Exploring English Language Proficiency Challenges among Rural Students

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Abstract

Secondary-level students often struggle with reading, writing and speaking simple words in rural areas. This study investigates the influences of English language weaknesses among secondary school students in rural Nepal. The purpose of this study is to dig out the challenges contributing to weaknesses in English language proficiency among rural secondary school students in Khatyad Rural Municipality of Mugu District. I employed a qualitative research approach, motivated by the theory of rurality. I selected Khatyad Rural Municipality as my research site. Two secondary-level teachers and three students were my participants. I employed in-depth interviews to acquire information. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data. My results showed a number of important themes regarding the challenges that contribute to English language deficiencies in secondary school students in rural areas. They are the lack of a positive learning environment after school, a lack of ongoing professional development opportunities for educators, lack of English proficiency in teachers and students, ill-equipped classrooms, little classroom interaction and feedback, and inadequate instructional materials. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing targeted interventions to enhance English language education. Educators should implement more effective educational strategies and resources to address these obstacles to improve the quality of English language education in these regions.

Keywords: Lingua franca, ELT, rural education, academic success

Introduction

Due to the position of English as an important medium for international interaction, its influence as a lingua franca is increasing across the globe (Rao, 2019). Agustiana et al. (2024) highlight English as the dominant global business language, essential for cross-border communication and efficient operations in diverse

environments. Its use extends beyond English-speaking nations to multinational corporations and global markets, making English proficiency crucial for professionals in various sectors. The importance of English as a language continues in education, research, tourism, print and electronic media, and international trade and business, especially in the context of globalization (Chhetri, 2023). Proficiency in the English language has become an essential skill for academic and professional success. English serves as a dominant language across various sectors, including business, arts, education and culture, facilitating global communication and integration (Tamtam et al., 2012).

In Nepal's educational system, English is a mandatory subject taught and learned at the school level. There is a noticeable increase in interest towards English-medium education due to the global prominence of the English language (Ghimire, 2024; Saud, 2019). Parents believe that proficiency in English opens up significant opportunities for their children (Ghimire, 2019). English-language instruction is preferred in schools because it plays a crucial role in developing students' listening, speaking, and vocabulary skills, which are essential for academic success and future prospects (Shrestha, 2023). Recent developments in Nepal's community school system indicate a growing adoption of English as a medium of instruction (EMI), representing a significant linguistic shift (Saud, 2020; Saud, 2024). Sah (2021) emphasizes the global importance of English education, widely acknowledged for its prestige and influence, including Nepal (Ghimire, 2024). Sah and Li (2018) argue that EMI serves as crucial linguistic capital, perceived by students, parents, and educators alike, to enhance advanced English proficiency, support academic advancement, stimulate economic and social prosperity, and facilitate access to higher education. Consequently, many public and community schools in both rural and urban areas of Nepal have now adopted EMI into their educational frameworks.

Dutta (2019) stated that English is a highly influential and widely recognized language across the globe. It serves as a gateway to global opportunities, enabling full participation in academic, business, cultural, social and political aspects. As the dominant language in education, commerce, entertainment, travel, and the digital world, English equips learners with essential skills to thrive in a globalized society (Shrishthy, 2023).

English language proficiency among secondary-level students in rural Nepal, specifically within the Khatyad Rural Municipality of Mugu District, is a pressing issue marked by significant challenges. Despite the increasing global importance of English and its perceived benefits for educational and career opportunities, students in this region encounter substantial obstacles in achieving proficiency. From my own experience teaching in the remote areas of Mugu District at the secondary level, I

have observed that students struggle to communicate even using simple sentences, both orally and in writing. They are weak in the four language skills of English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which are essential for secondary-level education. These weaknesses can be attributed to various reasons. Understanding these reasons is vital for addressing the educational disparities faced by rural students and for enhancing their access to quality English language education.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the challenges contributing to the weaknesses in English language proficiency among rural secondary school students in Khatyad Rural Municipality, Mugu District. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the question: What are the challenges faced by rural secondary school students in Khatyad Rural Municipality in learning English?

Literature Review

In Nepal, English is a compulsory subject in schools. Basically, students from rural areas encounter numerous challenges that hinder proficiency in the English language. The challenges encountered by students directly leads to weaknesses in English subject. Several national and international studies have investigated these challenges, shedding light on barriers to effective language learning in rural settings. Singh (2023) underscores the prevalent issues in rural Nepali schools. He highlights the weak language skills, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate resources as primary obstacles. His study conducted in the remote village of Dolpa, Singh observed that students struggled to engage with English language textbooks that were outdated and did not resonate with their cultural context. Despite the government's efforts to implement a communicative language teaching approach, many students found it challenging to apply their learning due to disconnection between the curriculum and their daily lives.

In the same way, Tuladhar (2023) expands on these challenges, specifically noting the scarcity of trained educators and limited resources in rural settings, which significantly impact inclusive education efforts. Ranjit (2022), focusing on secondary-level education in remote Nepali schools, highlights additional hurdles such as teacher communication barriers, varied class sizes, and ineffective classroom management strategies. These findings collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of challenges impeding English language education outcomes in Nepal's rural communities.

Moreover, insights from international contexts offer comparative perspectives. For example, studies from Indonesia by Endriyati et al. (2023) identify student-related concerns such as motivation and parental support, alongside teacher-related challenges including technological familiarity and pedagogical expertise.

These findings resonate with the Nepali context, highlighting the universal nature of challenges faced by rural educational systems in fostering English language proficiency. Al-Sohbani (2016) identifies challenges in Yemeni schools, including outdated teaching materials, teacher motivation issues, and student disengagement due to perceived unfair grading practices. These challenges mirror those faced in Nepal, underscoring the broader implications of inadequate educational resources and support on student learning outcomes. Issues such as curriculum constraints, lack of infrastructure, and poverty-related barriers further exacerbate the difficulties in providing quality English language education. In Malaysia, Musa et al. (2012) identify student attitudes and perceptions towards English as critical factors influencing language learning outcomes. The study emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to enhance student motivation and engagement in English language education.

Overall, while existing literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges in English language education across diverse contexts, there remains a notable gap in research specifically addressing the nuanced challenges faced by rural Nepali students. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the influences of English language weaknesses among secondary school students in Khatyad Rural Municipality, Mugu District, Nepal. By identifying and addressing these challenges, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions to enhance English language education and improve academic outcomes for rural students.

I utilized the theory of Rurality as the primary theoretical foundation for my research study. This theory comprehensively addresses rural contexts, specifically focusing on Khatyad Rural Municipality, Mugu District, Nepal. It critically examines the challenges faced by secondary school students in their English language learning. With this theoretical framework, I assessed the English language proficiency weaknesses among students in rural secondary schools within the municipality. According to Leibowitz (2020), "rurality serves as a broader case study for examining questions of locality and difference." Furthermore, Singh (2024) highlights its significance, emphasizing that the theory of rurality encompasses the educational dynamics in rural settings. Through this approach, I conducted a thorough analysis aimed at understanding and addressing these language proficiency challenges effectively.

Methods and Procedures

In my study, I adopted an interpretive research paradigm rooted in a socially constructed ontology, enabling me to see what has happened and how it has happened (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This paradigm is particularly suited to my objectives as it emphasizes understanding the subjective experiences and perceptions

of rural secondary school students regarding their challenges in learning English.

I used qualitative research approach. Qualitative research approach involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, and experiences (Bhandari, 2023). I have purposively selected participants based on their relevance to my study. I selected two secondary-level English teachers who have been teaching English for several years in Khatyad Rural Municipality, and three students from secondary-level community schools who have been facing challenges in learning English. The site of my study was Khatyad rural municipality, Mugu district.

The protection of human subjects through the application of appropriate ethical principles is important in any research study (Arifin, 2018). That's why ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality of responses, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. The study adhered to ethical guidelines and received necessary approvals from relevant institutional bodies. Pseudonyms were used (teacher A, teacher B, and Student A, Student B, Student C) to protect their identities. Interview was recorded through mobile recordings and note-taking.

Data Collection Process

I used a purposive sampling method to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information about their experiences learning English in community schools. I chose three students and two teachers from secondary level in Khatyad Rural Municipality. I designed semi-structured interviews to explore the students' experiences and challenges in learning English. Each interview was conducted in a familiar setting to ensure participants felt comfortable and open to sharing their experiences. I used open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses. I audio-recorded all interviews with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy, and I took additional notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. I carefully addressed ethical considerations by fully informing participants about the purpose of the study, their role in it, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. I used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants, and I stored all data securely to maintain confidentiality. I transcribed the audio recordings verbatim to capture all nuances of the participants' responses, and I cross-checked the transcriptions with the audio recordings for accuracy.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involved a thematic analysis approach to identify and interpret patterns and themes within the collected data. I began by transcribing the

interview recordings and observational notes. Then, I coded the data to generate initial categories reflecting the participants' experiences and challenges. Through iterative refinement, these categories were developed into broader themes that captured the essence of the issues faced by rural students in learning English. This thematic analysis allowed for a detailed exploration of the factors contributing to the weaknesses in English language proficiency among the students.

Results and Discussion

From the responses of teachers and students, I generated the themes regarding the challenges contributing to English language weaknesses among rural secondary school students.

Absence of a Positive Learning Environment after School

There is a lack of a positive learning environment at home in Khatyad Rural Municipality. According to Lee (2024), "By creating positive and engaging learning environments, teachers and parents can lend their students the physical, psychological, and emotional support they need to thrive and be successful in school, the workplace, and beyond". That's why parents and educators responsibility is to create supportive environment at home and at school. But it is different in rural area like Khatyad Rural Municipality. From the interview with teachers and students it was found that Many students face challenges such as working to support their families or lacking supportive home environments conducive to studying. Student A ". After school, I have to take care of our home, cook meals, look after my brothers, and support my parents in their work. I don't have much time left for studying at home"(student A). She takes the responsibility of their parents at home she had no time to study at home. teachers struggle for students to improve English at school but learners have no home environment to improve English. Which makes learner weaker day by day? (Teachers A). "There is no learning environment at home for kids to learn. They need to help their parents, who affect their English and other subjects too" (Teacher B). That's why students in Khatyad Rural Municipality lack the supportive home environment needed to improve their language skills

Lack of Ongoing Professional Development Opportunities for Educators

In the study, teachers acknowledged their proficiency in English but highlighted the critical need for ongoing professional development to refine their teaching skills and adapt to evolving language teaching methods. Teacher A shared, "I have been teaching for five years but have not had any opportunities for teacher training. I consider myself proficient in English, but continuous professional development is essential for effective teaching and keeping myself updated. Unfortunately, there are no programs like this available for teachers in rural areas (Teacher A). Similarly,

Teacher B added, "I have not had the chance to attend workshops focused on language teaching methodologies and integrating technology into the classroom."

The benefits of continuous professional development were evident in refining teaching strategies and aligning with advancements in language education. However, participants also expressed a significant gap in ongoing support and training needed to effectively integrate technology and access diverse teaching materials. These challenges underscore the importance of investing in comprehensive teacher training programs that address both language proficiency and pedagogical skills.

Enhancing teacher training and development initiatives can empower educators to create more engaging and effective learning environments and improve the student's achievement.

Lack of English Language Proficiency in Students and Teachers

Teachers and students have identified significant challenges in students' English language proficiency, including difficulties with grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary retention, and a lack of confidence in speaking fluently. Teacher A highlighted these challenges: The primary issues among students include limited vocabulary retention, difficulty with grammar structures, and a lack of confidence in speaking English fluently (teacher A). To address these challenges teacher emphasized vocabulary-building activities; grammar exercises tailored to their proficiency level, and provide opportunities for regular speaking practice to their students. Students reported significant challenges that their teachers are not competent to teach English. Student A said, "Our teacher does not focus on speaking and listening activities in the classroom. He is not very confident in speaking English because he only reads what is written in the book, but he does not teach us how to read, pronounce the words, or understand their meanings. We rarely get class work and homework in English, and when we do, it is not checked by the teacher".

The lack of English language proficiency is influencing weaknesses among rural students in Nepal. This is evident from the challenges highlighted by both Teachers and students, such as limited vocabulary retention, difficulties with grammar and pronunciation, and a lack of confidence in speaking fluently. These challenges directly impact the students' ability to engage actively in classroom activities and effectively practice language skills, thereby contributing to their overall weaknesses in English proficiency.

Ill-equipped Classrooms

A positive classroom environment is one in which students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, taking risks, asking questions, and confronting challenges in

their learning (Preply, 2023). Educators can foster this environment by presenting clear classroom expectations, providing ample opportunities to enhance skills, building relationships with their students, and offering relevant content. In such a setting, students feel valued by their educator, which encourages them to become more active participants in the learning process and leads to a more productive learning environment but in the context of rural area the situation found different.

Student A shared, "There are many students in my class room, and it's hard to concentrate whatever teachers teaching and saying about in the classroom." Students in overcrowded classes are more likely to feel disconnected from the learning process and less motivated to actively participate in class discussions and activities (Marais, 2016). Teacher A said, "students come from far from different places to our school so Our classrooms are overcrowded there is no division of section also and there is lack of teaching materials our classroom are ill-equipped that is making difficult for us to control the class and teach English effectively". In overcrowded classrooms, teachers are often overwhelmed by the high learner-to-teacher ratio, resulting in limited interaction with each learner (Lockspeiser & Kaul, 2016).This observation underscores the impact of large class sizes on students' ability to focus and engage effectively during lessons and making student weaker in English.

Additionally, Student C noted "Our classroom lacks essential facilities like dustbins, a proper book corner, and an appropriate whiteboard and new technologies in the classroom. The classroom is often dirty, overcrowded, and noisy, and nobody cleans or sweeps it regularly. There aren't enough good benches and desks in classroom."

This comment reflects the practical difficulties faced due to limited resources, affecting both comfort and concentration among students and hindering their ability to engage in additional activities in the classroom. The physical environment of a classroom plays a crucial role in facilitating effective learning and academic performance, especially in language acquisition like English (Nwokedi, 2023). That's why physical arrangement and features of the classroom environment, including seating arrangements, can influence students' behavior and attention to academic tasks. These observations underscore the challenges posed by overcrowded classrooms, lack of essential facilities, inadequate physical environments, and resource constraints in creating a supportive learning environment. These challenges influence students, creating an unsupportive learning environment for learning English.

Lack of Classroom Interaction and Feedback

Classroom interaction and feedback play a pivotal role in the teaching and

learning process, particularly in second language instruction. Interaction empowers students to actively participate in discussions, ask questions, and collaborate with their peers, thereby enriching their overall learning experience in acquiring a second language. Siddig and AlKhoudary (2018) assert that student-teacher interaction is vital as it significantly influences positive academic progress and social development (p. 86). Feedback serves as a powerful tool essential for improving assignments and enhancing the understanding of concepts (Angelos & Darra, 2023). Consequently, the processes of feedback and classroom interaction are crucial components within effective English language education, providing students with essential guidance and insights to enhance their skills.

Students A reported limited classroom interaction, primarily characterized by teacher-led activities, "Our classes are mostly teacher-centered; the teacher reads from books and speaks, and we are not allowed to speak or ask questions in class. We listen quietly and often work alone without opportunities for group or pair activities." Another student added, "Group work or discussions are rare. If we try to speak, the teacher scolds or punishes us, so we stay silent." These comments highlight a predominantly passive learning environment where students have few chances to engage in meaningful communication or collaborative learning.

Student C mentioned "Our teachers never give us to engage in different teaching-learning activities in the classroom. There is no pair work, group work, speaking practice, listening practice to improve our English in the classroom". The lack of opportunity for classroom interaction severely hinders students' ability to practice English language skills effectively. In rural areas, where such opportunities are limited, students face challenges in developing proficiency in English. This passive learning environment contributes significantly to students' weaknesses in English language skills, as they lack opportunities for meaningful dialogue, peer collaboration, and active engagement in language learning activities. Therefore, enhancing classroom interaction through student-centered activities, peer collaboration, and supportive teacher practices is essential for improving English language proficiency among students in rural areas. Providing opportunities for interactive learning experiences can significantly enhance students' language acquisition and overall educational outcomes.

Lack of Teaching Materials for English

Teaching materials come in various forms and serve the common purpose of supporting learning. They are essential for making lessons interesting, facilitating easy learning, and enabling teachers to effectively convey concepts. Teachers use different kinds of teaching and learning materials to achieve objectives of content in the classroom. Students and teachers indicated a lack of adequate materials for

learning and teaching English. They have only textbook available in the school as a teaching learning materials but they don't get textbook in time. According to students and teachers there are no other materials like audio, video, audio video and new technologies in the school to teach and learn English.

Teacher B expressed "There are no resources available in the school to practice the English language. There is no library in the school for extra materials for teaching. We struggle in English and only use lecture methods and textbooks because of the lack of teaching and learning materials needed for the English subject. This is making students weaker in English language skills since they do not get to practice the four key skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The lack of a school library and the absence of digital tools and supplementary materials severely limit students' opportunities to practice and develop their English language skills in rural area.

Student C added "Our teacher only uses textbooks during the teaching and learning process. We haven't had any opportunities to practice the four language skills because there are no teaching-learning materials in the school, such as speaking materials, ICT tools, radio, tape recorders, and other resources needed for learning English (Student C). Student B mentioned, "We don't have basic learning aids like a proper whiteboard or visual materials. The whiteboard also becomes old teachers rarely write on the board with a finished marker. There are no pictures, radios, tape recorders, audio-visual aids, or digital resources available to us. Teachers never use any materials to teach English; they only use books and the board."

These statements reflect critical gaps in material resources, which may impede students' ability to grasp English concepts and improve their language skills. That's why the lack of teaching and learning materials in rural areas creates weaknesses for students, hindering their ability to become proficient in English and preparing them for the twenty-first century.

During my observations conducted with permission in three classrooms across three schools within Khatyad Rural Municipality, several critical insights into the English language teaching environment emerged. The focus was on understanding student participation, classroom atmosphere, interaction between teachers and students, teacher proficiency and support, evaluation and feedback practices, utilization of teaching-learning materials, techniques employed by teachers, and the challenges encountered by students.

Firstly, the observations revealed varying levels of student participation across classrooms, reflecting a need for more interactive and engaging teaching methods. While the overall classroom atmosphere appeared positive, there

was a notable absence of robust interaction between teachers and students. Teachers predominantly relied on traditional lecture-style teaching, which limited opportunities for active student involvement and dialogue. Secondly, the observations highlighted a significant deficiency in the use of teaching-learning materials and technology. Classrooms lacked essential resources such as visual aids, digital tools, and supplementary materials, which are crucial for enhancing the four language skills effectively. Moreover, technological tools like smart boards or projectors were not utilized, further hindering interactive learning experiences. Thirdly, teacher support and proficiency varied noticeably. Some teachers demonstrated strong English proficiency and engaged teaching styles, while others relied heavily on textbook-based instruction without fostering interactive learning environments. This disparity in teaching approaches underscored the need for continuous professional development to enhance teaching skills and adapt to more innovative methods. Regarding evaluation and feedback practices, students reported receiving limited assignments and feedback on their work. Evaluations seemed sporadic rather than systematic, missing opportunities to provide constructive feedback that could aid students in improving their English language skills over time.

Lastly, several challenges faced by students were evident during the observations. Overcrowded classrooms with inadequate seating arrangements were observed, forcing multiple students to share benches. Basic facilities like access to drinking water were lacking, leading students to leave the classroom during lessons. Additionally, variations in students' language proficiency, including instances of using Nepali instead of English, indicated challenges in maintaining an immersive English language learning environment.

Conclusion

My research concludes that the findings from observations and perspectives gathered in rural secondary schools within Khatyad Rural Municipality highlight several key factors contributing to weaknesses in English language proficiency. The study revealed significant challenges, including the absence of a positive learning environment after school, a lack of ongoing professional development opportunities for educators, inadequate English proficiency among teachers and students, overcrowded and ill-equipped classrooms, limited classroom interaction, and insufficient instructional materials. Observations also indicated a heavy reliance on traditional teaching methods and a shortage of interactive learning materials and technologies, which hinder student engagement and proficiency development. Students' perspectives echoed these challenges, particularly regarding classroom overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and inconsistent teacher support and proficiency.

My study underscores critical areas for improvement in rural English language education, such as enhancing interactive teaching methods, providing essential teaching-learning materials, improving teacher proficiency through professional development, establishing consistent evaluation and feedback practices, and addressing infrastructure challenges to create conducive learning environments. Addressing these issues will be crucial to ensuring that rural students receive quality education and opportunities to effectively develop proficiency in the English language.

The findings have many implications for English language education in rural areas. To enhance students' language proficiency and academic success, it is essential to diversify teaching strategies, improve resource availability, enhance teacher training and support, foster meaningful classroom interaction, implement effective feedback mechanisms, and address infrastructure deficiencies. By implementing these recommendations, rural schools can create a more supportive environment for English language learning, equipping students with the skills necessary for future educational and professional opportunities. This study highlights the importance of addressing systemic challenges in order to improve English language education in rural settings, emphasizing the practical applications of enhancing teaching practices and learning environments to support student success.

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