

Exploring Discrimination Experienced by Secondary Level Students in ELT Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at examining the experiences of discrimination in English language classrooms from the perspective of secondary level students. The research adopted a narrative inquiry approach, conducting individual face-to-face interviews with participants to explore their personal experiences and observations regarding discrimination. We selected four secondary level students from two government schools in the Kathmandu district purposively. We used semi-structured interviews allowing for open-ended questions and follow-up probes to gain deeper insights into participants' responses. The analysis of the collected data followed a thematic approach. The researchers carefully reviewed the transcribed interview recordings to identify recurring patterns, themes, and key insights related to discrimination in English language classrooms. The findings revealed instances of unequal treatment by teachers, including favoritism based on gender, academic performance, and subjective factors. Participants expressed how such unequal treatment affected their motivation and engagement in the English language classroom. Discrimination based on physical appearance, skin colour, and linguistic competence was also highlighted, demonstrating the negative impact on students' self-esteem and sense of belonging. Additionally, social hierarchies among peers contributed to exclusion and marginalization, affecting students from less privileged backgrounds.

To minimize discrimination in ELT classrooms, the study suggests fostering an inclusive and supportive environment where all students are treated equally and valued for their individual strengths and contributions. Teacher training programs are recommended to promote cultural sensitivity, awareness of biases, and inclusive teaching practices. The importance of creating gender-inclusive curricula and encouraging positive gender socialization is emphasized. The research contributes to the understanding of discrimination in English classrooms by centering on students' perspectives. The insights gained can inform educational policies and practices aimed at reducing discrimination and promoting equity in English language teaching classrooms.

Keywords: Discrimination, academic achievement, English Language Teaching, secondary-level students, narrative inquiry

Introduction

Wikipedia defines discrimination as an act of unfairly or discriminatorily distinguishing individuals based on the groups, classes, or other categories to which they belong or are perceived to belong, such as race, gender, age, or sexual orientation. Discrimination is generally experienced in various contexts and through multiple perspectives. Discrimination in education has been attributed to institutional or individual actions, attitudes and ideologies, or procedures that systematically discriminate against students from diverse racial/ethnic groups (Mickelson, 2003 as cited in Gracia 2020).

To foster pleasant and rewarding learning experiences for every student, classrooms should ideally operate an

inclusive, safe spaces (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that discrimination still occurs in classrooms and has a negative impact on students' educational experiences, particularly those who come from marginalized groups (Howard, 2001). The study focuses on secondary level English language teaching (ELT) classrooms with the goal of examining the nuanced dynamics of prejudice and how it profoundly affects students' educational experiences.

Discrimination within classrooms can manifest in various forms, such as biases based on gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or language proficiency (Gorski & Pothini, 2018). It can occur through overt acts of prejudice or through more subtle and implicit behaviors, creating an atmosphere that continues unequal treatment and restricts opportunities for some students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Understanding the nuances and lived experiences of discrimination within ELT classrooms is crucial for developing effective strategies to address these issues and promote equitable educational practices.

The focus of this study lies in employing narrative inquiry as a research methodology, allowing for a deep exploration of the experiences and perspectives of secondary-level students who have encountered discrimination in their ELT classrooms (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry enables researchers to capture the complex interplay of individual stories and lived experiences, providing valuable insights into the ways in which discrimination unfolds and affects students' engagement, self-esteem, and learning outcomes (Riessman, 2008). The purpose of the study is to explore the discrimination in English language classrooms faced by secondary-level students. The following research questions were set to meet the objectives of the study:

1. What are the discriminatory forms prevalent in English language classrooms?
2. How do peers and teachers discriminate against students in English language classrooms?

Literature Review

In the realm of education, the concept of equality has often been viewed as a matter of distributing educational resources more fairly (Lynch, 2000 as cited in Lynch & Baker, 2005). The term "equity" emerged in 1990 when many countries began combining the principles of equity and quality in education. This movement has gained momentum since 2004, with numerous nations joining the cause (Moreno-Guerrero, 2020). Similarly, the Education for All initiative in Nepal began as a project in 2004 and was completed in 2009 (World Bank Group [WBG], 2016). Currently, the government of Nepal wants to ensure equitable access to excellent education for all Nepalese school-aged children by 2030 in accordance with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, Nepal, 2023). Since the adoption of Nepal's first constitution in 1948, every child has had the right to a free and compulsory education devoid of bias. Article 31 of the 2015 constitution expressly calls for equal access to education for everyone emphasizing the obligation of the state to offer free and compulsory primary and secondary education.

These goals are further reinforced in the National Education Act of 2019, which defines "basic education" as schooling from grades one through eight, and "secondary education" as grades nine through twelve. Despite the constitutional provisions and educational policies seemingly guaranteeing equal access to education, the reality on the ground tells a different story.

Critical pedagogy, developed by theorists like Paulo Freire, offers valuable theoretical insights to the study on discrimination in ELT classrooms. It highlights the importance of unveiling power dynamics and oppressive structures, encouraging educators to critically examine and challenge discriminatory practices. This perspective helps analyze the unequal treatment and power dynamics between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves. By understanding the underlying systems of power, critical pedagogy provides a pathway for challenging and transforming discriminatory practices.

The encouragement of critical consciousness among students is one of the major contributions of critical pedagogy. It challenges students to examine their own experiences, challenge prevailing narratives, and acquire a critical awareness of societal concerns. Critical pedagogy supports students in identifying and analysing discriminatory practices in the context of the study. Students who are equipped with critical thinking abilities are better able to fight against prejudice and promote equality and social justice in their learning settings. The value of conversation and practice as transformational tools for social change is also emphasized by critical pedagogy. It promotes honest communication between students and teachers, enabling the sharing of knowledge and experiences. In the study, this approach facilitates communication and collaboration, enabling students and teachers to collectively work towards creating inclusive and equitable classroom environments. By engaging in dialogue, they can ad-

dress discrimination and promote social change.

In addition, critical pedagogy promotes learners' empowerment and agency, encouraging their active engagement in the learning process and their function as social change agents. It motivates students to take charge of their education, develop critical thinking skills, and actively engage in their communities. According to the research, critical pedagogy helps educator empower students by respecting their opinions, including them in decision-making and instilling in them a sense of accountability for fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. By incorporating critical pedagogy, the study on discrimination in ELT classrooms gains a theoretical framework to understand the complexities of power, oppression, and social justice in education. It provides guidance for analysing the underlying structures and dynamics that contribute to discrimination and offers practical approaches for addressing these issues and promoting inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Despite constitutional guarantees of equal access to education, discrimination is still prevalent in English language classrooms. Students experience discrimination from their teachers and peers in various ways. Research conducted by Khanal (2018) highlights how discrimination in school attendance contributes to gender inequality in Nepal.

Inequality persists despite an increase in female's participation rates in all grade levels. The study shows that boys are more likely to attend private schools than girls, which is a serious kind of discrimination. In addition, Neupane's research (2022) examines gender-based injustices experienced by female teachers and girls in the context of Nepal, such as psychological and emotional abuse, sexual harassment, unequal roles and responsibilities, discrimination in hiring, wage disparities, disrespect, gender bias in grading, and the absence of gender-inclusive textbooks and curriculum. These findings show the need for further initiatives to promote equality and eradicate discrimination in English language classes by illuminating the persistence of discriminatory practices within educational settings. Contrary to the findings in the study by Shahi (2017), which focused on Dalit students in the Kalikot district, discrimination was not observed in the English language classroom. The study reported that the situation for Dalit students in ELT classrooms is positive and improving. However, policy-makers should still formulate policies that encourage stakeholders to further increase Dalit students' access to education in English language classrooms.

On an international scale, discrimination in English language classes has been documented. Marlon et al. (2016) found that oppressive perspectives, whether from teachers or peers, can significantly impact academic performance. Unfair attitudes lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and fear, which hinder class participation, the quality of relationships, the assimilation of new ideas and information, and motivation towards the language and the course. As a result, students exhibit low engagement in teaching and learning activities, leading to poor academic achievements.

Furthermore, Tamimi Sa'd and Eames (2021) conducted a study that revealed instances where instructors openly oppressed students, engaging in behaviors such as mocking, neglecting to involve them in class participation, and unfairly evaluating students and their accomplishments. These discriminatory practices contribute to a negative learning environment and hinder students' academic success.

Discrimination in the class is not just fostered by professors and teachers, but it can also result from fellow students' perceptions and attitudes. According to Rojas et al. (2016), when students receive criticism and judgement from their peers, their academic performance suffers dramatically. High achieving students, in particular, tend to cast judgement on lower-achieving students' communication abilities, emphasizing on grammatical faults and pronunciation (Rojas et al., 2016; as cited in Matson, 2019).

The classroom serves as a microcosm of society, bringing students from all socio-economic and educational backgrounds together. Students' diverse experiences and view points have a significant influence on the classroom atmosphere. According to Cummins (1988, as cited in Matson, 2019), power dynamics and status relations between minority and majority groups greatly influence academic performance within schools.

To determine the level of discrimination in education, particularly in English language classes, a significant number of studies have been conducted. These studies have shown a number of facets of prejudice, including unequal access to educational opportunities, gender-based disparities, oppressive viewpoints held by classmates and teachers, and the effects on academic achievement. Studies that especially look at the unfair treatment encountered by secondary-level students within the Nepalese ELT context are conspicuously lacking, nonetheless. Our study, which explores the experiences and narratives of secondary-level students in ELT courses, tries to fulfil

this gap by addressing it. Through this study, we hope to learn more about the unfair practices and disparities that exist in these context.

Research Method

The researchers employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore the discrimination experienced by secondary level students in ELT classrooms. We collected information from four secondary level English language teachers teaching in two different government schools in Kathmandu. To get information, we used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and follow-up probes (Jones et al., 2022). We obtained informed consent from the participants and recorded the interviews with their permission (Smith et al., 2021). We used purposive sampling to select four participants who had first hand experience of discrimination in ELT classroom (Brown & Johnson, 2020). The sample size was determined based on data saturation, ensuring that an adequate number of participants were included in the study (Jones et al., 2022).

During the interviews, we encouraged participants to share their personal experiences and observations regarding discrimination in the ELT classroom. The researchers transcribed the interview recordings verbatim and analyzed the data thematically, identifying recurring patterns, themes, and key insights related to discrimination (Smith et al., 2021). Coding and categorization techniques were applied to organize the data and identify common themes across the participants' narratives (Brown & Johnson, 2020).

Analysis and Findings

The collected data were analyzed thematically. The researcher transcribed the interview recordings and carefully reviewed the data to identify recurring patterns, themes, and key insights related to discrimination in English language classrooms. Coding and categorization techniques were employed to organize the data and identify common themes across the participants' responses.

Unequal Treatment by Teachers

Favoritism: Participants reported instances where teachers showed favoritism towards certain students, often based on gender, academic performance, or other subjective factors. When teachers give priority to the needs of good-looking students, boys/men, and non-disabled students they create barriers to students of color, girls and women, and students with disabilities (Soika,2020). This unequal treatment affected the students' motivation and engagement in the English language classroom. Student 4 expressed,

during class discussions, teachers often focus their attention on students sitting in the front rows, neglecting those at the back. Additionally, teachers may not ask questions or check the homework of all students, which creates an unequal learning environment. These practices can leave some students feeling overlooked and marginalized.

Gender-based discrimination: The data revealed that some teachers tend to favor girls over boys in ELT classrooms. Girls are given more opportunities to speak, take leadership roles, and receive attention, while boys are often overlooked or ignored. This unequal treatment based on gender perpetuates a discriminatory environment, where boys may feel marginalized and their participation hindered. To address this issue, it is essential for teachers to promote equal opportunities and fair treatment for all students, regardless of their gender.

Discrimination on physical appearance and colour complexion: Students are treated unfairly due to their physical appearance and skin colour. Student 1 shared *When I tried to share this problem with teachers, they couldn't understand our feelings and advised us to let it go. During group activities, the teacher doesn't listen to my voice and always favors the "good-looking" students.*

Lack of Recognition: Participants felt that their strengths and achievements were often overlooked or overshadowed by their mistakes. Teachers' focus on errors without acknowledging positive contributions hindered the students' confidence and self-esteem. Student 3 shared

When the teacher consistently focuses on my mistakes and doesn't acknowledge my efforts or achievements, it can be demotivating. It feels like my good work goes unnoticed, and the emphasis is solely on what I have done wrong. This can hinder my confidence and enthusiasm in learning English. Students are discriminated in terms of their competency and intelligence in English Language class. Similarly, student 2 expressed,

'Yes, I have experienced one incident where a teacher asked me to do the work which I was not able to do, while another student who was better than me on that subject was allowed to avoid it. It frustrated me to learn that I was being singled out and given additional work, which made me feel bored, demotivated and disengaged.'

The theme of unequal treatment by teachers, as identified in the study, aligns with critical pedagogy theory by

highlighting the power dynamics and inequalities present within educational contexts. Critical pedagogy emphasizes the importance of critically examining the social, cultural, and political contexts of education to identify and challenge oppressive practices (Freire, 1970). In the case of the study, the unequal treatment reported by participants, such as favoritism based on gender, physical appearance, and academic performance, reflects the power imbalances and biases that critical pedagogy seeks to address.

The findings related to favoritism based on subjective factors, gender-based discrimination, discrimination based on physical appearance and skin color, and lack of recognition for students' strengths and achievements resonate with critical pedagogy's focus on unveiling power dynamics and promoting social justice. These discriminatory practices perpetuate unequal treatment and hinder students' motivation, engagement, confidence, and self-esteem, which are crucial aspects of their learning experiences. Critical pedagogy recognizes the detrimental impact of such practices on marginalized students and emphasizes the need for equal opportunities and fair treatment for all learners (Freire, 1970).

Moreover, the findings in the study are consistent with previous research supporting critical pedagogy. Studies by Soika (2020) and Rojas et al. (2016) highlight the barriers created by discrimination based on factors such as gender, physical appearance, and skin color. These studies align with critical pedagogy's aim to challenge oppressive structures and promote social justice. Research by Khanal (2018), Neupane (2022), and Marlon et al. (2016) further emphasize the unequal treatment experienced by girls, the negative impact of appearance-based bias and colorism, and the consequences of differential treatment based on perceived ability, all of which align with critical pedagogy's concerns about equity and inclusivity in education.

Peer Interactions and Social Dynamics

Social Hierarchies: Participants observed social hierarchies within the classroom, where students with higher social status or economic privilege received preferential treatment from their peers. This resulted in the exclusion and marginalization of students from less privileged backgrounds. Regarding the unequal treatment due to class hierarchy in the class, student 2 shared

When I bring money and give it to my friends, they treat me well and want to be friends with me. However, when I don't have money to give, they don't want to make friends with me anymore. This affects my interactions with them in the English classroom because they don't speak with me and don't offer any help. It creates a sense of isolation and makes it difficult for me to engage and receive support in my English studies.

Discrimination based on physical appearance and complexion: Participants shared experiences of discrimination, such as mocking, teasing, or exclusion based on physical appearance, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. These discriminatory behaviors created a hostile and unwelcoming environment in the English classroom.

Students belonging to marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds reported experiencing discrimination based on their skin color. Student 1 shared *'In the computer lab, students laughed at me because of my skin color. Even when I read while standing up, they would laugh at me. These incidents made me feel frustrated.* They described instances of differential treatment, biased assumptions about their abilities, and even ridicule or laughter. Additionally, social status was found to play a role in how students are treated in the ELT classrooms, with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds enjoying better friendships and social connections. In this regard, student 1 further shared that *when I asked a friend for money to buy a copy, she gave money to other friends and not to me.*

The theme of peer interactions and social dynamics identified in the study aligns with critical pedagogy principles by highlighting the social hierarchies, discrimination, and exclusion that occur within the classroom. Critical pedagogy seeks to unveil power dynamics and challenge oppressive structures, not only in teacher-student relationships but also in student-student interactions (Freire, 1970).

The findings of other studies are consistent with the theme of peer interactions and social dynamics identified in the study. Research on social hierarchies and discrimination based on socio-economic status supports the finding that students from higher social status or economic privilege receive preferential treatment from their peers, while those from less privileged backgrounds may face exclusion and marginalization (Freire, 1970). Similarly, discrimination based on physical appearance, complexion, and racial or ethnic backgrounds has been well-documented in the literature, with students experiencing ridicule, biased assumptions, and differential treatment (Rojas et al., 2016). These studies provide further evidence of the hostile and unwelcoming environments

that can emerge due to discriminatory behaviors and social hierarchies.

Ways to Minimize the Discrimination in ELT Classroom

The students experienced being discriminated by the teachers and peers in the ELT class and such unequal treatment impacted the academics of the suppressed students. Marlon et. Al(2016) discovered that academic performance is impacted by a wide range of oppressive perspectives, either by teachers or cohorts. Therefore it is crucial for teachers and school authorities to foster an inclusive and supportive environment where all students are treated equally and valued for their individual strengths and contributions. In the same vein, Neupane (2022) suggested the purpose of language instructing like ELT isn't just to foster citizens who are capable in language skills yet additionally to advance social skills so they can be dynamic agents of social change.

Peer discrimination can be minimized by teaching the students social values and norms. Student 2 suggested '*It's important for teachers to treat students equally and not favour certain individuals based on their abilities or other factors*'.

Student 3 shared, *the teachers and administration treat all students equally and do not physically harm or discriminate against them. However, I believe they could do more to create an inclusive learning environment. For example, giving equal opportunities for students to participate, encouraging and recognizing their strengths, and not favoring certain individuals over others.*

Student 4 suggested,

it is crucial for teachers to understand and empathize with students' feelings. Teachers should receive training and support in creating an inclusive and equitable classroom environment. It is essential to encourage open dialogue, where students can share their concerns and experiences without fear of judgement. Teachers should actively address instances of discrimination, promote respect and understanding among students and ensure that all voices are heard and value

Overall, the finding on ways to minimize discrimination in the ELT classroom is consistent with critical pedagogy theory and supported by previous research. Critical pedagogy emphasizes the need to challenge oppressive perspectives and behaviors, promote social justice, and create inclusive learning environments (Marlon et al., 2016; Neupane, 2022). The recommendations provided by the students align with these principles, highlighting the importance of treating all students equally, fostering empathy and understanding, and creating an inclusive and equitable classroom environment.

The finding is consistent with the study conducted by Marlon et al. (2016), which emphasizes the impact of oppressive perspectives on academic performance. It underscores the need to create an inclusive and supportive environment that values the diverse strengths and contributions of all students. Similarly, Neupane (2022) emphasizes the purpose of language instruction, such as ELT, in advancing social skills and empowering students to be agents of social change.

The recommendation to teach social values and norms to minimize peer discrimination aligns with critical pedagogy's emphasis on promoting positive social interactions and cultivating a sense of community among students (Neupane, 2022). By fostering empathy, respect, and understanding, teachers can help create a supportive environment where students value and appreciate one another.

The suggestion to give equal opportunities for participation and recognize individual strengths reflects the principles of equity and inclusivity in critical pedagogy (Marlon et al., 2016). Providing equal opportunities ensures that all students have a voice and feel included, while recognizing individual strengths fosters a positive learning environment where students' abilities and achievements are acknowledged and valued.

Lastly, the recommendation for teachers to understand and empathize with students' feelings and actively address instances of discrimination aligns with critical pedagogy's goal of creating a respectful and supportive learning environment (Marlon et al., 2016). Open dialogue and the promotion of respect and understanding among students can help create a safe space where students feel comfortable sharing their experiences and concerns.

Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight the presence of discrimination in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms at the secondary level. The narrative inquiry approach employed in this study provided valuable insights into the experiences of students who faced discrimination. The research revealed instances of unequal treatment

by teachers, including favouritism based on subjective factors, gender-based discrimination, discrimination based on physical appearance and colour complexion, and a lack of recognition for students' strengths and achievements.

The research also uncovered discriminatory peer interactions and social dynamics within the classroom. Social hierarchies, often based on economic privilege, resulted in the exclusion and marginalization of students from less privileged backgrounds. Discrimination based on linguistic competence, physical appearance, and skin colour further contributed to a hostile and unwelcoming environment for students.

To minimize discrimination in ELT classrooms, it is crucial for teachers and school authorities to foster inclusive and supportive environments where all students are treated equally and valued for their individual strengths and contributions. This can be achieved through promoting equal opportunities, recognizing students' achievements, and addressing instances of discrimination promptly. Peer discrimination can be reduced by teaching social values and norms that promote empathy, equality, and respect among students. The implementation of critical pedagogy, which aims to promote social justice and emancipation for all students, can also contribute to creating more equitable classroom environments.

Additionally, stakeholders and teachers should work towards gender-inclusive curricula and positive gender socialization to promote gender equality in schools. Providing training and support for teachers in creating inclusive classrooms and facilitating open dialogue where students can share their concerns and experiences without fear of judgement is essential.

Overall, these findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge on discrimination in education and emphasize the importance of interventions and inclusive teaching practices to address discrimination and promote equity in ELT classrooms.

This research contributes to the understanding of discrimination in the English classroom by centering on the experiences and perspectives of students. The findings highlight the presence of unequal treatment by teachers and the impact of peer interactions on students' experiences of discrimination. It underscores the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment that promotes equal opportunities for all students. It highlights the importance of creating inclusive and equitable learning environments where all students feel valued and respected, regardless of their gender, skin colour, or socio-economic background.

The research emphasizes the need for teacher training programs to promote cultural sensitivity, awareness of biases, and inclusive teaching practices. By addressing the issues of favoritism, lack of recognition, and discriminatory behavior, educators can work towards fostering a classroom environment that values diversity, promotes empathy, and encourages respectful interactions among

g students. The insights gained from this research can inform educational policies and practices aimed at reducing discrimination and promoting equity in English language teaching classrooms.

Since this is a small-scale study, the results can not be applicable in other contexts. Therefore, for greater applicability of the findings, a large scale study is needed including a large sample size of students. Teachers and administrators.

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