

# Challenges Faced by Teachers in Teaching English at Basic Level

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## **Abstract**

*Teaching English as a foreign language can be a challenging job in non-English speaking countries like Nepal, particularly when English is taught as a subject. In consideration of English as an international language in Nepal, this study explored the challenges faced by English language teachers in teaching English at basic level public school education in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City of Kailali district of Nepal. Using a phenomenological design under qualitative research, the study included four English language teachers selected through non-random, purposive sampling technique. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect information from the participants, and then the data were analysed and discussed thematically in line with the research questions. As the results revealed, the key challenge concerned large class sizes, particularly when the students came from poor economic family backgrounds, those who also had a poor English language base with low vocabulary achievement. Managing larger classes, recruiting more teachers having English language proficiency and managing infrastructures along with extending class hour can be its implications. Exposing students to English forms the base.*

**Keywords:** English language teaching, large class sizes, English base, multilingual classrooms, English medium

## **Introduction**

English has been taught as a foreign language in Nepal since the 1950s. Teachers who teach English at the basic level are non-English speaking teachers and the learners come from various indigenous language backgrounds. In Nepal, the current school education system includes from Kindergarten to grade 12. As stated in National Education Policy (NEP, 2019), the school education has been divided into four levels: Early Childhood Education (pre-primary level), Primary Education (grades 1 to 5),

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Basic Education (grades 1 to 8), and Secondary Education (grades 9 to 12). English teachers who teach at the basic level face certain problems in the context of Nepal. In this context, this study aims at exploring the challenges and problems in English language teaching and learning faced by the English language teachers at Basic Level in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City of Kaialai district of Far Western Province, Nepal.

As a global language, English has now become the language of education, business, science and technology, conferences, academics, entertainment, and politics. Due to this fact, the demand for English language teaching and learning in ‘expanding-circle’ (Kachru, 1997) countries like Nepal, China, and Thailand has increased dramatically in the last few years and will continue to do so. However, very little has been known about English language teaching in these ‘expanding-circle’ countries (Floris, 2013). This gap directs the study of exploring the challenges faced by the teachers of English in teaching English in their classes in those countries.

English, being an international language, English language teaching (ELT) has become an important part of teaching in Nepal. Almost all sorts of people from all backgrounds want to learn English. Its acquisition can guarantee the availability of opportunities to employment, travelling, higher education, and even better life (Crystal, 2003). Students come from different language backgrounds and abilities to the class. English is the foreign language to almost all students. English learners in Nepal do not have enough exposure to ELT opportunities. Rather, it is exercised in a limited form in academic, technical and public affairs in the nation (Bista, 2011).

Teaching English as a foreign language is a challenging task in developing countries in general and in Nepal in particular (Akbari, 2015). English has been included in the curriculum of Nepal’s schools and universities and there is a considerable attention to this language in the society. Due to the shortcomings of the formal ELT programmes at schools to fulfill the practical needs of the learners on the one hand, and the need for learning English to satisfy the communicative needs on the other, an increasing number of ELT institutes have been emerged throughout the country.

English is the most dominant language in the world and has been growing as a global language (Crystal, 2003). As Aryal, Short, Fan and Kember (2016) remark, “The use and importance of ELT is increasing worldwide, in developed as well as developing countries” (p.142). As Brown (2018) opines, “The teaching of English is a feature of policies and practices in

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education systems around the world” (p.15). English is given much importance in the education system in non-English speaking countries.

English has been made a compulsory subject from School level to Bachelor’s level in the curriculum of Nepal. Private schools teach all the content subjects in English. However, in public schools, English is taught as a subject. Recently, some public schools have adopted the English medium of instruction (EMI) in their schools considering that learning English is a key skill for students to develop in order to access further education, training and employment (Brown, 2018; Saud, 2020; Sah and Li, 2018). English has become inevitable for academic, communicative and practical purposes. It is the only language to gain knowledge in the field of science and technology, commerce, law, religion, and so on. Many books, newspapers, magazines and journals are also being published in English throughout the world including Nepal. Many institutions in cities teach the English language to those who want to learn it for their academic, professional or career development purposes. All these facts prove the importance and growth of English in Nepal. As such, English as an international lingua franca is extremely important in non-English speaking countries like Nepal.

Despite all these facts, being Nepal a multi-ethnic and multilingual country, teachers face problems in the classroom. In this context, this study was taken up for investigating the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English at basic level school education. Since English language teachers face certain problems and challenges in teaching English at the basic level in the context of government schools, this study is quite significant for policy makers, language planners, administrators and teachers.

The main aim of this study was to explore the challenges faced by the basic level teachers in teaching English in their classrooms of public school education in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, Dhangadhi, Kailali. The study also explored how the English teachers addressed the challenges they faced.

### **Research questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by the basic level English teachers in teaching English in their classrooms?
2. How do they perceive such challenges they encounter in teaching English at basic level?

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3. How do they address such challenges faced locally at the basic level?

### **Literature review**

The literature on teaching English to young learners has identified a number of pressing challenges. One is that English is often introduced as a compulsory subject at primary school without due consideration of who will teach it. In some countries, a severe shortage of trained primary school teachers of English is reported (Hu, 2005; Nunan, 2003). Teachers may therefore find themselves teaching English either without adequate training in teaching young learners in general or in teaching English to young learners in particular. The situation is especially acute in poor or rural areas (Copland, Garton, and Burns, 2014).

Many studies have been conducted on the challenges faced by teachers while teaching English. Rasheed, Zeeshan and Zaidi (2017) explored the challenges faced by the secondary school female teachers while teaching the English language in their multilingual classrooms in Pakistan. They found that teaching English language in a multilingual context is an enormous challenge for the English teachers due to linguistic diversity in the classrooms. Similarly, Behroozi and Amoozegar (2013) investigated obstacles that teachers encounter in teaching English language in secondary schools in Iran. The findings showed that apart from external limitations such as insufficient teaching times and limited teaching resources, English language teachers are disappointed by their low proficiency in speaking English and using technology during teaching times. Moreover, teachers showed willingness to receive training in how to plan and perform their teaching more effective and motivate students' engagement in class activity; also teachers seek effective approach for teaching English. Similarly, Anjaneyulu (2015) studied the problems faced by the teachers in teaching English language in government schools in Telangana State, India. He found that the problems were related to school facilities, instructional resources and background of the teachers.

Recognising teaching English as an international language (EIL) in Nepal (Saud, 2020) as a theoretical framework, this study investigated the challenges faced by the English teachers in teaching English at the basic level public school education in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City of Kailali district in Far Western Province, Nepal, using a phenomenological design of qualitative research method. As English has been taken as a foreign language

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in Nepal (Shrestha, 1983; Bista, 2011; Saud, 2020), it has been taught as a compulsory subject at schools.

In Nepal, little research has been carried out in this particular field. No researcher (to my knowledge) has tried to explore the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English at basic level in Nepal. Therefore, the present study aimed at exploring the challenges faced by the English language teachers at basic level in the context of Nepal, especially in Dhangadhi Sub-metropolitan City of Kailali district in Far Western Province.

### **Methods and procedures**

This section includes the methods and procedures employed for the study, discussing under the headings of ‘research design’, ‘study context and participants’, ‘data collection tool,’ ‘data collection and analysis procedure.’

#### ***Research design***

This study followed a phenomenological qualitative research method to examine information regarding the perceived challenges faced by basic level English language teachers while teaching English to learners in their local contexts. Phenomenology in qualitative research focuses on the lived experiences of individuals of the phenomenon, event or situation (Creswell, 2013). A phenomenological study explores the experiences of the people of a phenomenon and thus helps to understand the meanings of their lived experiences. In this sense, this study captured the phenomenon of English language teachers’ experiences regarding the challenges of teaching English at basic level.

#### ***Study context and participants***

This study was conducted in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, a multilingual city with people from various parts of the country. Originally, this place was the habitat of the ethnic Rana people. But with urbanization, various groups of people have been settling down in this city which is also the headquarters of Kailali district. The schools from where I selected the participants were multilingual government-aided schools.

For this study, four teachers were selected through the non-random purposive sampling technique and they were interviewed following the semi-structured interview method. Out of the four English teachers, two were female teachers and two male teachers, ranging in age from 30 to 50. They

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were all native speakers of Nepali language, teaching English at the basic level government multilingual schools. The teachers participating in the study were informed about the aims before, after and during the research process. The participants were affirmed to be volunteers in the study.

The participants' names have been kept secret. They have been coded as T1, T2, T3 and T4. T1 (female) had the experience of teaching English for seven years and had master's degree. T2 (male) had the experience of more than 16 years and had bachelor's degree. T3 (female) experienced the teaching for only three years and had bachelor's degree. T4 (male) had long experience, more than 26 years, of teaching English mainly at the primary level (up to grade 5 only).

### ***Data collection tool***

The data collection instrument included the semi-structured interviews. The background questions were asked to interrogate the English teachers about their qualification, age and teaching experiences. The participants were asked to express their experiences regarding the challenges of teaching English at the basic level, and how they addressed such problems.

### ***Data collection and analysis procedures***

In data collection, the informants were asked to express their experiences regarding the challenges of teaching English at the basic level. All the information was collected by the researcher. Then the interviews were transcribed, coded, analysed and interpreted in line with the research questions.

## **Results and discussion**

After the transcription and coding of the information collected from the participant teachers, the three themes have been developed based on the research questions. So the following section deals with these themes with discussion.

### ***Challenges of teaching English***

English teachers teaching at the basic level in Nepalese public schools face various challenges and problems, especially in the multilingual classrooms where students come from various economic, linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds. Such challenges can be varied in relation to the students,

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teachers, and the facilities in the school or in the locality. The challenges in teaching English faced by the teachers at the basic level where this study was conducted are mostly related to large class sizes, including poor base, low exposure, preferences of Nepali medium of instruction and reluctant to participate in activities as informed by the participants.

The classes at the basic level in public schools are very crowded, with more than sixty students in one class. Because of the crowded classes, English teachers are unable to pay attention to all the students and conduct interactive activities. In this regard, T1 says, “Teaching English in Nepal in government schools is too difficult. ... we have large classes. In my school also, there is a large size class...in one class, there are 76 students. I face classroom management challenge.” As she says, there were 76 students in one class. It is the condition of government schools in Nepal where one teacher has to teach English with crowded classes. It is then creating problems for the teachers in classroom management and conduct student centred activities. All participants claimed the large class size as the main problem as T3 confessed that there were 80 students in her class. To quote T2, “There are more than 60 students in one class, we can’t care individually, we can’t check homework.” The large class size is creating the English teachers problem to teach focusing the students and caring them all. Thus, large class size is a challenging problem for the English teachers at basic level.

T2 and T2 remarked that the students had a poor English language base. To quote T2, “Students have no base, no vocabulary power and weak grammar knowledge.” Similarly, T3 viewed, “Students have no word power; they don’t understand if we teach only in English. If we only teach in English, they say, we don’t like this teacher. Weak don’t understand, there is lack of base.” Thus, two teachers complained that students lack vocabulary power which is in line with Songbatumis' (2017) study. The main reason is low exposure of English in the class as T3 confessed that if they taught only in English, students would not understand and complain that they didn’t understand. Because of this, teachers had to teach in Nepali language.

The participants also expressed that students did not understand if they taught only in English. T2 remarked that she used 75% English and 25% Nepali during the 45 minute class time. As T3 confessed if she taught only in English, students would say they didn’t like her, so she was forced to speak in Nepali.

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T4 viewed that since class time was only 45 minute, it was not sufficient to develop English for the students. Again within that time they had to speak in Nepali as students preferred to be taught in Nepali rather than in English. According to T1, “They take English as a burden...only one subject... so they only target how to pass the exam”. In public schools, students have to learn all subjects in the national official language that is Nepali and they become habituated to it. So they feel difficulty in English. In this regard, as T4 viewed, “only one subject to learn in English, others in Nepali. So students are habitual in Nepali, but not in English as only 45 minute class time.” What we can infer from these expressions is that the 45 minute class time is not sufficient to do student centred different activities in the class. Students have preferences of the Nepali medium instruction over English as they have to study only one English as a subject.

Most of the students do not want to take part in learning activities like interaction, discussion, asking question, and writing activities. As T1 expressed “Students remain silent, they...don’t react in our questions also...they don’t want to involve in activities...they don’t want to speak. They don’t want to write also.” It seems students are passive learners; they depend on teacher’s spoon-feeding. This is what Freire (1970) calls banking model of education. T3 said, “Rana-Tharu students are there...they ask in Nepali but only few, only talented [ones] ask, others silent”. Thus, students remain silent in the class and do not ask questions, nor do they involve in the interactive activities. As a result, they become poor in English.

Almost all the students come from their own home language backgrounds other than English. They use their own mother tongues at their home and school, they speak Nepali as a lingua franca. So they do not practise English either at home or in the school premise. Moreover, they prefer Nepali medium in the class. Then it creates them problem for learning English effectively. In this context, T2 said, “All speak Nepali though they have their own mother tongues.” T4 also expressed similar views, “different mother tongue students come to school. At home they practise their language, but at school, they can’t understand English...practice is less.” Students are unwilling to use English because of which they cannot understand English well in the class. As effective learning depends on much more practise that the behaviourists believe, lack of practising English by the students is a problem for them to learn better.

T1 also expressed that there were not sufficient materials to teach English effectively, and T2 had a similar view, while T3 complained that there were



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no sufficient teachers, so there were large classes to be taught by only a few teachers. T4 said that he only used the textbook as the material. It means English teachers do not usually use any other materials to teach English.

In this way, English teachers have been facing challenges while teaching English. In fact, a large class size is beyond teachers' responsibility. This problem needs to be addressed by the government by managing more classes and employing or hiring more teachers. Other problems can be addressed by the teachers themselves and it depends on their artistry of teaching and other classroom techniques.

### ***Participants' perceptions on the challenges***

Varying perceptions had been held by the participants regarding the challenges in teaching English at the basic level by the teachers. As T1 confessed, "All the teachers in Nepal face such problems, I think," while T2 viewed that it was due to the lack of preparation from all sides. T4 opined that there should be more period time as only 45 minute was not sufficient. He further viewed that, for more exposure, other subjects such as Maths and Science should also be taught in English.

T3 viewed that teachers need to tackle the problems by providing extra classes for English. T1 focused on using the multi-media for teaching English and that there should be no use of Nepali in the class so that the students could be habituated in English and take interest in it. It is because even Nepali is the second language for most of the students who come from various ethnic language backgrounds. So, it would not make any difference whether to teach in English or Nepali for them (my observation).

Almost all the four participants viewed the challenges of teaching English at the basic level in public schools as normal. Most of the students in those public schools come from poor economic-background families as rich and middle class children go to private English medium schools. Large class sizes, poor infrastructures and poor management of the public schools along with insufficient manpower create problems in effective teaching of English. So, the participants were hopeful that all these would be changed and the condition of the government-aided public schools would be improved.

### ***Addressing the challenges***

The challenges of teaching English can be addressed to some extent by adopting certain strategies. The participants viewed that they were adopting

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certain ways to address the challenges. Below is what the four participants expressed:

T1: I try to speak in very simple English...also explain in Nepali...use materials myself.

T2: I focus on basic things, extra coaching classes to form foundation for ...weak ones, lack proficiency in English...some students are better in learning.

T3: I take extra class... I ask talented to help weak ones....rotation class in seating...allstudents are equal for teachers.

T4: Creative work should be focused...textbook should be revised soon. There are old, not sufficient exercises in the book. Technology should be used to motivate students, to encourage them. I have experienced so.

Thus, the participants have their own ways of addressing the challenges in teaching English. As students have poor English, speaking in simple English can be one of the ways that T1 used to do. Moreover, the use of the teaching learning materials like videos is a better solution.

Not all students are weak in learning English. Some students can be very talented and creative even if they come from the poor economic background. This is what T2 said, and T3 expressed that she used to ask the talented ones to help the weak students in the class. It can be considered as an effective strategy as the learners can learn better from their peers in a friendly and hesitation-free way. T2 and T3, as they expressed, used to take extra classes focusing on the basic things in which the learners had difficulties in learning English.

Arranging extra classes for the weak ones can also be a better way to make all the learners learn better and improve their learning.

T4 expressed his opinion about the students' English. As he opined, focus should be paid to creative work and the textbooks need to be revised timely by adding varieties of exercises relevant and interesting to the learners so that they can be motivated to do the task and exercises given in the books. Using technology in teaching English can be motivating to the students as T4 viewed.

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### **Conclusion**

Teaching English as a foreign language, particularly as a subject, in Nepal can be a challenging job. This study investigated the challenges faced by the English teachers in teaching English at the basic level public school education in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City of Kailali district. I discussed the results under three themes including the challenges of teaching English, perceptions on the challenges and addressing the challenges in line with the research questions. As the study has shown, the central challenge concerns large class sizes, particularly when the students come from the families with poor economic background in the public schools. Large class size creates various problems including lack of individual care, checking homework, involving students in interaction, etc. Though such challenges and problems can be normal due to large class sizes and the weak base of the learners, it is necessary that English teachers use different strategies to tackle them. It depends on the teacher's artistry and will to address the challenges of teaching English more effectively.

This study has some wider implications for the concerned authorities. The implications are associated with managing larger classes with smaller ones in size in terms of the number of students, recruiting more teachers having English language proficiency and managing infrastructures along with extending class time as 45 minute is a very short time to teach English. Exposing students to English through English speaking environment in the class with peers and teachers along with the use of audio and audio-video materials can be another implication to form their English base and make their vocabulary power stronger and rich.

This study has the limitation that it was only conducted in one of the cities in Nepal taking the views from only four English language teachers teaching at basic level. As the study has shown, students have a very weak English base. Exploring the causes of weak base of the students at basic level can be a further direction of future research.

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