Sociocultural Influence on English Language Skills of Secondary Students in Public Schools of Bardiya District in Nepal

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to identify sociocultural factors influencing English language skills and to provide suggestions for improving them by examining the sociocultural aspects affecting public secondary students' narratives in Nepal, thereby understanding their realities, challenges, and opportunities in learning English. In this study, three students from a public secondary school in the Bardiya district, Nepal, were selected as research participants. The participants were interviewed in person using an open-ended questionnaire to elicit research information. The study contains the leading research questions: i. What are the influences of the sociocultural environment on English language skills, and ii. How have secondary students perceived sociocultural factors in terms of learning English language skills? This qualitative study selected research participants following a purposive, non-random sampling procedure. The major findings of this study suggest that complex, interconnected sociocultural factors influence the English language skills of Nepalese public secondary students. Sociocultural factors, including family and peer support, significantly affect English language skills. It stresses the requirement of supportive and competent English teachers. Similarly, it suggests that the success of Nepalese public secondary students in acquiring English skills largely relies on a complex interplay among family, friends, community, education system, and media to address challenges.

Keywords: sociocultural factors, English language skills, secondary students, learning outcomes

Introduction

The English language is widely known as a universal language and a medium of communication in different fields. As a result, the English language has international importance and recognition in this rapidly growing world. Despite the myriad advancements in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the use of English is increasing each day in the 21st century, and it has also helped maintain multiple realities of globalization. The quality of English proficiency among secondary students in public schools in Nepal is comparatively poor, despite the fact that English is implemented as a compulsory subject from grade one through the bachelor's level by the Nepalese government. This scenario presents a challenge for students who aim to pursue higher education and a professional career that requires proficiency in English. Therefore, the present study aims to address the lack of knowledge about the sociocultural factors affecting secondary students' English skills in public schools in Nepal. The influence of family, friends, community, cultural norms and practices, the learning environment at school, and media, etc., is referred to as the sociocultural influence on students' learning of English skills and their outcomes. According to previous studies, sociocultural factors play an imperative role in shaping students' attitudes, motivation, beliefs, and strategies for acquiring English skills. Similarly, exposure, access to English resources, and opportunities tend to affect students' English status. In this context, the study aims to identify sociocultural factors influencing English language skills and to provide recommendations for improving the English skills of secondary students in public schools in Nepal, based on the findings of the present study.

Crystal (2011) opines that English has become a lingua franca due to its historical and political dominance. Furthermore, it is imperative to understand the influence and relationship between sociocultural factors and English language skills among secondary students in public schools. That means this study also aims to explore the intertwined associations among the social, cultural, and academic atmosphere that shape and develop students' English language skills. Moreover, English carries significant social prestige in Nepali society. Being deemed an indicator of modernity, upward mobility, and access to better-paying jobs, proficiency in English fuels student motivation and shapes family ambitions (Sharma, 2018). Parents often consider English fluency "an investment in their children's future" (Ghimire, 2017, p. 5), reinforcing the perception of English as a key to success. This depicts that the knowledge and significance of English is regarded as the standard norm in society by almost everyone. As a result, the acquisition of English in

schools and the curriculum is also emphasized. Going further, Nepal's public schools implement English as a compulsory subject. However, limited pedagogical resources, underqualified teachers, and large class sizes pose challenges to providing effective English language instruction (Bhatta, 2015). The focus on grammar and rote learning often hinders the development of communicative skills, further impacting students' fluency and comprehension (Maharjan, 2019). Meanwhile, when we talk about public schools, their conditions paint a different picture of a robust academic atmosphere, especially in the case of the English language. Similarly, students from urban, affluent backgrounds often have access to private English-medium schools, supplemental coaching classes, and exposure to international media, propelling them ahead in English proficiency (Chaudhary, 2019). Conversely, their rural counterparts in public schools face disadvantages due to limited resources, exposure to English, and often, mother-tongue-based instruction in lower grades (Rijal, 2017). All these scenarios also depict a struggling landscape for learning English despite different teaching and learning activities in public schools in Nepal. At the same time, culture also influences students' expectations for achieving English skills. According to Shrestha (2018), learning English can sometimes lead to a disconnect from one's own cultural roots. Students, particularly in rural areas, may face a dilemma: embracing English while fearing a loss of cultural identity. This tension could negatively impact their motivation and engagement in language learning. Therefore, understanding cultural aspects along with the social environment is of high importance. On the other hand, technological advancement has also contributed more in recent times. In this regard, the role of media and technology in acquiring English skills has become deeply integrated into students' learning these days. In addition, Karki (2016) remarks that the proliferation of English-language media, including movies, music, and social media, offers informal exposure and can motivate students to learn the language. However, unequal access to technology and varying levels of digital literacy further exacerbate existing socio-economic disparities in English proficiency.

In Nepal, the sociocultural influence of English language skills has led to differences in mastering the English language. Therefore, this study aims to understand the influences of other societal pursuits, academic inequalities, cultural norms and values, and technological accessibility, among others, that are essential for developing better English language teaching and learning techniques that address distinct circumstances and needs. Only then can public schools genuinely serve as open platforms for English language acquisition, enabling students from diverse backgrounds to succeed to their full potential.

Rationale of the Study

Regarding the present study, my own background as a public-school student in Nepal fuelled my interest in this research area. Even now, I often reflect on how my English proficiency might have been different had I received greater exposure and opportunities during my school years. This feeling intensified after entering the teaching profession at a private boarding school, where I witnessed significantly better English performance among students. This disparity prompted me to compare my own public-school experience with the seemingly privileged learning environment I encountered at the private school. Furthermore, research suggests that public schools in Nepal generally have more qualified English teachers than their private counterparts, particularly in terms of licensing and higher qualifications (Sharma & Khanal, 2020). This trend is further corroborated by the stringent teacher selection process implemented by the Teacher Service Commission (TSC) (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2019). Besides, Gurung (2024) also notes that students' learning outcomes in public schools do not seem to reflect this trend. This apparent disconnect between teacher qualifications and student performance, even after rigorous examinations such as the Teacher Service Commission (TSC) selection process (Ministry of Education, Nepal, 2022), sparked my interest in exploring the sociocultural factors that may influence English language skills among public school students in Nepal. Therefore, such vivid disconnection in public schools between the students' performance and teachers' qualifications prompted my inquiry to explore the influence of sociocultural factors in English language skills in this study. This further fuelled my curiosity to uncover those underlying sociocultural aspects that may be restricting secondary students' English language learning in the Nepalese context.

Research Questions

The present study carries the following two research questions as the major ones:

i. What are the influences of sociocultural factors on English language skills, and

ii. How do sociocultural factors, such as family, friends, teachers, community, and media, influence the English language skills of secondary students in public schools of Nepal?

Literature Review

The influence of sociocultural factors on the acquisition of English language skills results in students' varying learning outcomes. The literature review in this section aims to explore and analyse existing studies on the influence of sociocultural factors on the learning of English language skills. By examining diverse viewpoints and findings in this area, this

review aims to identify gaps in the current research and highlight areas that warrant further exploration.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this literature review is the sociocultural theory of language learning, developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978). This theory regards language learning as a "social and cultural phenomenon" (P.31) that takes place through "interaction and collaborations" (P.32) with others in meaningful contexts. It further details language learning as a cognitive process, along with social and cultural aspects, which are negotiated through tools such as "language, symbols, artifacts, and activities" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 33). Not only these, but this theory also holds that language learning is affected by the "identity, motivation, beliefs, and attitudes" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 151) of learners. Because it explains that such aspects of students are shaped by their "sociocultural background and experiences" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 29) within their homes, society, or schools.

Therefore, given the nature of the current study, the sociocultural theory of language learning has multiple applications for understanding and improving secondary students' English language skills in public schools in Nepal. With respect to this theory, it holds that students' English language skills are determined by their personal capabilities, qualities, and the quantity of their social and cultural interactions with people who use English. Examples of such communication include family, friends, relatives, the community, teachers, and the media. Similarly, the theory holds that the formal instruction students receive in the classroom also influences their English language skills. Moreover, the other "informal and incidental learning" (Skehan, 1998, p. 7) learners encounter in their everyday lives also impacts English skills. Furthermore, Vygotsky's theory implies that the "linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic aspects" (Scollon, 2001, p. 25) along with the "norms, values, and expectations" (Duranti, 2004, p. 19) of different speech communities influence the acquisition of English language skills. In the same way, the theory also emphasizes students' knowledge and competence (Bruner, 1990, p. 33), reflecting their self-awareness and ability to act and interact in different contexts. Moving further, this theory holds that students' English language skills are also matters of identity and agency (Wertsch, 1991, p. 21).

Empirical Review

In this section, I have reviewed research related to my present study. Here, the fundamental background of the associated issues and past studies has been mentioned in the empirical reviews.

Basnet, S., & Bhatta, G. (2021) conducted research on English Language Learning in Nepalese Public Schools: A Sociolinguistic Analysis. This study examined the sociolinguistic factors influencing English language learning in Nepalese public schools. Based on their study, the researchers extended the findings of limited resources for English language learning, the dominant use of the Nepali language in classrooms, and the shortage of qualified English teachers. Because of these, they share that the students have encountered hindrances in their learning. Furthermore, their research underscored the importance of prioritizing students' local languages. Besides, they further showed the importance of cultural panorama in processing effective English language teaching methods. Similarly, Shrestha, M. (2019) conducted a study on The Role of English in Nepalese Society and its Impact on Educational Language Policy. The findings of this article highlighted the difficult role of the English language in Nepali society, which affected policy-making in Education. The researcher also asserted that the English language has been a measure of social status and a means of gaining access to different opportunities. In the study, the dominant role of English has also been spotlighted, showing the marginalization of Nepali and other indigenous languages. The study suggested a more balanced and inclusive language policy in Nepal so that the nation's educational system could recognize the value of Nepali alongside English in the context of globalization.

Another study was administered by Bista, K. R., & Adhikari, S. (2016). Their study focused on the impact of English-medium instruction on Nepalese Secondary Students' Academic Achievement. The study examined the influence of English-medium instruction (EMI) on secondary students' academic achievement in public schools in Nepal. The findings of this study suggested that the students performed better in English language tests in EMI schools than in other subjects. This study showed that students from poor, marginalized, and disadvantaged environments faced difficulties in assimilating into EMI due to limited proficiency in English.

Furthermore, Sharma, S. (2015) conducted a study on The Sociocultural Challenges of Teaching and Learning English in Rural Nepal. This study talked about the sociocultural challenges of teaching and learning in rural Nepal. This article highlighted different aspects, such as limited access to resources, a lack of opportunities to practise English in informal settings, and cultural distinctions between teachers and students. Through this study, the author suggested techniques to address such challenges by making English learning smoother, more accessible, and more contextual for students in rural settings. In the same

way, Gurung, T., Bista, K. R., & Gautam, S. (2020) operated another study on The Impact of Socioeconomic and Sociocultural Factors on Nepalese Secondary Students' English Language Learning Motivation. In this study, the authors identified the influence of socioeconomic and sociocultural factors on English language learning motivation among secondary students in Nepal. The findings of this article showed that students from higher socioeconomic environments and greater exposure to English, even in informal settings, had greater motivation to learn English. Besides, the study also revealed that the priority given to education and English for a better lifestyle and a professional career influences students' motivation and cultural values.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of language learning regards language learning as a social and cultural phenomenon. With respect to the theory, the interactions and collaborations that students make with others in meaningful contexts will shape their English language skills in this study. Similarly, other contributing factors to language acquisition include personal abilities, social and cultural interactions, formal instruction, and informal learning. Furthermore, English language skills are also influenced by the linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, and social values and norms of speech communities. In this way, Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the role of identity, sociocultural background, motivation, beliefs, attitudes, etc. In shaping students' language learning. Moving further, the empirical reviews by Basnet & Bhatta (2021) and Shrestha (2019) focus on sociolinguistic elements as the influence on English language learning in public secondary schools in Nepal. The studies explored challenges such as limited resources, a lack of qualified English teachers, and the dominance of Nepali, which obstruct students' learning. Moreover, Bista & Adhikari (2016) highlighted the influence of English Medium Instruction (EMI) on the students' achievement, affecting their educational attainment, and also showed the hindrances of the students coming from marginalized backgrounds. In addition, Sharma (2015) shared the sociocultural challenges in rural Nepal. This study also revealed problems related to limited resources and cultural differences between teachers and students. Besides, the study by Gurung, Bista, and Gautam (2020) provided information on socioeconomic and sociocultural factors as influential elements in students' English language learning motivation. They also highlighted the role of exposure opportunities and cultural values in their study.

The reviews above provide a broader exploration of the sociocultural impact on the English language skills of different students in a Nepalese context. However, there exists a notable gap in synthesizing the different aspects and elements identified in the existing

literature. The theoretical frame is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. It provides insights into the social and cultural factors influencing students' language learning. On the other hand, empirical reviews have underscored specific restrictions faced by students in Nepalese settings. However, after reviewing both literature reviews, a need for more integrated analysis, synthesizing theoretical and empirical studies, is evident. It shows the necessity of a nuanced understanding of how sociocultural elements influence, interact, and are showcased in the English language learning process. Moreover, the current literature lacks a cohesive outline of a broader sociocultural theoretical lens for the special difficulties identified in public secondary schools in Nepal. Therefore, the gap identified in this study suggests that the researcher conduct an in-depth study of specific sociocultural elements affecting the English language skills of public secondary students in Nepal. The studies above have mentioned the overall influencing factors such as socioeconomic position, rural background, and classroom realities. However, there is still a strong need to explore the influence of sociocultural factors on the English language skills of secondary school students in Nepal. Especially emphasizing particular cultural practices, beliefs, and attitudes that influence students' language acquisition. That is why the present study aims to compensate for these gaps.

Method

The present study followed a qualitative research approach. It used a semi-structured questionnaire through in-person interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) in the physical presence at the school to obtain insights, lived experiences, realities, and beliefs on influencing sociocultural factors in acquiring English skills of secondary students studying in three distinct academic streams (Education, Management, and Law) at a public secondary school in Bardiya district. Three student participants were selected using a purposive sampling procedure, one from each program. The principal of the school granted permission, along with the collaborative discussion with the subject teacher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). and facilitated the required arrangements for data collection. The three subsequent interviews were recorded on a mobile phone to elicit in-depth sharing of the perspectives and lived experiences of secondary students on the influence of sociocultural factors on mastering English skills. Similarly, the data analysis procedure involved transcribing the recorded interviews into themes and their codifications (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The themes were developed using thematic analysis. In addition, based on the information obtained from the

interviews reviewed and analysed, related to the sociocultural influence on English language skills (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Findings and Discussion

While exploring the complex interconnectedness that shapes secondary students' English language skills in public schools in Nepal, this study delves into the varied sociocultural impacts. As this study was guided by two research questions, it sought to examine the broad impacts of sociocultural factors and the specific influences of these factors, based on themes developed from the research participants' data. As this section incorporates a discussion of findings, it has synthesized the following key themes that have been developed from the collected data:

Family Influence

The influence of family has been found to be one of the most important factors in students' acquisition of English skills (Khanal, 2019). The student "A" shared her experience. "I talk with my sister and brother occasionally to practice English speaking, but my mother cannot understand, while my father is more supportive." As I analysed the data from all three participants, their home environments seemed to contribute to their English learning. Similarly, students B and C shared challenging conditions in their homes, as the former had a paralysed mother and a drunkard father, and the latter attempted to learn English on his own. Because the student "C" was raised by a single mother who was also illiterate, the participants, on the whole, seemed to be affected by their home environment. The learners' family environments affected their English skills (Khanal, 2019). Therefore, the family environment needs to be supportive of providing the necessary inputs and resources for acquiring English language skills (Cummins, 2017).

Peer and friend influence

Another influencing factor was the influence of peers and friends in school. The student "A" shared her experience: "You are showing off your broken English with us." Student B shared, 'I have desires to learn English, but due to a lack of academic environment, a sick mother, a drunkard father, and a poor financial condition, I am unable to learn English. I have very few friends to share my problems with and learn English collaboratively' (Sharma, 2018). On the other hand, student C practiced and communicated just the normal English chunks with friends while cycling home to school and vice versa. He further expressed that the roles of peers and friends need to be supportive to keep us motivated at first. Similarly, their sharing of ideas should also match in the case of learning English. The

student C said that he got support and help to learn English (Sharma, 2018). Ultimately, as the participants shared, practising English speaking with their friends led to better understanding of English reading and writing in the classroom. This depicts that peers and friends with positive ideologies contribute to and motivate learning English (Sharma, 2018).

Teacher Influence

Student C expressed the supportive views that helped him learn English when he did not understand difficult words. He expressed that sometimes he asked questions and curiosities to the teacher while studying English. He added, "I search the answers on Google when I am unsatisfied with his answers" (Poudel, 2017). On the other hand, Student A faced problems with the English teacher's pronunciation and accents. She shared, "We face problems in understanding his pronunciation; he is teaching us only this year. Another English teacher taught us last year." But the students B shared that the teacher's role was to be supportive whenever they came to class with homework (Poudel, 2017). The participants emphasized the need for a competent teacher to help them improve their proficiency in English. According to them, their teacher was the main, authentic, and reliable source for learning English. Especially, the teacher was the main source for learning pronunciation and getting input on their English listening skills. Therefore, their shared focus was on having a comprehensible teacher who taught them English in a friendly manner. In this regard, the findings stress a need for competent and engaging teachers who employ diverse instructional approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2017).

Community Influence

Based on analysis of participants' interview data, their experiences showed that unsupported and irrelevant communities were ineffective in helping them acquire English skills. The student C shared, "I don't have other supportive people to practice speaking English. Only a few people in my village understand English-related content. No partners are available to assist or collaborate to learn English in the village." Similarly, student A stated, "I get support from my sister and brother at home, but the other people in the community are more discouraging in English. They say there is no use in studying. You will go abroad to earn money later." While student B expressed, "Many people in my village go to India to earn money; other people of the village tell and encourage me to study English, but I have not received any particular help other than this." The participants primarily seemed to focus on speaking during their interviews for English learning. Student B also asked whether any organizations or INGOs could occasionally visit the community and offer special courses or

campaigns to help them improve proficiency in all four English skills. Therefore, the findings suggest adapting community-based initiatives and interventions for enhancing English language acquisition (Benson, 2014). In this way, the sharing of all participants demonstrates that students in public secondary schools in Nepal face a challenging situation in obtaining a supportive environment or context to learn English skills.

Media Influence

After analysing the participants' data, the media has been found to influence their English learning. The participants reported that teachers occasionally shared additional videos that supported learning English. Moreover, they took a written test once a month to reflect on their learning of English by writing in their own words. Student A said, "I use a dictionary. I watch English movies and some lyrical songs to practice English occasionally. Sometimes I also use Google, but do not copy everything from there." The student C shared, "I mostly use dictionaries to search for unknown words. I watch summaries on YouTube. Sometimes I also copy from Google to write homework. I usually search on Google and YouTube for the unknown subject matter." Student B shared, "Our teacher shows us videos on the projector sometimes, but mainly he teaches us the English course only." He further expressed that the teacher called us many times, even a day before our examination, to finish the course. Similarly, student A expressed similar viewpoints about the teacher's English teaching to them. After the data analysis of three participants, the media, like YouTube, Google, Dictionary, Movies, and Songs, were the main means for getting support in their English learning with their individual attempts. But this trend of using those sites was more related to getting help for course-related subject matters. But they watched movies and listened to songs that contributed to their English learning to some extent. Therefore, the information obtained from the participant suggests that media integration and individual learning strategies have the potential to enhance English proficiency (Warschauer & Fotos, 2010).

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study suggests that complex yet interconnected sociocultural factors influence the English language skills of Nepalese public secondary students. The support of family and peers plays a crucial role in motivating students. Especially, it facilitates learning, while an unsupported home and community atmosphere creates noticeable hurdles in students' English learning. Moreover, teachers and their teaching approaches directly influence the development of knowledge and English skills in secondary

students. This shows that English teachers need to be competent and supportive of secondary students' English learning. In addition, the present study also highlights the limited role of the community and the need for additional or external initiatives to address the challenges of acquiring English skills for Nepalese public secondary students. Furthermore, teachers occasionally use media, but students primarily use it for personal learning outside formal contexts. Therefore, the conclusion of this study suggests developing a holistic approach to address students' challenges in acquiring English language skills. Especially the family, friends, community, educational system, and media should be considered critically to harness the potential of these resources in achieving English skills for Nepalese secondary students in public schools.

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