

**Positionality of Critical Thinking in English Language Classroom: A Postmethod
Analysis**

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Abstract

This paper aims at identifying the state of possibility in English language classroom because English language classroom only emphasizes the four skills of language, but critical skills of students has not been prioritized. This study purposively selected six participants from three schools in Rupandehi district and collected the required data from the semi-structured interview. Thematic qualitative data analysis was used to explore the existing situation of possibility from the perspective of postmethod and critical pedagogy. Many research revealed about the state of other four language skills; however no research has still depicted the scenario of critical thinking prevailing in English language classroom. It revealed that the possibility has not been conceptualized because of insufficient content and conventional practices of teaching. Similarly, participants engaged in the study reflected that critical and sociocultural awareness are indispensable in the language classroom because language is a medium of negotiation of their views on several aspects of society. These perspectives from both the teachers and students pave the way for the integration of sociocultural issues in their pedagogical practices and the revitalization of teaching-learning modules in the classroom. Finally, it concluded that the development of sociocultural awareness alongside the enhancement of critical thinking among learners is indispensable in English language classroom.

Keywords: Critical thinking, language teaching, pedagogy, possibility, postmethod

Introduction

Teaching language includes the priority on listening, speaking, writing and reading. Teachers emphasize these skills in pursuit of holistic development in the use of language in day to day use. Critical thinking of the students in English language classroom in Nepal is still not sound as expected. Shedding light on the same issue, Kandel (2014) proposed that teaching methodology of teachers require critical strategies to bring out more democratic and participatory class. In this context, Neupane (2021) also revealed that the status of critical thinking has not been considered as important as other several aspects. Connecting to the same issue Poudel (2013) showed that teachers can organize various lower level activities and higher level activities to enhance the critical thinking of the students. In the next study, Kandel (2020) reflected practices of English language classroom do not meet the requirements of multiple intelligences and critical thinking. However, this research is fundamentally looking at the the status of possibility (critical thinking in reference to socio-cultural, political and economic issues) of the society in English language classroom in Rupandehi district.

According to Brown (2000), there are two forms concerning in language teaching process: Receptive language performance and Productive Language Performance. These performances focus on the listening, reading, writing and speaking skills of the students. However, the important aspect of students' critical thinking is not under the central focus of the communicative language teaching approach. Keeping it in mind, Kumaravadivelu (2001) engrained the concept of post-method pedagogy in which three pedagogic parameters particularity, practicality and possibility have been proposed to teach the English language in the classroom. The possibility is the basic requirement of language teaching because it supports them to be conscious of the contemporary social issues and challenges of society. Kumaravadivelu (2001) claimed that post-method pedagogy helps learners to aware them the sociopolitical consciousness that they bring with them to aid their quest for identity formation and social transformation. This idea of possibility in pedagogy comes from the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In this similar context, Giroux (2011) said:

I stress pedagogical approaches that enable students to read texts differently as objects of interrogation rather than slavishly through a culture of pedagogical conformity that teaches unquestioning reverence. I also argue for developing a language for thinking critically about how culture deploys power and how pedagogy as a moral and political practice enables students to focus on the Suffering of others. (p.5)

This quotation has also highlighted the importance of critical thinking for students. In this same backdrop, Burbules and Berk (1999) illustrated “To Critical Thinking, the critical person is something like a critical consumer of information; he or she is driven to seek reasons and evidence” (p.5). According to them, each student in the class is encouraged to interrogate the contents delivered in the curriculum or textbooks because they are the consumers of criticality.

Research Questions

The study is primarily aimed at answering the question “What is the status of possibility (Critical Thinking) in English Language Classrooms?”

Literature Review

An Overview of the Different Teaching Methods

English language classrooms of Nepal have used various methods to deal English discipline. Aryal et. al. (2018) highlighted that some teachers in English as a foreign language classrooms applied both grammar translation and communicative approach to develop the communicative competence of the learners; however, all teachers don't implement the communicative language teaching approach because of several problems like crowded classroom, insufficient materials, poor infrastructures etc. The focus is on the enhancement of communicative ability of learners, but raising the awareness and consciousness on several issues of society to students are not considered as a big deal. Rana & Rana (2022) revealed that traditional methods of teaching and teachers' limited knowledge of collaborative learning impede the collaborative teaching in the classroom; however, teachers rarely practise peer support, group work and dialogue etc. As a result of poor knowledge and practice of collaborative learning, students get deprived of adequate engagement and negotiation with their partners in enriching creative and critical thinking. Similarly, Adhikari (2007) also highlighted the shift in teaching English language method from traditional approach to modern approach as some teachers preferred giving tasks and activity to groups to develop the communicative competence of students. However, Khatri (2011) concluded that Nepali language immensely dominated the EFL classrooms of Nepal that obstruct the learning space of English language for the learners. On the contrary, English language teaching methods have undergone some changes to meet the needs of students. The study of Saud (2020) opined that despite the use of CLT in language classroom, it has not been able to address the socio-cultural and situational needs of learners. As a result of this condition, language classrooms require the needs of postmethod pedagogy. Similarly, the next study also revealed that (Singh, 2015) Nepali English Language Classroom has steadily experienced the changes

in terms of methods. It showed that mostly the classrooms teaching methods of Nepal are reliant on repetition, recitation, rote-memorization and drill; however, few teachers move from these conventional methods towards learner-centered approach. Shedding light on the use of English language in the different domains, Pandey (2020) highlighted the the areas of its uses like the interpersonal, administrative, creative, and linguistic function. This resulted in the communicative purpose of English Language in Nepal. The results of using cooperative learning method in english language classroom compared to the usage of traditional methods showed more satisfactory and effective in all four domains of language skills (Sijali, 2017). This result highlighted that traditional method is not as productive as learner centered method in teaching English language in Nepali classroom. In similar context, to develop the writing skills of students, grammar translation method and teacher- centered method are insufficient; however, collaborative, and holistic-based learning are beneficial for learners. This study revealed that grammar translation method and product approach were in vogue that don't help students overcome the challenges of writing (Kandel, 2018). The next study Nepal (2011) revealed that some problems prevent teachers from implementing communicative language teaching approach in the English language classroom. Despite having some impediments, few teachers attempt to use this approach in their classroom. Similarly, listening skill is also ignored in English language classrooms in Nepal, in this context, Ghimire (2019) concluded that owing to traditional method of teaching, not techno-friendly classroom, dearth of audio-visual materials, teaching listening skills is problematic in the classroom.

Similarly, English teachers and educators encourage students to use the English language in a real-life situation, and teachers should create such a situation where students can use the cognitive aspect for using language meaningfully and contextually (Pokharel, 2007). In this respect, Ghimire (2019) said “The English subject area of the integrated curriculum is based on the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching (CLT) as a theory of language teaching and learning.” Hence, it aims at developing a comprehensive communicative competence in the students. Similarly, CDC (2020) has also aimed at enhancing the ability to use language in day-to-day communication.

Standing on the support of literature review, I found that emphasis on critical thinking development in English Language classroom is not as equal as the priority of other language skills. While reviewing the articles, I observed the classrooms have been influenced by the language skills. Therefore, I set my objective to look into the space of critical thinking in this classroom.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative conversational analysis that analyzed the experiences and perspectives of the respondents. For this, I purposively selected eight participants, particularly four secondary-level students from community-based schools and four teachers from the same level. First, I informed my participants about my objective of data collection, and then took consent from them. I assured them that the data would be confidential and managed anonymity throughout my study. After receiving the written consent, I used semi-structured interviews and recorded the interviews by cell phone. I used also an open-ended questionnaire to enrich the data for this study.

After collecting the data, I transcribed the entire data and coded them as per the requirement of my research questions. Then, I made different themes and analyzed them. Finally, I interpreted the contents of transcribed data. I discuss the results of my study in the following section.

Findings and Discussions

Based on the analysis and interpretation of my data, I discuss the following themes in this following section: Contents of the English syllabus, the teaching methodology of some contents, and learners' involvement in the classroom.

Contents of English Syllabus

All the participants presented their views on the possibility (Critical Thinking) in their perspectives in association with the contents embedded in textbooks of English subjects. The different contents are necessary for the textbooks to develop a certain degree of criticality among the students (Bloom, 1956). The higher-order skills begin from comprehension and end at the analysis level. In this light, Kumaravadivelu (2001) also claimed that language support students to make them aware of the sociopolitical issues, power, and identity that they bring with them into the classroom. Keeping them aside, teaching language to students is not effective. Asking one of the participants about the inclusion of such texts useful for critical thinking and conscientization, the participant said:

The contents included in the text are not sufficient to develop such a skill. The communicative approach used in the textbooks more or less ignores such texts which are useful for the development of critical thinking of the students. I think designers emphasized four skills of language forgetting the other aspects. (T1 from Ratna Secondary School)

This reflection reflected that the communicative approach deemphasizes the critical thinking of students. It only focuses on the development of four language skills which are the

main focus of the curriculum development center. The embodiment of different sociopolitical topics in pedagogy assists learners to develop both linguistic and critical thinking abilities (Lopez-Gopar, 2014; Pessoa & De Urzeda Freitas, 2012). The different contexts like social, cultural, and political, where learners are placed should be accommodated and teachers should play a contemplative role in critical pedagogical practice (Riasati & Mollaei 2012). Connecting to the same issue, White (1988) also suggested that three comprehensive educational and philosophical orientations constitute a good curriculum. He further mentioned that reconstructionism is one of the three educational and philosophical orientations that ultimately result in social change. Similarly, critical literacy is equally important as pedagogical practices to teach language critically to students (Sharma & Phyak, 2017). In this light, another participant said:

I am mainly focusing on the four skills of students in the class; however, listening and speaking are not as focused as reading and writing. Teaching four skills is the main goal of language teaching, but making them think critically is not the focus of curriculum design. (T2 from Jeevanath Secondary School)

His reflection asserted that activities to develop critical thinking among the students in language classrooms are almost ignored. Therefore, students don't get such environment to argue, resist, and opine. According to Freire (1970), problem-posing education involves teacher-student arguments to sort out the problems embedded in the text. It also breaks the vertical patterns feature of banking education.

Teaching Methodology of Some Contents

The second theme of my study revolved around the teaching methodology of the teachers from the perspective of students in the language classroom. In this regard, Riasati and Mollaei (2012) claimed that language is not only a tool to communicate or express rather it is a product of recognition of learners towards their social, potential and historical surroundings. In this light, Riasati & Mollaei said, "Critical pedagogy does not ignore nor replace well-developed teaching methods. Instead, it adds critical quality to the existing textbooks and everyday instruction." The opinions of one student in the question of teachers' methodology to teach the text 'Chimney Sweeper' is:

My teacher begins the topic by reading aloud and tells us to listen to him carefully. He gives instructions to underline the difficult words and tells the meaning of those difficult words. Then after, he translates the text into the Nepali language. (Srijan from Ratan Secondary School)

This reflection revealed that teaching focuses on listening and reading skills; instead the development of other language skills and critical skills. This teaching methodology does not support bringing different sociopolitical and historical issues of society into their pedagogical practices. To teach such a text, Sharma & Phyak (2017) mentioned the four steps to prepare the materials: Selecting codes, Adapting and designing materials, Designing pedagogical activities, and Producing the final form of the materials in language lessons in the following format. Liberatory autonomy, as (Kumaravadivelu) 2001 claimed, emphasized the different skills of teachers in pedagogy for the enhancement of critical thinking of the students.

Another student in the same context (Yogmaya text) said:

My teacher comes and tells us to read the text and find some similar meanings of different words written on the board. He tells some students to read the text loudly and others to listen to those spoken words. After completing the text, he gives some questions to write. (Sujan from Navratna Secondary School)

This view of the student revealed the classroom scenario where the teacher mainly focuses on the four language skills. This action is the consequence of the spirit of the communicative approach to language teaching. Reading, listening, writing and speaking skills are subsequently taught. However, this teaching does not let students think and present their views on the text. Hence, there is no probability of an analogy of the same text with a social issue.

In the same context, Masduqi (2011) said, “The realization of critical thinking skills and meaning in English Language Teaching is worth doing to improve students’ English competence” (p13). Shedding light on the same issue, Rfaner (2006) also suggested that the development of students’ critical skills resist alternatives, ways of interpretation and conceptions presented by English teachers in the class. Furthermore, Washington and Mason (1992) claimed that texts like history and philosophy have pedagogical value supporting students to assimilate and transform them through work historical and philosophical texts have pedagogic value only to the extent that the student assimilates and transforms them through work.

Learners’ Involvement in the Class

The third theme was about the student’s participation in classroom activities. Students’ participation and readiness are important to develop an awareness of their existing socio-cultural issues. The study Guryanov et. al (2019) suggested that foreign language is a medium to raise awareness of several sociocultural issues of the learners in the classroom.

Against the same backdrop, Swain (2004) asserted that the collaborative approach divides the equal role of participation between teacher and students that results in the development of cognitive and social processes. Asking a question related to the same topic, one participant said:

I rarely participate in the pair-work and group discussions. I mainly spend my time reading and writing classwork. A few games of word identification in terms of synonyms and antonyms are conducted by my teacher. Generally, my teacher takes all time to deliver the content. (Simron from Trishuli Secondary School)

His reflection highlighted that students need group discussion and pair work to be motivated for learning. Continuous lectures of teachers bring a monotonous environment to the class. This lecture makes students silent recipients and teachers active participants in the classroom. Freire (1970) mentioned that education is suffering from narration sickness. Hence, this trend does not allow students to negotiate the meaning of their socio-cultural issues with an issue book. The study (Hinkel, 2014; Kescskes, 2015) also claimed that students are easily motivated in English as a Foreign Language Classroom if they are given social and cultural signals. This activity would instigate them to explore and comprehend those surrounding issues via in-depth conversation and continuous dialogues. The next participant in a similar context said:

I like the teaching style of my teacher, but it would be better if I get a chance to speak and discuss with my friends in some topics. I listen carefully, but I don't respond anything to my teacher. (Sulochana from Tripti Secondary School)

These experiences opined that students want to become an active agents in the pedagogical practice rather being passive learners. Learners' involvement is indispensable in the classroom for integrating social and cultural contexts with the contexts of their books. Communication with their friends assists them to be argumentative and rational. It leads them in questioning and contextualizing their texts.

Revitalization of Teachers' Teaching Strategies

This theme encapsulates teachers' views on their existing methods of teaching English language in the classroom. It is most to identify whether teaching practices are relevant or would they need to revitalize according to the existing needs of the students and curriculum. In this regard, one of the participants noted,

I need the training of teaching practices that could help me collect the cognitive and practical skills to foster the critical thinking of the students in the classroom. These trainings must be frequent and comprehensive. (T3 from Bhagwati Secondary School)

Enriching the cognitive and psychomotor skills of teachers concerning in the issue of critical thinking is mandatory. How to commence the methodology to facilitate students' critical thought and seek for exit purposively create a challenge for the teachers. Therefore, knowledge of critical pedagogy, and postmethod pedagogy are indispensable for teachers. In the same context, Phyak and Sharma (2017) suggested the teaching methodology for teachers about how to implement such pedagogical practices which could enhance critical thinking of both teachers and students. Similarly, the next participant explained,

I took the training of TPD many times, but these trainings focused only on the use of teaching-learning materials, lesson plan, rapport building, and few learner-centered methodologies. Critical thinking enhancement and implementation are not the concerns of those trainings. (T4 from Ratna Secondary School)

TPD training is once conducted in a year to invigorate teaching-learning strategies and instill the knowledge of various complicated texts; however, practices of critical thinking development are not appropriately addressed. The study of (Kumari, 2017) supported that teacher training facilitates teachers in development of managing ELT classroom, selecting teaching materials, and helping to acknowledge the psychological domain of students. The teacher professional development training is sound and designed perfectly; however, its implementation is not efficient because of many gaps (Kshetree, 2021). Connecting to the same issue Sah (2022) explored that these trainings do not prepare our teachers to handle social justice issues in the heterogeneous classrooms of Nepal. Therefore, teacher professional development training are not as effective as to enhance the teaching practices of possibility in language classrooms of Nepal.

The themes that I encapsulated clearly discussed the needs of critical thinking in the language classroom. The situation that is vogue in English language classroom has only emphasized the teaching of language skills; however, along with the practice of learning and teaching four skills of language, encompassing the strategies of improvement critical thinking is indispensable. Perceptions from the learners and teachers in the following themes ventilated that language classroom hardly incorporated the techniques of bringing out the

concept of possibility. Similarly, requirement of this possibility is necessary among the students and teachers to develop the critical thinking to be a critical thinker.

Conclusion

The above discussion concluded that activities to raise the possibility need to be integrated into the English as a Foreign Language classroom to develop students' critical and contextual thinking. Some of the classrooms resist the traditional method of teaching although the curriculum has already welcomed the communicative approach. The communicative approach solely focuses on the language skills RWLS; however, making students aware of their different social constructs has not been focused on by it. Therefore, this approach must motivate them to comprehend and question on several topics as taught by teachers to them. Similarly, the role of the teacher is also equally important in the creation of a conducive environment for learners where learners learn the target language conveniently and comfortably.

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