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Current Policies and Pedagogies of English Language Teacher Education: Unveiling Social Challenges

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Abstract

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This paper analyzes the current policies and pedagogies of English language teacher education, and the social inequalities associated with English language teaching. It also assesses the challenges of English language teachers to mitigate these social inequalities. It explores the roles and actions that English language teachers could perform to diminish these social inequalities. A review of the concerned literature and policy documents shows that the current policies and pedagogies of English language teacher education in Nepal have focused on the functional-communicative approach to English language teaching. However, the current social inequalities related to English language teaching are gender, class, caste or ethnic background and culture. The challenges for English language teachers are to address social justice and equity issues in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Thus, this study attempts to address social realities in English language teacher education so that it helps to reform current policies and practices. The role and actions of English language teachers should be directed to create critical consciousness.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, social challenges, social

justice, social inequalities, teacher education

Introduction

English language teacher education is a key element that influences learners' language development (Richards & Farrell, 2005). As there is the epistemological shift from a positivist, interpretive to a socio-cultural perspective in second language teacher education, there are changes in the scope and trends in second language teacher education. Johnson (2009) claims that second language (L2) teacher learning is socially negotiated and influenced by knowledge of self, student, subject matter, curricula and setting. Thus, the scope of second language teacher education seems to have passed from various stages such as training-focused, developmental, practical and socialization. Furthermore, it is essential to show the complex relationships of policies, pedagogies and social challenges embedded within English language teaching.

The complexities of policies and pedagogies can be manifested in the complex interplay between policy and practice. Education policies determine curriculum, evaluation and career

enhancement, and also guide teacher education (Johnson, 2006). On the other hand, teacher training pedagogies are also influenced by policies and practices (Borg, 2015). This interplay shows the need to analyze policies and pedagogies to comprehend social challenges in English language teacher education. In addition, the other challenges for English language teacher education are cultural, economic and political (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Furthermore, English language teaching and learning is also concerned with the issues of equity and justice (Kubota & Lin, 2009). Therefore, understanding social challenges with English language teaching is essential to mitigate social inequalities.

In this context, this research aims to examine the current policies and pedagogies of English language teacher education in Nepal critically so that it unveils social challenges within the education system. This study seeks to explain the complex dynamics between policies, pedagogies and social realities in English language teacher education in Nepal through extensive review of existing literature and policy documents. This research suggests transformative practices to diminish social inequalities in English language teaching.

Literature Review

This paper reviewed various literature found in multiple sources including Google Scholar and Research Gate. I have reviewed the literature related to the current policies and pedagogies of English language teacher education, social issues associated with English language teaching, challenges for English language teachers, and roles and actions of English language teachers. Finally, I have developed four themes guided by the research questions and presented the results of the study.

Methodology

This study aims to explain the complex interplay between policies, pedagogies and social issues in English language teacher education in Nepal through extensive review of existing literature and policy documents. I searched the relevant research articles and policy documents with the help of search engines such as Google Scholar and Google using the keywords ‘English language teacher education’, ‘English language teaching’, ‘pedagogy’, ‘social challenges’, ‘social inequalities’, and ‘critical pedagogy’. Most of the research articles were taken from journals and books. I also explored government agencies’ websites to find educational policies in English language teacher education. Relevant data and information were extracted from the research articles with the help of keywords. The findings of these articles were synthesized and analyzed under various themes related to the research topic.

Results and Discussion

Based on the literature review from various sources, I have analysed the results thematically.

Current Policies and Pedagogies of English Language Teacher Education

The current epistemological stand in second language teacher education considers second language learning a sociocultural activity. Much of second language education practice was dominated by an essentialist view of culture consisting of many imagined and problematic stereotypes (Franson & Holliday, 2009). To counter this, there has been a call for a decentred or locality-driven approach to explore cultural complexity and diversities (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). Two sets of experiences: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) have been practiced globally. TESOL is considered a generalized and international arena, whereas ESL is known as localized and context-specific. The juxtaposition of TESOL and ESL aims to reshape the traditional concepts of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, ‘power and identity’, and ‘inner and outer’ in this globalized world (Canagarajah, 2006). Phillipson (1992) expressed how the native-speaker teacher model worked

to serve and continue English colonization. Further, Holliday (2006) explored 'us'-'them' cultural politics which marginalized the so-called non-native speaker. Similarly, Kubota (2004) exposed how imagined stereotypes of the non-western 'Other' represented hidden racism in the TESOL. Cummins (2000) focused on the issues of language learning by bilingual children, the discourses of diversity, multiculturalism and bilingualism to address the concepts of inclusion and equity. Sociocultural theory has addressed various issues such as language, ethnicity, and identity to minority learners in second language contexts (Toohey, 2000). In short, English language education for minority ethnic learners is situated within the continuing ideological and political discussion that cannot be ignored in language teacher education. Critical approaches to language education focus on a commitment to social transformation, justice and equality.

In Nepal, English is taught as a compulsory subject from Grades 1 to 12, and English language curricula and pedagogy are shaped by the communicative approach to language learning (Sharma & Phyak, 2017). The principal aim of teaching the English language at primary school is to develop a "comprehensive communicative competence" on the part of learners and the major focus is on language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing along with confidence in "acceptable pronunciation and intonation" (Curriculum Development Centre, 2009). Similarly, the secondary English language curriculum aims to develop the confidence in learners for effective communication in speaking, listening, reading and writing so that they can actively participate in a global society (Curriculum Development Centre, 2014). In other words, the English language curriculum has focused on communicative approaches and grammatical structures that serve particular communicative purposes. To achieve these aims, the Ministry of Education disseminates a teacher professional development (TPD) program for in-service English teachers to improve their professional skills in English language teaching (Sharma & Phyak, 2017). The teacher professional development course is directed at changing school from a place of knowledge transmission to a knowledge generation space, and it focuses on the collaborative effort, communicative method, teaching language skills, vocabulary and grammar (Shrestha, 2012). Teacher professional development courses seem to have been directed to improve teachers' English proficiency and methodological skills to transform classrooms into a learning community. However, English language teaching in Nepal has suffered many problems such as less-trained teachers, large classroom sizes, inadequate audiovisual materials, libraries and laboratories after adopting the communicative approach (Aryal et al., 2016). Thus, there is a need to improve teacher professional development courses so that these courses include local context-specific strategies.

Social Issues Associated with English Language Teaching

Social inequalities associated with English language teaching are class, gender, caste or ethnicity, and culture. Hawkins and Norton (2009) said that globalization brought diversification in language classrooms as there were students from poverty, immigrants, refugees, and minority-language speakers in the class, and such learners were marginalized and denied equal opportunities for social and material resources. Hence, the language classes of today seem heterogeneous because of diversity. The issues of equality/inequalities or inclusion/exclusion seem to be pertinent as the nature of second language classes has become multilingual and multicultural.

In the context of Nepal, the problem of access and equity in school education is still regarded as a challenge since it is badly affected by social inequalities and disparities such as social class, gender, caste, ethnicity and regional background (Mathema, 2007). Similarly, Devkota (2018) argued that the main causes of social inequalities in Nepal were social, cultural, and economic forces. However, school policies and pedagogies have adopted the concept of inclusion for all kinds of school

children from different classes, castes, genders and ethnicities. In other words, English language teaching seems more problematic for learners from lower social strata and remote rural backgrounds not because of their deficiency but because of inequity.

Challenges for English Language Teachers

English language teachers seem to have faced the challenges created by the nexus of language, culture, power and identity while mitigating the inequalities prevalent in the social, economic, and cultural backdrop. They seem to be in a major position to address these inequalities because they serve most of the marginalized members of society and the nature of the English language can be empowering and marginalizing at the same time. Their role is considered as social mediators for shaping new views for diverse groups of learners negotiating their old belief systems, values and practices. Hawkins and Norton (2009) noted the challenges for critical language teachers related to dismantling harmful and oppressive relations between majority and minority speakers and cultural groups. Similarly, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) pointed out another challenge for language teachers they needed to be aware of issues concerning linguistic genocide. Language is considered not neutral but value-laden. Therefore, critical language teachers have to work with their students to deconstruct language, texts and discourses to find explicit and implicit messages behind them.

In the Nepali multilingual and multicultural context, Phyak (2016) observed that the English medium instruction policy created inequalities between the rich and the poor by badly affecting the children's access to academic content, and it also affected the policy of mother-tongue-based multilingual education mounting tensions between global and local ideologies. Similarly, Giri (2010) described that privileging Nepali and English has challenged ethnic cultures and languages. Thus, the recent liberal educational policy of the government of Nepal permitting both Nepali and English medium instruction and contradictory provisions of focusing on the local language and local curriculum can be considered a major challenge for English language teachers.

Roles and Actions of English Language Teachers

English language teachers have the roles and actions assigned to critical teachers to mitigate social inequalities. McDonald (2008) discussed the need to move from multicultural teacher education to social justice teacher education, the latter analyzed institutionalized and individual power differentials to promote teachers' role as a social activist. Hawkins and Norton (2009) suggested three practices to improve the actions of critical language teachers: critical awareness, critical self-reflection and critical pedagogy relations.

Critical awareness is the increasing consciousness of language teachers about power relations and their function in society. In her ethnographic study, Goldstein (2004) described tensions experienced in multilingual and multicultural settings in Canada that exposed pedagogical possibilities, and her praxis (combining theory and practice together to bring social change) was the recognition of existing inequitable social conditions. In a different setting in Australia, Pennycook (2004) presented an insightful reflection on the term 'Praxicum' (theory and practice come together to create a new understanding of the TESOL) with three critical moments of the classroom, and his praxis located in raising awareness for social transformations. Similarly, Hawkins (2004) observed the interactions on a listserv in a graduate teacher education class in the United States of America that supported dialogic engagement of class members, and his praxis was to raise critical awareness of their social relations. Hence, critical self-reflection incites language teachers to reflect on their identity and positioning in society both the possibilities and constraints for social change. Pavlenko (2003) showed that she utilized contemporary theories of language acquisition competency to empower graduate language

classes in the United States of America, and her praxis was social discourse that shapes learners' self-perceptions. Stein (2004) implemented the "Literacy Archive Project" for advantaged and disadvantaged teacher-learners in South Africa, and her praxis was a recognition of power differences among cultural groups. Lin (2004) explained her experience of integrating learners' lives and struggles with content while course designing in Hong Kong, and praxis was to empower teacher-learners to reflect on their position. Critical pedagogical relations are concerned with empowering learners by restructuring power relations between teacher educators and teacher-learners. Crookes and Leher (1998) presented a model with equal responsibility of teacher-learners to design and participate in learning in Hawaii, and their praxis was to shift in the curriculum and classroom. Willet and Miller (2004) discussed transformational curriculum design to make learners challenge the status quo in the United States, and their praxis was to change classroom practices promoting social justice. Toohey and Waterstone (2004) shared a mutual goal of expanding learning opportunities for language minority students in Canada, and their praxis was pedagogical restructuring of power relations between teacher educators and teacher-learners. Hawkins and Norton (2009) also suggested five principles: the situated nature of programmes and practices, the responsiveness of learners, dialogic engagement, reflexivity, and praxis, and they aimed to sharpen the role of critical English language teachers by employing these principles.

In the context of Nepal, Phyak (2013) suggested that engaged critical ethnography, a critical approach that exposes ground realities and ascertains the researcher's position as a promoter of social justice, can be helpful for local actors to deconstruct the prevailing social discourses and unravel the realities about language, literacy and education. Thus, the inequalities about class, gender, caste, ethnicity and culture are the product of existing social, cultural, and economic contexts in Nepali society. In short, critical English language teachers have to deconstruct the discriminatory discourses, texts, language and culture in collaboration with learners. They need to arouse critical awareness among learners and bring transformation. It can be inferred that English should be taught as a language of medium for communication preserving the linguistic and cultural heritage of the learners.

Conclusion and Implications

The global and national policies and pedagogies of English language teacher education have been changed along with the epistemological shift towards socio-cultural perspectives in second language teacher education. The existing policies and pedagogies of English language teacher education have focused functional communicative approach to English language teaching since English language teaching is considered a practice in a social context. The current critical pedagogy of English language teacher education has focused on exploring social inequalities related to gender, class, caste, ethnicity and culture. It has aimed to bring change in the existing social paradigm. English language teachers must know learners' differences to develop responsive curricula and pedagogy. Teacher education programs should include opportunities to explore culture as a dynamic, multifaceted, ideological and political construct. In other words, language, culture, identity, relations, ideology, and power are relevant to all language teaching and learning situations. English language teachers' work must address social justice and equity issues while working with multilingual and multicultural education for minority ethnic learners. Therefore, the focus of teacher educators is to draw a wide range of knowledge and skills to respond to more localized contexts of language learning and strengthen the role of English language teachers and learners as agencies for positive change in society. Thus, this study contributes to improving current policies and pedagogies in English language teacher education unveiling social challenges. Furthermore, as this paper is an outcome of secondary

data, there is a need for a rigorous study with primary data collection to explore English language teacher education critically and objectively in the future.

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