

Social Inequalities in ELT Classroom and Challenges on Teachers

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the policies and pedagogies related to English language teacher education (ELTE) in Nepal. Similarly, this study also addresses issues of social equalities and inequalities associated to ELT, Challenges that English language teachers are facing due to these social inequalities in the classroom, and the role and action that teachers can perform to mitigate these inequalities. From the review of different sources, it was found out that there exist various forms of social inequities in the English language teaching (ELT) classroom which have created several challenges for teachers in the classroom. Moreover, this study suggests that although avoiding social inequalities is tough work, the teachers can perform several actions and avoid social inequalities if they really show their commitment to solve the issue and take action accordingly.

Keywords: English Language Teacher, Policies and Pedagogies, Social Inequalities, Challenges in ELT Classroom, Solution

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Although the recent policy documents of Nepal have prioritized the use first language (L1) as medium of instruction in small classes, English is being taught as subject from grade one and its use as medium of instruction has been the choice of many schools in Nepal. Studies have shown positive impacts of first language (L1) as medium of instruction on both content learning and second or foreign language development (Phayak, 2015). However, in the context of our country English-prioritized schools' access for children is often perceived as the symbol of better future, better social status and economic soundness of the household (Devkota, 2018). Along with the development of English language teaching, English language teacher education policies and pedagogies have also occupied important place in the academic discussion of Nepal. Although the knowledge of English language has opened several doors of opportunities for many Nepalese people in global context, the use of English language has also created various forms of social inequalities in Nepalese society. These social inequalities have created several challenges in ELT classroom as well. The teachers have faced many challenges to mitigate inequalities problems prevailing in ELT classroom.

English Language Teacher Education Policies and Pedagogies in Nepalese Context

As the need and demand of English has been increasing in global context, the English language teaching and learning has been the interest of many people in Nepalese society as well. In this regard, Devkota (2018) states that school pedagogies in Nepal often highlight development of English knowledge and communication skills for connecting learners with outside world. Moreover, English and English education have been perceived as modern and as access of economic opportunity (*ibid*). Different policies have been developed for the development of English language teaching and English language teacher education but such discussion on the matter of ELT policies and pedagogies are limited to fewer policy makers. There has been little work to involve the parents, teachers and students in policy making and implementation process (Phyak, 2013) In this regard, Giri (2011) rightly argues that almost all the academic discussion in our country are limited to curricular and pedagogical matter of English language teaching (ELT). Johnson (2009) states that historically, the education of teachers has been predicated on the notion that knowledge about teaching and learning can be transmitted to teachers by others, usually in the form of theoretical readings, university- based lectures, and/or professional development workshops which often take place outside the walls of the classroom. It has been assumed that learned ideas can be transported from one place to another, and for this reason the positivist paradigm has focused on notions of transfer in learning to probe how knowledge travels from one setting or context to another. He further states that being appropriately innovative requires a certain amount of routinization in teaching but the essence of effective teaching is contingent on teachers' abilities to adapt and adjust to the unpredictable nature of classroom life. Ultimately, the learning of teaching becomes a life-long enterprise, and teacher education, whether pre-service or in-service, must be designed to support the development of teachers' adaptive expertise.

In the context of our country, the activities and programmes for professional development of Nepalese teacher have short history. Shrestha (2008, pp. 41-42) states that teacher career development was not an agenda of educational development programs of Nepal up to 1971, and in fact there was hardly any teacher who joined teaching for career. He further states that the government had taken no responsibility regarding the appointment, promotion and transfer of school teachers and in fact the country did not have any rules and regulations with regard to the teacher personnel service. But now the situation has been changed and teacher education has also occupied important place in different education-related policy documents and educational commissions of Nepal. Both pre-service and in-service training have been given to teachers for their overall development. Yadav (2018) states that the pre-service training attempts to provide trainees methodological options and the in-service training seeks to help working teachers to improve their teaching practice and develop themselves professionally. He further reports that besides training, workshop and conferences, EFL teachers are found to be engaged in other professional development activities like networking, observing each other's class, mentoring, reflective practice, writing journal, joining professional associations and collaborative teaching. Pre-service trainings have been used as teacher education course which are offered to trainee before they involve in actual teaching whereas in-service trainings are offered to teachers when they actually involved in real teaching field. University degree or pre-service training plays the most important role in building teacher identities where content knowledge, pedagogy, teaching philosophies and practice become interwoven (Khatri, 2013).

Teacher education now has been shifted from the traditional concept which focused content knowledge given to teachers as teacher education. Realizing the fact that only content knowledge given to teacher may not help them to tackle all the problems they encounter in their real classroom situation; the pedagogical knowledge has been highly focused in teacher education programme. The knowledge-base of L2 teacher education must include not only disciplinary or subject matter knowledge that defines how languages are structured, used, and acquired; it must also account for the *content* of L2 teaching, in other words, “what and how language is actually taught in L2 classrooms as well as teachers’ and students’ perception of that content (Freeman and Johnson 1998 as cited in Johnson)” (p. 410).

Social Equalities and Inequalities Associated to ELT

English now is taught as compulsory subject from grade one and communicative approach has been used as major framework in shaping school curricula and pedagogy in Nepali school (Sharma & Phyak, 2017) The policy documents of Nepal have supported multilingualism and multiculturalism but the practice in the real ground seems quite different (Davis, Phyak, & Bui, 2012). Although government documents have focused on multilingual education, the popularity and charm of English language teaching is spreading widely in our country. English has occupied an important place in our classroom. But the amount of English language exposure to the students in the classroom is different in private and boarding schools. Not only in terms of the English exposure but also in terms of other dimensions there exist inequalities in the classroom; may be in terms of gender, socio-economic condition, caste and many more. These different dimensions have created inequalities in the classroom. Devkota (2018) states that ideally our school policies have said to be inclusive and democratic as they focus equal involvement of all the children in education irrespective of their class, caste, gender and ethnicity. But there are so many children particularly the Dalit who are still out of school due to their economic, social and cultural constraints. He further states that although they attend and try to engage in the classroom, they feel humiliated, prejudiced and excluded there. Similarly, Mathema (2007) states that besides some noticeable improvements in school enrolment and literacy rates, hopefully from all sections of its citizens, schooling in the state is still entrenched with a vast range of social inequalities and disparities that underline social class, caste, gender, ethnicity, mother tongue and regional background.

Principally, our schools have equal access to learning opportunity for all children but many children are not equally grabbing the learning opportunity. In comparison to boys, the girls’ school attendance and dropout rate is higher than boys particularly in remote areas where the girls have to help at household work and boys go to school regularly. Even in the classroom activities there exist inequalities in terms of gender. Most of the girls except few do not participate in different teaching and learning activities particularly the extra-curricular activities conducted in school. The boys are often found involving more in different extracurricular activities than girls. The economic background of the students has also been another source of inequalities among students in the classroom. This kind of inequality also reflect in students’ teaching and learning activities. For example, many students take extra classes and tuition classes these days. But many students from poor family background cannot take such classes even they want. Likewise, there are many students in the classroom who even cannot afford the copy, pen, bag, and school dress at the time they need due to economic problems. This is just one example of inequalities existing among the students. Similarly, all the parents are not in the condition to

send their children in private school due to poor economic condition. So, those students who go to the public schools have not equal access of English language to that of boarding school. For example, the students from affluent socio-economic background get a lot of exposure of English as all subjects except Nepali is taught in English in the schools they attend. But, the students from low socioeconomic background often attend public schools where almost all subjects except English are taught in Nepali language. This situation has created different amount of exposure of English language to the students and has also created inequalities in the Nepalese ELT classrooms.

Challenges of English Language Teachers to Mitigate Social Inequalities in the Classroom

English language teaching has been both an opportunity as well as challenge in our context. Many problems have been witnessed by both teachers and students in classroom. There exist various forms of inequalities in the ELT classroom. These inequalities have created so many problems in the schools. Many students have the feeling of inferiority and domination in the classroom. They seem less interested in the teaching and learning activities of the classroom. Due to their poor socioeconomic condition they cannot afford different materials needed for their study. This kind of situation has created problems in teaching and learning process as well. The girls in many cases show less interest in participating into different extra-curricular activities conducted in the classroom. Moreover, the regular attendance of the girls in the classroom is another big challenge for teacher. How teacher can make them regular in the classroom is really important issue in our context. The condition of the students who are from the lower caste is even more critical. They become irregular in the classroom. Moreover, their feeling of being humiliated due to the attitude and behavior sometimes their friends and teacher show at them really discourage them for attending different activities in the classroom. The government has made several policies for their inclusion, but these policies have not really been able to bring all students in school. Regarding this, Devkota (2018) states although different documents and educational programmes of the government have prioritized social inclusion as important expected goal of formal schooling, there lies inequalities and differences which in turn underline social, cultural and economic forces that creates social exclusion of many school children. Different social, cultural and economic forces often create inequalities among students. These conditions have also close connection with the overall academic activities of the students in the classroom. The bitter reality with us is that many students particularly from minority groups, girls and students from poor economic classes are still beyond the approach of school. So, bringing them into school compound, enroll them into classes and motivate them for learning is another challenge for the teachers.

Ensuring equal participation of all students in teaching and learning activities in the classroom unless there exist various forms of inequalities among the students in the classroom activities is another challenge for the teachers. The economic condition of the family forces many students to drop out from the study and many students cannot be regular in the classroom because they have to help their parents at home in different economic activities. As many researches have shown that the family background of the students influences the academic achievement of the students, the students from the backward community have poor academic achievement comparatively to that of other students in the classroom. The active participation of the students from the backward community in all the activities conducted in school and their improvement in academic achievement is another challenge for teachers. Many students

cannot involve in the activities conducted in the school due to economic reason. For example, many students cannot involve in the programmes of school on which they have to pay certain amount of money such as educational tour. This situation creates demotivation on students. They have feeling of inferiority. The teachers have challenge to handle and motivate them. This is just one example of inequalities among students and its effect on them. Sometimes, this kind of situation creates more serious problems on students and gradually they feel humiliated and leave their study. More often bright students get more attention of many teachers and even the attention of the whole school family in schools. Such kind of behavior sometimes discourage other students to participate in teaching and learning activities because they feel they are humiliated and suppressed in the classroom. Including all the students in teaching and learning process, motivating them for learning, and giving them the feeling of being equally treated is one of the important challenges for teachers. Many students develop the negative attitude towards even teaching and learning process. Helping them to develop positive attitude towards teaching and learning is another challenge for teachers. These students do not find the meaning and value of participating into different activities. They gradually lose their interest in study and leave the school. Specially, most of the students from lower caste and poor socioeconomic background leave their study. Different policy documents of the government have made provision to provide free education to all the students but many students are still away from the access of formal schooling. In the name of equality, teacher provides equal exposure to the students, but there are some students who need more exposure and attention in the classroom. providing special attention to such students and bringing them in front position of teaching and learning process is another challenge for teachers.

Teachers possible Role and Action to Mitigate Social Inequalities among Students in the Classroom

Teachers can play an important role for creating conducive teaching environment in the classroom. Teachers' behaviors often determine how students perceive teachers and their teaching. Teachers and their caring behaviors are considered to be among the most important environmental factors that can help learners to develop positive attitudes towards language learning and promote students' effort or engagement in doing language learning tasks (Williams & Burden, 1997 as cited in Rahimi and Karkami, 2015). The non-threatening learning environment helps students involve into different teaching and learning activities in the classroom. The teacher should treat all the students equally irrespective of their gender, caste, culture, academic achievement and many more. Sometimes, teacher's voice and behavior may harm the students' self-dignity and they have the feeling that their culture, language, caste and personal freedom have been devaluated by the teachers' prejudiced judgmental views. I have my own experience regarding how I unknowingly cause harm someone through my own language. As a teacher, once I was commenting on Muslim cultural practices but I was immediately challenged by my students. So, teacher should be very much sensitive in the classroom while speaking or doing something else.

Some students need special attention of teachers in the classroom. The teachers should provide special attention for those who are really poor in teaching learning activities and always have the feeling of being inferior. The teachers can apply different innovative teaching techniques to involve all the students in teaching and learning process in the classroom. The teachers can make praise and reward as powerful weapon to ensure involvement of all the students in teaching and learning activities. Teacher

should give the students feeling that all of them have been equally noticed by teachers. Teachers should encourage those students who are not regular in the classroom having regular interaction with them and their parents as well. Teachers should give equal emphasis to all the students. As we know, teachers' role is not confined within the delivery of the subject matter to the students, they should also play the role of social transformer. They can encourage community people for sending their children at school and teach them the value of education for their children in at present and as well as in future. Teachers should encourage the students who have poor academic result. Teachers should not insult students for poor academic achievement. If teachers discourage students for their results, they develop inferior as well negative feeling. So, teachers can play dynamic role in the classroom. They can create inclusive teaching and learning environment and address the various forms of inequalities prevailing in our classroom if they really develop critical eyes and show the passion and commitment to do something from their heart.

Conclusion

Although different policy documents of Nepal have envisioned and focused on equal exposure of English language to the students, the practice on ground reality reflect something different. There still exist various forms of social inequalities among the students in the classroom even if the governments documents have envisioned the inclusion, equality, freedom enjoying by all the students in the classroom. Various forms of inequalities prevailing in the classroom have posed challenges for the teachers in creating conducive teaching and learning environment. However, the teacher can tackle with such situation and divert it if they really develop the critical eyes and show commitment for avoiding any forms of inequalities.

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