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Exploring the Dominance of Literature in English Studies, Its Consequences and Implications: A Reader-Response Analysis

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Abstract

This article explores the reasons behind the dominance of literature in English Studies (ES), its history, consequences and future direction. Applying David Bleich's subjective reader-response theory, this literary research studies secondary resources; books, book chapters and articles. Both literature and language were studied as an English subject. Later language was separated from English Studies creating its field like linguistics. Both disciplines remained incomplete due to the separation. Gradually, literature became de-textual and language became de-contextual. Now it is the time to reunite both of them and make the powerful discipline again making it an inter-disciplinary study. Although many attempts have been made to combine both disciplines; language and literature,

the education system, politics, curriculum, and government funding affect it. This study gives the ideas of developing and implementing an interdisciplinary English curriculum to curricularists, educators, and teachers and empowers students with theoretical understanding and practical skills. Empirical studies can be carried away by collecting primary data in future.

Keywords: Literature, Language, Pedagogy, Curriculum, Listening, Speaking

Introduction

This study explores the reasons behind the dominance of literature in English Studies (ES), its history, consequences and future direction. This research gives the idea of developing and implementing an effective English Studies Curriculum (ESC) for curricularists, policymakers, teachers, and educators. Literature is dominant in the English departments under the faculty of social sciences and humanities in Nepalese colleges and universities. Early days,

contrary, Literature and Language were together in English Studies in the West. Slowly literature became dominant over language due to national pride. Subsequently, language left the house and made linguistics its field of study. Both literature and language suffered and remained incomplete without one another. Respectively language became decontextualized and literature became de-textualized (Stockwell, 2016).

Today the Anglophone countries give priority to the language and non-Anglophone countries are emphasizing the literature under English Studies. The majority of students enrolled in the course of composition, not in Literature due to the funding support in the name of scholarships and grants by the government in Anglophone countries (Russell, 2016). Thus, the funders and government determine the supremacy and position of literature or language or both under English studies. Although the English language is being taught to enhance the communicative competencies of the students in school education and under the faculty of education in Nepali colleges and universities, the majority of students have weak language skills. In a Nepal-based qualitative study, Bhandari (2023) reports that the students have weaker communicative competence due to a lack of appropriate pedagogy and a lack of resources in school education. The listening and speaking skills have been neglected in the school-level pedagogical practices in Nepal (Bhandari, 2023; Ghimire, 2019; Panthee, 2024; Rana & Rana, 2019).

Such a teaching-learning process weakens the students' language proficiency like listening and speaking skills. Although it is broken English, the people working in tourism can communicate in English and serve the tourists (Doublespeak Dojo, 2024; Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2021). Similarly, I experienced that people working in tourism can speak English more fluently than higher-level students. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) argue it may be the result of over-emphasis on literature or content teaching rather than language skills focus pedagogy. Likewise, literature seems dominant in English Studies in non-Anglophone countries (Lanvers et al., 2021). It seems that the language has been neglected in the English departments of the faculty of social sciences and humanities in higher education and the students have weaker communicative skills in non-Anglophone countries like Nepal. It may not happen suddenly. It demands an in-depth study to explore the reasons behind the supremacy of literature in English Studies, and its consequences and implications. The following questions have been raised to carry forward this study:

Questions

- What are the reasons behind the dominance of literature, its consequences and future direction in English Studies?

Methodology

This is a literary study which took the secondary resources to carry forward this research. The texts have been analysed through the lens of David Bleich's subjective reader-response theory (Tyson, 2023). Bleich considers the reading as the subjective response to the reader's feelings, associations and memories of the printed words. Various documents have been analysed to find the research gap and make the ground for discussion (Fitzgerald, 2012).

Observation and self-reflection (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018) have been done to discuss the dominance of Literature in English Studies, its history, consequences and future direction. The empirical research papers also have been reviewed to make the study more robust and validate the critical literary claims.

Emergence and Dominance of Literature in English Studies

Stockwell (2016) traces the history of English Studies that it was developed as a university subject in the early twentieth century in the UK. This subject was meant to appreciate and study Literature (with a capital 'L'). Various factors played a significant role in making Literature a dominant subject. First, it was taken as a national pride and a suitable subject for women and working-class people. Second, anti-German feeling worked after the Great War of 1914–18 to develop Englishness of English rather than philological Germanness. The women's financial condition became reliable and they were formally allowed to graduate from Oxford in October 1920. He, further says that Arthur Quiller-Couch established English Literature as a part of a degree subject at Cambridge from 1912. Since I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis were renowned literary figures and professors, they focused more on literary study rather than linguistic analysis. Later Ferdinand de Saussure, Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield shifted the language study from philology to structural study. Literature and Language were together around the 1940s to 1950s. Although New Criticism emphasized the text, it also contributed to the integration of the study of literature and language to some extent. The publication of Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* and Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957 became the departure point of language from literature.

However, there are different views on establishing English as a subject and the dominance of literature in English Studies. English Culture and Literature used to be taught in India as a weapon of colonization and a means of civilizing Indian people (Gupta, 2016). Later they taught English language instead of literature. Through the *Minute on Indian Education of 1835*, Macaulay suggested shifting the teaching literature into language because the colonizers wanted to mimic men in India, not the scholars (Macaulay, 1835). Similarly, Ellis (2014) argues that English studies was developed as an instrument of colonial and class domination, and as a socially-progressive project. English Literature was taught only to the elites in the UK because people used to be proud of studying literature. British taught selected English literature, history and geography in India and other colonized countries to form an indigenous administrative elite fluent in standard English. These examples indicate that the colonizers taught English literature to impose their ethics and values in the name of enlightenment, and the English language to make their followers, not scholars and leaders in colonized countries.

Hewings and Seargeant (2016) argue that language has been overlooked whereas cultural products or literature became prominent in the UK because language study was treated like the servant of literary and cultural study. The professors of English prepared their peers as belles-lettres to train the people to read and interpret the text. Moreover, Goodwyn (2014) states how the Literature became dominant where "belles-lettres" approach was challenged by the advocacy of Matthew Arnold for the fundamental importance of the mother tongue, and its literature provided new moral technology for the importance of English. Goodwyn, further

mentions Arnold's contribution to the discourse of literary criticism. He states that F.R. Leavis and his legions of followers established the study of English literature. They take the literature as the “supreme subject” and one of the fundamental “national and moral importance”.

Arnold (1866) claims literature as a civilizing tool and he highly valued it. He has a significant role in establishing literature as a dominant field of study. Taking inspiration from classical literature, he claimed that English literature would emerge and work as the key to creating a harmonious society by replacing theology. It demonstrates that literature can work better than theology to enlighten the people. Similarly, the Newbolt Report (1921) promoted the Arnoldian view and recommended the English subject as an educational subject and demanded teaching English as the key school subject compulsorily in all schools. Taking the reference of F.R. Leavis, Goodwyn (2014) asserts that the height of the study of English literature was raised because it was taken as the key to leading the people to moral enlightenment. Leavis defined the text and canonized it. Furthermore, he says that I.A. Richards; a pioneer and theorist of practical criticism and reader-response theory respectively let the students study the text by removing the title, author and date which helped to align the literature with linguistics. Hence, Cambridge School was obsessed with “great literature”. This is how the supremacy of literature had been established in English Studies due to the scholars, elites and theorists' initiatives and love toward literature.

Tussle between Literature and Language

Later, this notion of studying literature was challenged by the London School which designed a curriculum to eradicate elitist education and to provide the equal opportunity of education for all regardless of class, colour and gender. Hence, the London School emphasized language, particularly spoken language and expressive forms of writing and take as key to the “personal growth” of all young people. Working-class language and “local” interest would be promoted as a strategy for the empowerment of youths. Taking the base of Vygotsky's theory of learning, they shifted from literature to language. Vygotsky (2012) offered a theory of learning which highly emphasized spoken language.

Likewise, Bullock Report (1975) had the slogan “Education for Life” which emphasized the importance of speaking and listening, and gave the mandate to accept the equal value of all languages and dialects within a language. The suggestions and recommendations of this report could not be implemented well and it did not produce the expected outcome. In 1992 the teaching materials were prepared but banned from use in schools because Michael Halliday's works and sociolinguistics had influenced them. It shows that government policy and political ideology influenced the formation and implementation of the curriculum. Contemporary rulers were afraid of people's awareness, knowledge, and criticality because the study of literature could enhance the people's criticality, and thinking and expand the horizon of understanding.

The dominance of literature in English studies depends upon government investment, educational policy, and political ideologies. If the government is progressive, it allocates more funds to a literature-focused curriculum. If the government allocate more budget on language, the language will be emphasized in English Studies. However, the majority of universities are emphasizing teaching literature in English Studies under the faculty of social sciences and

humanities (Tribhuvan University, 2018; 2019; Mid-West University, 2015). There is a dominant literature in the English Studies curriculum under the faculty of social sciences. Although the curriculum gives the mandate to teach language skills, the school, colleges and universities emphasize reading and writing skills by neglecting listening and speaking skills (Panthee, 2024; Rana & Rana, 2019).

Subsequently, the majority of students have a low level of language proficiency. Then, the private English Language Centers are booming and teaching the English language in Nepal. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL), The British Council and other private institutions are teaching mostly English language in Nepal. Language teaching is directly related to employability and hands-on skills. Language gives hands-on skills and life skills. Language teaching-learning improves the communication skills of students which is one of the 21st Century skills. Thus, English Language Studies is under the domination of Literature and an ineffective teaching-learning process.

Consequently, it seems impractical and unproductive to teach English Literature in a traditional way by emphasizing more on reading and writing skills. The student's language proficiency may not be improved emphasizing only reading and writing. Therefore, it would be better to teach language skills, particularly; listening and speaking skills for the empowerment of students with literary studies. As mentioned in the Cox Report (1989), it would be quite advantageous to equip the students with communicative life skills holistically. It seems that all language skills need to be valued equally and taught to the students through student-centred methods. We need to keep on questioning, revisiting and revising our English curriculum and pedagogical practices. In this case, Goodwyn (2012) asserts that Literature is rarely questioned in English-speaking countries. It indicates that there is a dominant and high value of Literature in English Studies. It seems that English Studies needs to be questioned time and again to update, refine and make it a flourishing and powerful subject.

Reasons behind the Study of Literature and Language

English Studies focuses on Literature and cultural studies and ethnic studies are being taught in the name of English Literature. Non-Anglophone universities largely teach and give priority and value to Literature rather than Language. Non-western schools, colleges and universities are teaching mostly culture, history, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and post-modern studies in the name of English Literature. It is useful to teach Literature because it is knowledge. Knowledge is power which liberates the people from ignorance. It can be concluded that to learn English literature is to learn the English mind. English people may be afraid of us if we learn their minds via literature.

As Macaulay (2012) states colonizers want non-westerns to learn the only language, not their knowledge and culture. Literature has the power to enhance the student's knowledge and skills and boost the people's confidence, criticality and communicative competency. Hence, the students can be equipped and empowered by studying English literature. If the students learn only the English language, they will be lame. They can be obedient and loyal workers who may be weak in thinking creatively and critically and fighting against the unjust

system. It seems that the Westerners are reluctant to teach their knowledge (mind) to us. They just want to make non-westerners work for them being loyal and obedient.

Therefore, the majority of Western universities are providing scholarships for composition and linguistics studies, not for literature (Russell, 2016). Thus, the mostly students enrolled in the course of composition, not in Literature due to the funding support. It indicates that funding support and scholarship determine the dominance of the area of studies either literature or language in English studies. However, it is beneficial and practical to study and learn the English language from the perspective of employability. It has immediate practical value and it can solve the immediate problems.

The students of English Language Studies can survive and thrive due to English language skills in the business, media, publication, law, and education fields. Although the obsessive study of English literature has some problems with language proficiency, it has long-term value. It empowers people by enhancing their knowledge of value, culture, history, philosophy, politics, society, and critical theories. Literature may focus on culture and language focuses on language skills. However, society values the Professors of Literature rather than the English language teacher. It can be said that English literature is more process-oriented and the English language is more product oriented. Today the majority of people focus on the product, not the process because of short-sightedness. Both are equally important and necessary to enhance human development and reach in full potential.

In Nepal, the majority of English Departments under the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of colleges and universities mostly teach culture, history, philosophy, society, and humanities in the name of Literature or English Studies. Although the objective of English has been set to enhance communicative competency, the students have weak language proficiency due to the limited practice of listening and speaking skills (Bhandari, 2023; Ghimire, 2019; Panthee, 2024; Rana & Rana, 2019). In a real sense, the English Language is being taught mostly in private institutions as vocational courses because most students go to those language teaching centres to learn the language (Shrestha, & Gautam, (2022). It shows that there is the domination of Literature in English Studies and Western hegemony.

Raymond Williams (2001), a Marxist thinker argues that Government policy and political ideology shape the future of English Studies. He further asserts that language curriculum and policies depend upon the Government's funding and support. The government's political ideology determines the content of English Studies. Raymond Williams writes in favour of working-class people. Working-class people need practical skills to solve immediate problems. Language skills can address the issues of the majority of proletariats. Mostly elites study literature in the West. Westerners discourage us from studying and teaching English literature and theories. It seems that higher education is in the access to elite people in the West. All cannot study literature because they have established and managed polytechnic universities to teach life skills to the students who are unwilling to study the theories.

English Literature was accessible only to the elites in the West whereas the majority of the working-class people had less opportunity to study literature. At that time, literature was dominant in English Studies. Today Nepali students are studying English Literature. This is our opportunity to study English and learn English mind (knowledge). Although there are some loops and wholes, it needs to be continued and improved. The students' communication competencies need to be enhanced with the philosophical and theoretical competencies.

English Language skills need to be developed to provide life skills to the students. It can be concluded that only theoretical knowledge is not enough to survive, practical skills are necessary to apply knowledge to day-to-day life.

The majority of students are receiving a scholarship for higher study in language and rhetoric in the West (Russell, 2016). The students of English studies from non-Anglophone countries need to pass the IELTS test to be eligible for higher study. It is quite ridiculous and surprising. The government of Nepal can maintain the standard and talk with the authorities of Anglophone universities. Nepal can enact a regulation for the students who go abroad for higher study and employment. Different studies (Phyak, 2016, 2018) reported that there is a lack of planned language policy, specific curriculum and effective implementation and strong evaluation and monitoring mechanisms in Nepal.

Future Direction: Literature and Language in English Studies

Various studies (Pope, 2005; Waugh, 2016) reported that English is a very powerful, interdisciplinary and flourishing subject. However, it needs to have its content and it would be better not to depend on other disciplines. Although immediate utility and benefit are important, it need to contribute to humanity. The English Language has social importance in Nepal due to its immediate value. Instead of literature, the English language became dominant in India because of the colonizers' linguistic and cultural imperialism based on Macauley's *The Minute of Indian Education of 1835*.

The massification of education supported to promotion of English Studies. Enlightenment ethos, the idea of progress and social justice, and democracy provided new impetus to English Education. Interdisciplinary content can be taught under English Studies to promote non-linear thinking, complexity thinking, criticality, and creativity which is the strength of English Studies. To make English studies more vibrant and useful, rhetoric and applied linguistics can be taught in Nepal as in the UK and other Anglophone countries (Pope, 2016; Stockwell, 2016). Moreover, it would be better to make it more intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary. So, it seems that it is quite useful and meaningful from the perspective of enlightenment and employability to study both language and literature in English Studies giving equal value to both of them.

This study provides the ideas to design and implement the interdisciplinary English Studies Curriculum for curricularists, policymakers, educators and teachers. Empirical studies can be conducted for the greater authenticity and validity of the study.

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