning English vocabulary from non-English subjects, especially within the SLETNES group. This insight underscores the potential effectiveness of integrating English into non-language subjects for vocabulary enrichment.

Language Learning Strategy

The data presented in Table 2 provides valuable insights into the language learning strategies employed by Nepalese EFL learners, particularly in the context of vocabulary acquisition.

Table 2

Language Learning Strategies

Strategies	Response Percent			
	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Never
Textbook vocabularies	64	11	22	3
Dictionaries	34	24	10	32
Asking teachers	23	17	11	49
Non-English subjects taught in English	79	19	2	0
Parts of speech analysis	21	19	13	47
Word root analysis	19	17	11	53

Some key observations based on the Table 2 are:

Textbook Vocabularies: A significant portion of students (64%) reported using textbook vocabularies as a language learning strategy “Very often”. This suggests that students often rely on their textbooks to acquire new vocabulary.

Dictionaries: Dictionaries are a commonly used resource, with 34% of students indicating they use them “Very often”. However, a substantial percentage (32%) reported “Never” using dictionaries, indicating a diversity in learning approaches.

Asking Teachers: Approximately 23% of students stated that they “Very often” ask teachers for assistance with vocabulary. However, a substantial portion (49%) reported “Never” using this strategy, indicating a potential area for increased teacher-student interaction.

Non-English Subjects in English Medium: The most striking finding is that 79% of students reported using non-English subjects taught in English medium “Very often”. This high percentage suggests that learning non-English subjects in English is a highly favored strategy among students for vocabulary acquisition.

Parts of Speech Analysis and Word Root Analysis: Both parts of speech analysis and word root analysis were less frequently used strategies, with a notable percentage of students reporting “Never” employing these techniques.

Overall, the data supports the idea that teaching English through non-English subjects, especially in English medium, is perceived as an effective strategy by students for learning vocabulary in context. The results also indicate that students following the SLETNES approach learned more vocabularies and structures of the English language compared to those in the SLNESMT group. This underscores the potential benefits of integrating English into non-language subjects as a strategy to enhance vocabulary acquisition among Nepalese EFL learners.

From the above-mentioned table, we can realize that most students agreed that they get to learn a lot of words’ meanings in context when they are able to learn non-English subjects in English medium. That is why teaching students English through non-English subjects can also be of great help to them both as a strategy and technique. All that I found is SLETNES learned more vocabularies and structures of English language than SLNESMT.

Problems of Vocabulary Learning in English

In the section addressing the problems of vocabulary learning in English, a set of 10 questions was designed to explore the challenges and hurdles faced by students in the process of acquiring English vocabulary. The primary objectives were to gauge the students’ overall perception of the difficulty associated with learning English vocabulary and to pinpoint specific obstacles encountered during vocabulary acquisition. The intention behind identifying these difficulties and obstacles was to provide valuable insights for instructors, enabling them to design effective supplementary vocabulary exercises that would enhance the efficiency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students’ vocabulary learning.

Upon analyzing the feedback gathered from both groups through the questionnaire, three major obstacles to vocabulary learning emerged:

Word Forms: One significant challenge reported by students was related to word forms. This suggests that learners may struggle with variations in word forms, such as verb conjugations, plurals, tenses, and other inflections.

Technical Terms: Another obstacle highlighted by students pertains to technical terms, including specialized vocabulary related to technology, satellite, morbidity, and similar domains. Such terminology can be complex and unfamiliar to EFL students, posing a difficulty in vocabulary acquisition.

Polysemant: Polysemy, which refers to words or phrases having multiple meanings, was identified as a third obstacle. This implies that students may encounter difficulties in distinguishing between different contextual meanings of the same word.

Understanding these specific challenges faced by EFL learners provides instructors with valuable insights into tailoring vocabulary exercises and teaching strategies that address these obstacles effectively. By addressing these issues, instructors can facilitate more efficient vocabulary acquisition among their students.

Most Effective Strategies

Students from both groups were asked to rank 25 different strategies in order of their preference for learning new words. Table 3 presents the strategies based on the ranks provided by the participants.

Rank	Strategies
1	Oral repetition
2	Written repetition
3	Read new words aloud and write them down while studying
4	Listen to recordings of words
5	Learn from non-English subjects taught in English
6	Utilize glossaries from textbooks
7	Keep a vocabulary notebook
8	Label objects with their English names
9	Learn words with visual aids or signs representing their meanings
10	Connect words to personal experiences
11	Learn and practice meanings in a group setting
12	Study spelling, affixes, and word roots
13	Organize vocabulary into categories
14	Imagine word forms
15	Connect words to their synonyms and antonyms

Rank	Strategies
16	Associate words with related concepts
17	Learn idiomatic expressions along with words
18	Engage in oral practice using previously learned words
19	Create sentences using new words
20	Reinforce vocabulary through translation
21	Read articles and reiterate their content with newly acquired words
22	Deepen understanding and enhance memory through extensive reading
23	Self-administer word tests
24	Regularly review previously learned words

The strategies presented in Table 3 included various techniques to aid in vocabulary acquisition. These findings provide valuable insights into the strategies that students find most effective and those they are less inclined to use when learning new vocabulary. Understanding these preferences can help educators tailor their teaching methods to better suit their students' needs and preferences for vocabulary acquisition.

Features of Learning English Through Non-English Subjects vs Only Through English Subject

Participant students were asked to freely choose and list the features of two different strategies: “Learning English through Non-English Subjects” and “Learning English Only Through English Subjects”. The students’ responses highlighted key aspects of these strategies, as shown in the Table 3.

Table 3

Features of Learning English Through Non-English Subjects vs Only Through English Subject

English through non-English subjects	English only through English subjects
More inputs	Less inputs
More exposures	Less exposures
Longer practice	Less practice
Variety of words	Words limited to English textbook only
Contextualization	Less burden

Analyzing the data presented in the table, it becomes evident that students overwhelmingly favored the strategy of “Learning English through Non-English Subjects” taught in the medium of English. They believed that this approach provided them with several advantages, including more inputs, greater exposure to English,

extended practice, exposure to a wider variety of words, and a more contextualized learning experience.

Conversely, the strategy of “Learning English Only Through English Subjects” was perceived as less favorable, with students indicating fewer inputs, reduced exposure to the language, less practice, limited vocabulary derived solely from English textbooks, and a perception of it being less burdensome.

This preference for learning English through non-English subjects in English medium reflects the strong interest and inclination of Nepalese EFL students towards English language learning. It suggests that students see value in integrating English into various subjects, rather than restricting its use to English-specific coursework.

Major Findings

Some major findings of the study are listed as follows:

- i. Students hold a positive perception of learning English through non-English subjects.
- ii. Integrated-skills course design and diverse textbooks are preferred.
- iii. Student-centered teaching methods, proper assessments, and relevant teaching content are beneficial.
- iv. Students face challenges related to poor English proficiency and low motivation.
- v. The study provides valuable insights for English teachers, SLETNES administrators, and relevant authorities to improve English language learning in Nepal.
- vi. Further research on ETNES programs in Nepal is encouraged to better meet students’ language learning needs in the context of globalization.

Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the effectiveness of learning English through non-English subjects for independent language acquisition. The majority of students exhibit a proactive attitude toward learning English vocabulary and employ a diverse range of strategies to understand and consolidate new words. However, it is crucial to note that while students utilize various strategies, they may not have independently developed highly effective vocabulary learning techniques.

The study’s tables clearly illustrate the most frequently used, least-used, and least-helpful strategies. It’s important to recognize that vocabulary learning is a highly personalized endeavor, and learners should be encouraged to explore the strategies that work best for them in expanding and maintaining their vocabulary.

While this research provides valuable insights into vocabulary learning strategies from non-English subjects taught in English, it also has limitations, as discussed earlier.

Future research should delve deeper into the effectiveness and significance of each specific strategy in a more controlled and systematic manner.

The survey feedback suggests that students encounter challenges in vocabulary learning. From both teaching and learning perspectives, some recommendations emerge:

Enhanced Vocabulary Teaching: Teachers should place greater emphasis on vocabulary instruction, actively seek out successful learning strategies, and encourage students to adopt strategies that suit their individual needs.

Stimulating Strategy Use: Educators can play a role in stimulating and assisting students in selecting and applying effective vocabulary learning strategies.

Integration of Non-English Subjects: The study suggests that teaching non-English subjects in English medium can be a valuable approach to language learning. This strategy can enhance students' exposure to and practice with English vocabulary.

In conclusion, this research highlights the importance of vocabulary learning strategies and the potential benefits of incorporating English into non-English subjects. Further exploration and research in this area can contribute to more effective English language education in Nepal and beyond.

Implications

The results of this study have several implications on different dimensions in the context of English language learning and teaching. Some are presented as follows:

Vocabulary Learning Strategies: The study highlights the importance of teaching effective vocabulary learning strategies. Students in this study expressed a positive response to employing strategies for learning new words. This suggests that educators should focus on instructing students in these strategies to enhance their vocabulary acquisition. Teaching learning strategies should be a fundamental aspect of English language education, benefiting both teachers and students.

Exploring Underutilized Strategies: Some strategies, such as oral practice with learned words and using new words in sentences, were perceived as helpful by students but were not frequently employed. This indicates that students may be open to exploring new strategies if they are introduced and guided in their usage. English teachers should consider introducing these strategies to students and providing guidance on their effective implementation.

Learning English through Non-English Subjects: The study found that students generally preferred learning English through non-English subjects, citing benefits such as

increased exposure, extended practice, and contextualized learning. This suggests that integrating English into various subjects can be an effective strategy for language learning. English language programs in Nepal could explore the incorporation of English into non-English subjects to further enhance students' language skills.

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