EXPLORING LEARNERS' DIVERSITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at exploring the diversity of students in English language classes. The technique of customizing classes to each student's unique interests, needs, and strengths is known as differentiated instruction (DI). It is a student-centered strategy that raises learners' engagement levels while addressing concerns of diversity with multiple teaching approaches and techniques. I adopted the social constructivism theory and interpretive inquiry as a research method to examine the diversity of learners. To achieve the purpose of the study, four research participants, two teachers and two students were selected from a public school in Rupandehi. I used a series of observations and unstructured interviews to gather the data from the participants. The diversity of the students was examined in terms of their performance, personality, and gender-based discrimination in class. This study explored that the teachers employed differentiated instruction to some extent in the English classroom by creating context, using group work, pair work, etc. However, they often ignored slow, shy and weak learners and frequently designed classroom activities for talented and extroverted learners. The study can contribute to English language teachers with insightful ideas to address and apply learners' diversities through differentiated instruction in classrooms.

Key Words: *Critical thinking, differentiated instruction, performance, personality*

INTRODUCTION

One of the main objectives of instruction is up-to-date and foster student achievement and assist them in developing their self-direction, productive problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking skills. Differentiated instruction (DI) is a teaching strategy for determining each learner's readiness, interests, and learning styles (Tomlinson, 2003). DI is a set of strategies that helps teachers to guide students along their educational path (Levy, 2008). Every classroom has a diverse group of students with an extensive range of skills, preferences for learning, life proficiencies, and needs that the teachers must take into account. In such classrooms, teachers cannot teach the learners with a *one-size-fits-all* approach. A single approach cannot address the needs of diverse learners in terms of their performance, gender, and personality. Teachers need to differentiate instruction to help every child meet their full potential (as cited in Moreno, 2015). Teachers must assist the learners in developing the skills necessary to be productive, independent, and problem-solving learners. DI is investigation-based, activity-intensive and learner-centred (Chamberlin &

Power, 2010) which can address their interest and abilities. Not all pupils learn the same material in the same way on the same day (Ireh & Ibeneme, 2010). Fostering success for all students and assisting them in developing into self-directed, effective problem-solvers and thinkers is one of the main objectives of good teaching.

Teachers also need to assist students to overcome their concerns and master the materials they are learning by making them feel like they belong in the class. Teachers, who employ DI should offer a learning atmosphere and possibilities that don't exclude any learners. So, through differentiated instruction, teachers may better assist students in understanding their strengths and weaknesses, enhancing and strengthening their strong points, and overcoming their weaknesses (Anderson, 2007). In other words, DI is a personalized strategy for addressing the academic demands of all students at their level (Servilio, 2009). With DI, teachers ask to know their students well enough to assign each one specific experience and assignments that will enhance learning (Robb, 2008). Before creating a lesson plan, DI offers a method of instruction that takes into consideration each student's needs, interests, and level of understanding. Learners are more likely to participate in class when they are enthusiastic about the subject matter. Teachers can get students involved in the learning process by providing them with a selection of activities that let them choose which assignments or activities to do. Differentiated instruction based on learning profile aims to tailor instruction following the preferred method of learning for each student, taking into account factors including learning styles, intelligence, preferences, gender, culture, and situation (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). As a result, differentiated instruction aids teachers in giving students a variety of possibilities to inspire successful learning.

It is essential to reduce the tendency of a one-size-fits-all approach to deal with the needs of diverse learners. It is difficult for teachers to instruct a diverse group of students using only one method. To satisfy the various learning needs, interests, readiness, and talents of the learners, teachers must employ multiple teaching methods. In light of students' abilities, requirements, and preferred learning styles, it focuses on flexibility in terms of both material and method (Levy, 2008). Similarly, teachers who differentiate teaching, according to Demos and Foshay (2009), recognize that every learner is distinct and has a unique set of preferences and learning styles. As every learner is distinct and has a different learning style and preference, teachers need to employ a range of instructional techniques to satisfy each student's needs. This is because no two learners learn languages in the same way. Tomlinson (2001) contended that every learner's potential for learning is to be fully realized through differentiated instruction. The background, areas of interest, levels, and skills of the students must therefore be known by the teachers.

In the context of Nepal, every classroom has a variety of unique individuals, making it difficult to instruct each learner using a single method. Thus, when teachers take into account differences and diversity in students' readiness levels, learning profiles, and interests, learning is at its best (Tomlinson, 2005). Unfortunately, the Nepalese context for DI is not adequately examined. It would be important to understand the various facets of diversity in English language classrooms.

At present, schools and colleges throughout the nation are shifting the medium of instruction to English from Nepali. Students with a wider variety of requirements are present in today's classrooms (Tomlinson, 2005). In Nepal, as I have experienced rote learning, memorization, grammar translation, and drilling methods are commonly used in language classes. These rigid, regulated, and time-bound educational strategies are also prevalent. Little emphasis has been placed on teaching students to think critically and to be conscious in banking education (Freire, 1999). DI can address the need and interests of the students. Despite having such profits from the

practice of DI in instruction and learning language, many teachers, in the context of Nepal, do not use differentiated instruction rather, they use the same instruction. The students in today's classrooms have a wider diversity of interests, readiness levels, and learning preferences (Tomlinson, 2014). Although the 2015 Constitution of Nepal mentions addressing concerns of diversity, its use in practice has not yet been demonstrated. There aren't many studies done in our setting, so academic research is needed in Nepal.

In the context of Nepal, there are diverse learners in English language classrooms. The biggest differences are each individual's performance, personality, and gender. Not every learner learns at the same rate. The way a learner learns the English language is also influenced by their gender role in Nepali society. According to this, learners' personality features, such as their introversion or extroversion, play key roles in their English language learning. Consequently, it is important to explore these various facets of English language teaching and learning in Nepal. This study focuses on how teachers view the diversity of their students and how they meet those students' needs through differentiated instruction. This study aimed to explore learners' diversity in the English language classroom in secondary schools in Nepal. For the study, I formulated the following research questions.

1. What types of learners' diversity exist in English language classrooms?
2. How do teachers address learners' diversities?

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism believes that social interaction actively constructs knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) asserted that cognitive growth first occurs on a social level before it may take place within an individual. Before knowledge is internalized, people engage with their environment and other people to make sense of others and construct knowledge on such a social level that allows learners to interact with circumstances (Roth, 2000). According to social constructivism, social interaction is the key to learning since it allows for the most fruitful and successful learning between students and teachers. Since language is used for communication and meaning negotiation, it encourages engagement, sharing, and conversation, which is fundamental to language learning. As a result, learners' interaction with different people improves learning. Similarly, the idea behind social constructivism is to encourage students to cooperate and work together so that they can create knowledge. Thus, individual learners experience makes meaningful learning when they participate in social activities like interaction and teamwork (Kim, 2001). Also, social constructivism assists in creating learning communities in the classroom where each student has the chance to freely express their thoughts and experiences with their peers. So, it is crucial to consider the learners' cultural background when planning lessons since these factors have an impact on the information and truth that learners construct, discover, and ultimately come to understand.

The idea of social constructivism facilitates teachers in planning lessons based on their students' needs and interests so that every learner has more opportunities to engage with others through group work, pair work, etc. As a result, learning only promotes a variety of developmental processes when students connect with the people around them and work together with their classmates (Vygotsky, 1978). Collaboration with one another while completing tasks in class is the only way for people to interact socially. In light of each student's performance, personality, and gender, teachers can tailor their instruction to meet their needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study only deals with learners' diversity based on academic performance, personality and gender. Different learners in the classroom have diverse needs, interests, and learning abilities. Some are very intelligent and some are weak. Some learners learn very quickly, some learn slowly, and some learn on average. While those who learn quickly merely require guidance, those who learn slowly require consistent effort and care. The students who are neither the top nor the last ranker are considered average learners. They always occupy the middle. Learners might be quick, slow, or average depending on how well they retain information.

The personalities of students vary, thus teachers in English language classrooms must deal with those students. Although there is a lot of literature on the subject of student diversity in English classes, there are still a lot of other aspects that need to be looked into. Gibson (2005) conducted a study on how differentiated instruction meets the needs of diverse learners. This study showed that both students and parents had a positive perception of DI and that teachers saw students' needs as challenges rather than disruptions in teaching.

In the same way, Stavroula (2011) conducted research to examine the effectiveness of DI as it relates to quality and equality as well as student achievement in mixed-ability classes. This study concluded that DI boosted the learning process, improved learners' achievements and was found feasible, effective, and necessary to promote quality and equity. Likewise, Burkett (2013) researched teachers' perceptions of DI and its influence on instructional practice to explore the teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction through their lived experiences. The teachers found the application of DI very effective to address the learners' diversity. They considered DI innovative in the sense that it justifies the learning rights of every child depending on their interests, needs, and desires. Regarding this, Bogle (2014) researched teachers' perceptions of classroom diversity. This study revealed that the teachers had an understanding of DI but they could not apply it regularly because of a shortage of time, resources, and training.

In this context, Dhital's (2014) study on practices of Differentiated Instruction showed that there were many hindering factors of DI less awareness of education actors, /sufficient instructional materials, lack of administrative support, /adequate time for planning, the large size of the class, learner friendly classroom, evaluation system, and influence of traditional teaching-learning activities, centrally designed curriculum and teachers' professionalism. In the same way, Rai (2018) studied learners' diversity in English language classrooms. She adopted the interpretative research paradigm to interpret and analyze the collected information. She found that the theory of inclusive education was very worthwhile for the study. She explored that the theory of inclusive education contemplates generating an equal and positive learning atmosphere for every child. Likewise, Joshi's (2019) study found learners are of different needs, interests, and learning speeds and these differences can be addressed by constructing a learning encouraging environment and providing tasks as per their learning speed the learning differences

As highlighted in the literature the current study and relevant recent papers from Nepal and elsewhere determine the research gap. In the context of the globe, the nature of diversity is different in English language classrooms; however, it has not been addressed in the available research studies. I could not find any specific study conducted on exploring differentiated instruction and its interrelationship. I found the theoretical and contextual gap therefore; this study tries to address the gap in the current literature.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I adopted interpretive inquiry as my research method to explore learners' diversity in the English language classroom. Things are observed in their natural contexts during qualitative research, and phenomena are interpreted in light of the significance that different people attach to them (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Interviews and observations were employed as research techniques. Patton (2002) asserted interviews are preferable to observations because they can provide information about people's experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge, as opposed to observations, which can only provide information about people's activities, behaviours, and the full range of interpersonal interactions and organizational processes that are a part of their experience. Observation involves carefully observing and analyzing participants' behaviours in a naturalistic situation (Cowie, 2009). As a result, I went for classroom observation and gathered the data by observing the activities that took place in the classes. Similarly, Robson highlighted the importance of observation, what people did may differ from; what they said observations provide reality (as cited in Cohen et al., 2007). In other words, the interview is a strategy for gathering information that provides a variety of ways for examining people's perspectives and experiences (Richards, 2009). Thus, to understand the teachers' views or experiences regarding learners' diversity in terms of performance, personality, and gender and way of addressing their needs, I formally had a series of interview sessions with the teachers. Understanding the meanings, intentions, and uses people assign to their actions and relationships with others is a key component of the interpretive investigation. Smith (2008) stated that the interpretive inquiry was suitable because it used context, the participants' experiences, and subjective interpretations. One public school was selected in Rupandehi for this study because it had a wide range of students to collect the required data. Also, I wanted to explore the diversity of learners' abilities, genders, and personalities. So, I spent a lot of time in the field observing the classes and interviewing the participants.

I had three rounds of conversations to know the actual scenario of the situation. Also, I had an informal talk with the teacher which helped me learn more about their professional and personal experiences, as well as their attitudes and behaviour toward the diversity of students in the English language classroom in terms of their abilities, personalities, and gender. To help the students feel at ease, I spoke with them informally and told them about my own experiences. To protect my research's privacy and the confidentiality of participants, each interview session was conducted inside the school premises. Similarly, to ensure the accuracy of information generation each interview was recorded on a mobile phone because it was not possible to write down everything. Finally, I transcribed the interviews and document the written format of the interview. I read many times thoroughly and made themes based on similarities and differences. To maintain ethical issues I took informed consent and used pseudonyms to keep the identity of participants secret.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, Learners' diversity existed in English language classrooms has been discussed, interpreted and analyzed under three headings such as classroom performance-based diversity, gender-based and learners' personality-based diversity.

Classroom Performance-based Diversity

Based on the classroom performance, there are fast, slow, and average learners in every class. Fast learners are those learners whose learning speed is more than their peers. In this regard,

Burden (2010) stated students are considered gifted and talented if their performance levels are significantly higher than those of students their own age. Regarding this, Krishna stated,

> *There were fast, average and slow learners in my class. To address their needs, I used different teaching styles and methods such as problem-solving activities, group work, pair work, and individual work creating contexts and giving immediate feedback. I also got good learners to help the weak ones and encourage them to search and involve in group discussions.*

Krishna believed that learners were of diverse abilities in terms of their performance such as fast, slow, and average learners. A single method could not address the learners' needs and interests especially slow and average learners as well as teaching-learning cannot be fruitful. Therefore, he used multiple techniques to teach and address the needs of those learners assigning problem-solving activities, group work, pair work, and individual work and creating contexts and giving immediate feedback.

Krishna's experience was consistent with Weselby (2017). He stated that every person has a different learning style, requirements, interests, and talents, therefore no two students would understand a subject in the same way or at the same level. Deepak stated, "*When the weak learners do not know the answer, I provide them proper guidance and support so that they can be motivated in learning. However, when I scold them in front of their friends, they feel humiliated and shame.*" To promote slow and weak learners, Deepak gave them more time to complete the task, proper guidance and support which motivated and encouraged them towards learning. Krishna mentioned, *"I encourage my pupils to work in groups and pair more and more so that slow and average learners can benefit from them and increase their learning capacity. I support them and act following their requirements and abilities."*

Krishna's view indicated that he tried to involve his students in interaction so that they could learn from each other. However, when I observed his real class, I found that teachers did not treat slow, average and fast learners equally. He did not give equal priority to all; as a result, weak learners were a bit neglected. They did not get proper guidance, love, and care from the teachers. It showed that there was a gap between teachers' beliefs and practices. The learning capacity of each learner differs from subject to subject as well as from learner to learner. Therefore, they would not learn at the same pace. Hence, for slow or weak learners, special guidance and support are required because they did not learn easily what they had been taught. That is why struggling students typically have short attention spans, making it challenging for them to learn from textbooks and other instructional resources created for the majority of students (Burden, as cited in Cevallos, 2017). While observing the class, I found the teacher encouraging the fast learners and asking more questions for the talented ones than the weak ones. The teacher frequently scolded the weaker ones so they felt uneasy. This indicated that without differentiating instruction, the learners who are slow and weak remain weaker. Also, learners feel humiliated and dominated when teachers scolded them in front of others.

Then I asked one of the student participants, how he would feel when the teacher scolded or punished them in the class. Deepak responded, "*When the teacher scolds or gives us punishment in class, we feel insecure so we don't like to talk to anyone.*" He replied in a depressed voice. When learners would feel insecure in the class it meant they did not have feelings of belongingness that made them excluded from the class. In this line, Teacher participant, Krishna pointed out,

> *I encourage my students to interact more and more so that slow and average learners can also improve their learning capacity. I advocate for and employ learner-centered teaching strategies and offer feedback right away. Rewarding behaviour can also*

increase a person's potential for learning. I make an effort to comprehend each person's psychology and adapt my actions to suit their requirements and capabilities.

The above evidence revealed dealing with diverse learners in the class was one of the challenging jobs. However, Krishna tried to address their needs by studying them closely and giving them more time to interact with each other. Likewise, he also said that giving immediate feedback and rewards would boost up learning capacity of slow and average learners. Since each student in his class is unique and learns differently, they all need individualized attention in the classroom to develop at their rate. Some learners quickly grasp the lesson, while others require more time to comprehend and practice.

Gender-based Diversity

How students learn may vary by gender. For instance, although female learners learn better from verbal-linguistic activities, male learners prefer hands-on learning and enjoy action and physical engagement. Yet, female students prefer working both independently and together (Gurian & Stevens, 2010). Learning styles differ depending on gender, with male students favouring action, physical activity, and hands-on learning.

Gender discrimination in the classroom affects their learning. Deepak stated, "*I usually scold and sometimes give physical punishment to my male students but I neither scold nor punish the female students.*" Deepak's view explored that he did not treat his students equally. While observing the class, I also found teachers scolding boys when they did not complete the given tasks.

It proved that there was gender discrimination between boys and girls and the talented and weak ones in the class. Boys were dominated by the teachers more than girls. Teachers selectively asked questions to the talented learners. While giving feedback teachers encouraged the talented learners and scolded the weaker ones for being weak. There were some girls very talented but hesitated to speak but the teacher encouraged and forced them to speak whereas there were some very shy boys but the teacher never encouraged them to speak. In this regard, Sax (2005) stated that a gender-friendly classroom does not mean giving preference to one gender over another. He believed that differentiated instruction may be beneficial in addressing the performance-based diversity of the learners, particularly those who were slow and weak since a single approach would not do so.

Learners' Personality-based Diversity

Some learners were very shy and they did not speak until and unless teachers asked them to speak. So, they were less interactive and they were very shy even if they were good learners. I also asked the teacher, why some learners were very shy and less interactive while others are friendly and interactive. In response to this question the teacher responded, "*In my class, extroverted students usually take part in interaction with their friends and teacher whereas introvert students don't speak and hesitate to ask any questions and make discussions with their friends and teachers.*"

In his experience, shy students hated speaking with their friends and teachers. His experience is in harmony with Abali (2006). He claimed that extrovert learners are more sociable, engaged and interested in external events and seem to be motivated by other people nearby, whereas introverts are likely to suffer a strong sense of isolation and hesitation in interacting and expressing what they have in their mind with others. Deepak asserted,

I categorized English language learners at secondary levels in terms of their academic performance. Some learners were fast learners whereas some other learners were slow learners and quite a many were average. I consider their interests, skills, and learning profile when designing lessons and assignments.

This categorization was based on the academic performance of these learners in previous tests and their participation in learning activities in the classroom. Slow learners are also normal learners but they are inactive in comparison to their peers hence they need extra guidance and support to complete the tasks whereas average learners are neither excellent rankers nor poor rankers they are always in middle. He claimed when creating courses and assignments, he took into account their interests, skills, and learning profiles. Another student participant named Milan stated,

When the teacher gives us a variety of tasks to complete and invites us to work in pairs or groups, I am more stimulated in the learning process and learn more effectively. When we work in a group, we have the opportunity to learn by sharing ideas.

From the above expression of Milan, it is clear that Milan preferred to work in a group because while working in a group he would feel secure and stimulated and gets the opportunity to learn by exchanging information. The personality of the learner has a significant impact on how they learn. Therefore, extrovert learners learn best when they collaborate with a friend and acquire knowledge by doing something for themselves rather than by observing or listening to others, whereas introvert learners learn best when they can find quiet workspaces and have enough time to think about, revise, and improve their work (Pritchard, 2009).

Fast learners learn the lesson and topics at a faster rate. The teacher selectively asked questions for the fast learners and more wait time was given for them. While giving feedback also the teacher encouraged the good learners and scolded the weak ones. Through the class observation of extended periods and my series of conversations with the teacher and the learners, I understood that gender role is crucial in learning English. For example, the stereotypical sense of gender in our society such as the idea that a female learner is considered good if she speaks less and remains introverted has an impact on the learning process. This makes them better in written form than in spoken. Female learners got less punishment from the teacher for the same offence compared to the boys. I found that gender also affected learning.

While observing class, I found girl learners instantly asking questions to the teacher than the boys. Boys were less active in the classroom performance. They often got punishment such as asking to stand in front of the class for a whole period, twisting their ears, beating with their hands, and pulling their ears if they did not complete the tasks that is assigned to them. In addition, more excuses were given to the girls and they were not punished by the teacher. Some girls were very talented but they were introverts however the teacher encouraged and forced them to speak when they hesitated to speak whereas the teacher did not encourage the boys who were passive, weak and shy. The classroom observations also guided me to explore the personality traits of the learners. The study found that the personality traits such as extrovert and introvert have a direct impact on learning a language.

Another student, Geeta claimed, "*My teacher does not provide a choice of assignments to do but always asks questions to talented and extrovert students. He usually does not ask questions to introvert students.*" Her view made it clear that her teacher did not offer her a selection of assignments to do. Extrovert learners are frank and open and interact more with others whereas introvert learners are quiet, shy, and less interactive. If the teacher gave more opportunities in the

class even slow, weak, shy and introverted learners also would have improved their learning. However, the teacher did not do so and he only encouraged and provided many chances for those who were fast and extrovert learners. Instructors pay close attention to the students who are talented and self-assured, but they frequently ignore the weaker students in favour of providing them with general instruction and care. Therefore, when teaching English to a mixed group of learners in a classroom, teachers should adopt several strategies that can provide equal opportunity for all students.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study aimed to explore learners' diversity in English language classrooms. The study shows classroom performance-based diversity, gender-based and personality-based diversity in the class. DI could support learners to learn the language better as their needs, interests and abilities are addressed. In reality, teachers frequently ignore the shy, slow, poor and academically underachieving learners in the class. Such learners become weaker as a result of their frequent inability to keep up with classroom activities. The study also reveals that teachers frequently design classroom activities for talented and extroverted learners. The majority of the time, such an environment makes slow and poor learners feel humiliated and demotivated. It indicates that a one-size-fits-everyone approach cannot address the issues of diversity in teaching language in class. The theory of social constructivism developed by Vygotsky asserts that a learner's cognitive development first takes place socially, and then it develops individually. Due to their varied social contexts, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic heritages, they do not all grow cognitively in the same way.

Furthermore, the study can contribute to English teachers drawing useful insights to design classroom activities handling the issues of diversity in the classroom. It creates a healthy and inclusive classroom climate with a variety of diversified learning activities. Since it is a qualitative study, its findings cannot be generalized throughout the country. Therefore, more studies in this area are required that can explore the issues of diversity in the English classroom with a larger sample population and area of study.

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