

Integrating Tharu Indigenous Culture in English Language Teaching: An Action Research¹

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Abstract

The effect of integrating local (indigenous) culture into the course of English language teaching has not been explored much in Nepal. This study aims to investigate the Tharu indigenous festival 'Joorshital' in its socio-cultural aspects and integrates the festival into an English language course by designing activities relating to teaching and learning English inside and outside the classroom. This study used qualitative method to collect and analyze the data. The study took 30 students of Grade 5 from a secondary school in Itahari, Sunsari as the subjects for the study. The surveys among the students and parents before and after the implementation of the action research, students' and parents' written comments, and student observation were employed to record the changes in motivation and enthusiasm for learning English during a one-year study period. The data resources included the Tharu community, Tharu students, Tharu social leaders and elderly people, students' prior knowledge of 'Joorshital', online resources, and journal articles. The data were collected through field visits, questionnaires, interviews, and observation. The students were very enthusiastic and active in cross-cultural activities. They became more motivated, interactive, and participatory in learning English when the indigenous cultural contents were integrated into the course. Their level of interest increased; and they enjoyed the process thoroughly. Such studies are very beneficial to the teachers to promote cross-cultural awareness among themselves and the students, to help the indigenous culture to preserve, and to motivate them in English learning through interactive engagements.

Keywords: cross-cultural understanding, indigenous culture, interactive learning, Tharu festivals

Introduction

Cultural diversity is a reality in Nepalese classrooms. Students come from heterogeneous backgrounds embedded with diverse cultural entities. They have their own social and cultural manners and behaviors which, most of the time, tend to confront the target language learning. This heterogeneity is a challenge to English

language teaching and learning. There are many difficulties and obstructions among the students in the learning process due to these cultural interferences. These interferences cause cultural gaps. The school curriculum focuses on only the target language cultures which broaden this gap between student diversity and the curriculum input.

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This action research was designed to investigate and explore the Tharu cultural festival 'Joorshital' and its integration into the course in English language teaching for the purpose of enhancing students' cultural awareness and their motivation and engagement. Hence, the researcher observed whether the above-mentioned gap could be fulfilled through the integration of cultural content or not. Accordingly, it is significant to discuss the meaning and definition of the indigenous culture and Tharu indigenous community in this section further.

Indigenous people are those who have a distinct cultural and socio-ethnic identity that mutually shares the natural resources and the ancestral ties to the land they have owned or where they occupy and live. They are the practitioners and inheritors of distinctive cultures and a way of relating to the surroundings and the people (<https://www.un.org>). They have their own language and lifestyle. Their members are generally considered to be descendants of people who had previously inhabited a certain geographic area when new conquerors from different cultures or ethnic origins arrived there (UN, 2017). Indigenous people are also called 'Cultural Communities'. They are homogenous societies identified by self-aspiration and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as an organized community, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions, and other distinctive cultural traits (*Republic Act 8371, IPRA 1997*). In this regard, Tharu people are the indigenous people in Nepal with their own cultural and linguistic identities. Moreover, the Tharu indigenous group is one of the oldest and largest

indigenous people groups in Nepal (Fornanito et. al., 2009).

To understand the diversity of Nepal and the significance of the Tharu cultural studies, it is desirable to present and discuss the current statistical scenario of Nepal's ethnicity and population in a nutshell. *The constitution of Nepal* (2072BS) stated that Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multicultural, and multi-religious country. According to the latest data provided by the Nepal Government, Department of Statistics (2023), the total number of castes in Nepal is 142 and the languages spoken are 124. Among these ethnic groups, the caste in top ten positions are: Chhetri (16.45%), Brahmin (11.29%), Magar (6.9%), Tharu (6.2%), Tamang (5.62%), Biswakarma (5.04%), Musalman (4.86%), Newar (4.6%), Yadav (4.21%), and Rai (2.2%).

The data presents Tharu people in the fourth position in the number. They occupy 6.2 percent of the total population of Nepal. To put Tharu people in the brief spectrum, they are an ethnic group indigenous to the Terai in southern Nepal. To be specific, they occupy 4.1 percent of the total population in Koshi Province. To be more specific to Itahari sub-metropolitan city, Tharu people are the largest community in number. They occupy 19.41 percent of the total population here (population by caste, 2021 census). They are rich in their culture and customs. They live a rural and traditional life. The name 'Itahari' itself is derived from the Tharu language (Timalsina, 2011). To honor the Tharu caste, their indigenous identity, and typical cultures, Itahari sub-metropolitan city has declared

the Tharu ethnic group as the 'First Citizen' of Itahari.

The data above show that the Tharu ethnic group is remarkable in number in Nepal and is the largest ethnic group in Itahari. And the fact is obvious that the Tharu students make a prominent number in the classes at schools there. Not only the Tharu students but also the students of other ethnicities are not much interactive and aware of the cross-cultural content. The students are indifferent towards the indigenous cultures and they do not pay due attention to the cultural learning. There can be specific reasons behind this; but a lack of integrating cultural content into the course can be the one. So, this study integrates 'Joorshital', an indigenous Tharu festival, into the course of English language teaching and learning to observe whether the integration of indigenous cultural content enhances students' cultural awareness as well as motivation and engagement in learning or not. The research question, in this background, is: How can the integration of indigenous culture enhance cultural awareness, and English language learning?

Review of Literature

The integration and inclusion of local indigenous cultural content in the curriculum have long been in discourse and application in the field of teaching English. The approaches such as culturally responsive teaching and cross-cultural pedagogy provide an outline and theoretical framework as well as practical guidelines. Hence, integrating indigenous culture into the course as the local curriculum can be a good solution. Various previous studies have shown that the role of

indigenous culture in language teaching is positive and encouraging. The scholars have highlighted the importance of integrating local cultures into the course of English language teaching.

In the school-based curriculum, learners' local culture is incorporated in ELT as it can facilitate them to acquire the target language. Post and Rathet (1996) claimed that students' familiarity with the content of the targeted texts in reference to their prior experience achieved in their daily lives affected their understanding of the target language. In support of this claim, Khan (2016) found that incorporating the local culture in teaching the English language was a good strategy for cross-cultural understanding. Mahardika (2018) stated that culturally familiar materials are beneficial since these local cultural materials help students learn English better. Familiarity with the cultural material lessened foreign nuances and reduced students' stress levels while learning. These scholars' claims affirm that integrating indigenous culture into English language teaching is an aid to enhance students' achievements.

Susan C. Barfield and Joëlle Uzarski (2009) further, mentioned in their article that integrating local indigenous culture into English language learning not only educated learners about indigenous people in their own countries and throughout the world; it also made learning English more relevant for indigenous students in those classrooms (2009). Including indigenous cultures in teaching English is becoming more important and common in many parts of the world. In Europe, the study of American indigenous languages and cultures are being studied at

the Latin America Institute at the Free University of Berlin, and the Department of Indigenous Languages and Cultures at the University of Leyden in Holland. The approach to basic education offered by the *World Conference on Education for All* (2000) presented another insight into the world of teaching and learning, focusing on the philosophy of considering the unique needs and 'culture of each community'. In this regard, it can be argued that culturally responsive pedagogy encourages the integration of indigenous culture into the course. Hence, it is desirable to discuss further culturally responsive pedagogy in brief.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is a student-centered approach to teaching that includes cultural references and recognizes the importance of students' cultural backgrounds and experiences in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The approach is meant to promote the engagement, enrichment, and achievement of all students by embracing learners' diversity, identifying and nurturing students' cultural strengths, and validating students' lived experiences and their place in the world (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Culturally responsive pedagogy can be materialized by teachers who are committed to cultural competence, establish high expectations, and position themselves as both facilitators and learners. Teachers who utilize Cultural Responsive Teaching practices value students' cultural and linguistic resources and view this knowledge as capital to build upon rather than as a barrier to learning. These teachers use this capital (i.e. personal experiences and interests) as the basis for instructional connections to facilitate student learning

and development. Teachers who use CRT apply interactive, and collaborative teaching methods, strategies, and ways of interacting that support students' cultural, linguistic, and racial experiences; and that integrate the methods with evidence-based practices (EBPs, Harlin & Souto-Manning, 2009; Hersi & Watkinson, 2012; Nieto et al., 2008; Santamaria, 2009).

The literature reviewed above brings together the various scholars' affirmations and claims for integrating indigenous/local cultures into the teaching and learning of the English language.

Method

This section describes the subjects under study, and how they were selected for inclusion in this study. In addition, the instruments and tools used to collect information are discussed. Data collection and analysis procedures are also presented. This section concludes with some of the methodological limitations.

Research Design

The study employed a hybrid methodology using sequential mixed methods. Creswell (2003) has described mixed methodology as one in which the researcher collects, analyzes, and integrates both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in multiple studies in a sustained program of inquiry. It can be conceptualized as combining quantitative and qualitative research in a concurrent, sequential, conversion, or parallel way.

Sample Selection and Description of Participants

The subjects for this study were students of the junior class (Grade 5) at a

privately funded secondary level school in Itahari, Sunsari. The total number of participants was 30. They were selected because their curiosity level was found to be high to new cross-cultural activities and

practices, their course curriculum was implicitly connected with the objectivity of the research study, and some students in these classes came from the targeted Tharu community.

Table 1

Research Participants

	Male	Female	Total
Grade 5	17	13	30

Materials/Instruments

The researcher applied various instruments and materials in the process of this action research. The main instruments were background study, literature, and journals, students’ works and classroom artifacts: students’ reading, students’ writings, drawings, handicrafts, celebration, cultural dress exhibition, songs, food items, interviews, and surveys.

Procedure

The implementation of the cross-cultural project occurred in two distinct phases:

Phase 1: Sampling, Consent, and Orientation

Firstly, the participants were selected for the study. The consent was taken from the parents for the process. Thereafter, the participants were given an orientation about multiculturalism and inclusiveness shedding light on ‘Joorshital’ in particular.

Phase 2: Action and Activities in Implementation

During the intervention, the subjects were engaged in various

activities. Firstly, they were instructed by a Tharu expert about the festival. Secondly, they were engaged in community visits to meet and observe the Tharu people and houses. Thirdly, they were engaged in the festival celebration with food and clothes of that community. Focus group discussions and observations were carried out among each group of students, their parents, and teachers as part of the process. Teachers, parents, and students participated in research activities such as conducting dialogue conferences, workshops, and formal and informal talks during the intervention. Furthermore, the actions were executed through various classroom activities like quizzes, drawing, writing essays, and poetry sessions relating them to the festival. The goal of the study was to observe the development of inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through cross-cultural understanding and respect.

In a nutshell, in the course of the project implementation, the following activities were executed by the students and the teachers in the classroom and the community.

- A discussion on the 'Joorshital' festival by a Tharu community leader
- Meeting local Tharu people with questionnaires and interviewing them
- Panel discussion program inviting Tharu cultural experts
- Learning about local festivals of ethnic communities in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh for an international dimension
- Celebrating the 'Joorshital' festival with related food and attire at school
- Essay and quiz competitions with evaluation tools
- Oratory competition
- Drawing competition and photo fair
- Collaboration with partner schools and exchange of activities between them

Limitations

This study collected data from the students selected from a big, heterogeneous group. There was no measure of validity or reliability because the survey was created specifically for this study.

Results

The study was undertaken with various activities as per the objectives. The theories of culturally responsive teaching and cross-cultural pedagogy set the path for the objective analysis. The Tharu festival 'Joorshital' was taken as the resource and

material for the study. The students of grade 5 studying in a privately funded English medium school located at Itahari, Sunsari, were the subjects through whom the activities were executed. The students exhibited higher level of enthusiasm and curiosity while the activities were implemented. The close observation of the student behavior and achievement before the project implementation and the time while the activities were being carried on, the distinctly different perceptions could be identified in their attitude and understanding. The major findings are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Students' engagement in various activities relating to the festival 'Joorshital' remarkably enhanced their curiosity and motivation towards it. They asked several questions about the festival that most of them had never heard before. Even Tharu students did not have authentic knowledge of the festival 'Joorshital'. The students of other ethnic backgrounds also showed much interest in it. Their respect for the Tharu indigenous festival and culture increased. 'Joorshital' became the catchy term for them, and they buzzed about it in their peer groups for a long time. The sharing of the Tharu cultural content on social media increased; and the teachers also shared and commented on the matter of 'Joorshital' on social media.

Table 2

Students' Awareness about 'Joorshital'

The number of students who knew about 'Joorshital' before	The number of students who knew about 'Joorshital' after
3	30

The next achievement of the interaction was that the integration of the Tharu indigenous festival 'Joorshital' with their language learning program provided the students with an encouraging environment for using authentic language. They got exposed to genuine and contextualized language use. The participants could easily engage and interact with the native Tharu people improving their listening and speaking skills both in local language and target language by engaging themselves in conversations, performances, and activities.

The participants' opportunities to participate and engage in the interview, interaction, and celebration of the festival 'Joorshital' provided a unique platform for immersing themselves in indigenous culture. They got engaged in dance, music, food, storytelling, and other traditional practices and rituals of the festival which helped to deepen their understanding of the customs and beliefs of the Tharu community. As a result, their cultural competence was duly enhanced.

The contextualized and authentic environment created by the celebratory nature of the cultural festival significantly enhanced student motivation and engagement. Learning became more pleasant, enjoyable, and spontaneous

fostering a more positive learning environment.

Engaging with indigenous communities through festivals promoted intercultural understanding and empathy. Students gained insight into different communities' views, values, and perspectives, contributing to their development as culturally sensitive and globally aware individuals.

The participants' engagement and interaction with the local Tharu people in the community, and the discussion and sharing that took place in their classroom among themselves offered an opportunity to practice various language functions. They learned to make comparisons, give descriptions, and express preferences while participating in the activities related to the festival which ultimately helped to improve their language proficiency.

The indigenous festival provided sets of authentic materials, such as traditional songs, stories, and artifacts. These resources could be used to develop authentic and culturally relevant language learning materials, fostering a deeper connection between language and culture.

Indigenous cultural festivals such as 'Joorshital' helped to involve the broader community, creating opportunities for students to interact with native indigenous people outside the

classroom. This engagement promoted real-life language use and encouraged the learners to apply their language skills in authentic social contexts.

In the course of intervention, the participants got an opportunity to expose themselves in to the real-life situation, and interactive language use which benefitted them in two ways: First, they learnt and assimilated with the Tharu culture and festivals; and second, they used English language as the medium of

communication when they engaged in pedagogical activities such as speech, essay writing, international collaboration and presentations. Consequently, they grew more tolerant to each-other culturally, and they developed language competency as well.

Thirty students were engaged in pedagogical activities such as oratory, essay writing, and drawing competition. Few samples are presented for evidence here.

Figure 1

Students in Essay Writing Competition



Figure 2

Students Participating in Drawing Competition



Figure 3

Parents' and Visitors' Feedback

PARENT

ISA Parent/ Guardian Activity Evaluation Form	
No. of activity	उत्तरशीलता पर्व
Title of activity	
Your name	उत्तर शर्मा तामाङ
Your child's name	आर्यन तामाङ
Class	पाँच (५)
Please comment on the impact this activity has had on your child and in your local community.	
यो विद्यालयमा उत्तरशीलता आएको लाग्यो। यसले विद्यालयमा आर्यन मा कुनै पनि विषयमा बढिया कोही गरी आर्यनलाई उत्तरीको विकास उपरोक्त फाइ। जसो लाग्यो काम लेखेर र ब्याचमा उत्तरशीलता थियो। अहिले उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो। जसो आर्यनलाई उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो।	
If you have been directly involved in this activity what impact did it have on you?	
मलाई पनि यो उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो। जसो आर्यनलाई उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो। जसो आर्यनलाई उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो।	
Any other comments? You may like to mention how this activity can be improved in future	
जसो विद्यालयमा उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो। जसो आर्यनलाई उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो।	

VISITOR

ISA Visitor Evaluation Form	
No. of activity	उत्तरशीलता पर्व
Title of activity	
Your name	श्रीमती शर्मिष्ठा शर्मा
Please comment on the impact this activity has had on the people involved.	
यो विद्यालयमा उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो। जसो आर्यनलाई उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो।	
Please comment on the impact this activity has had on you.	
मलाई पनि यो उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो। जसो आर्यनलाई उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो।	
Please comment on the impact this activity has had on the school generally.	
यो विद्यालयमा उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो। जसो आर्यनलाई उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो।	
If you have any suggestions for how to improve this activity, please comment here.	
जसो विद्यालयमा उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो। जसो आर्यनलाई उत्तरशीलतामा बढिया लाग्यो।	

Discussion

The findings of this study are somehow time and place specific which show a certain level of convergence and alignment to and from the literature I discussed above. First, talking about convergence, the integration of the indigenous Tharu festival ‘Joorshital’ helped to create a remarkably positive environment for questioning and interaction in the classroom and outside the classroom. The common attitude of the students towards the festival became significantly positive.

The students showed an optimum level of enthusiasm for the festival. Their respect for the Tharu culture was visibly enhanced. The students were deeply engaged in the festival celebration and community visit. They interacted with the Tharu elderly people discussing the origin of celebrating ‘Joorshital’ in their community. The students did not directly approach the community people rather they met them

with some fruits and sweets first; then they talked informally for a while; and finally they asked some relevant questions based on the festival. Thereafter, returning to the classroom, they prepared the journal of their visit. Then they were assigned an essay writing task which they performed with great motivation and energy.

The findings of this study also revealed certain important cultural issues of the Tharu community. Though they seemed to be proud of their culture, they also showed that the newer generation of their community is not much aware of their own festival. Most of the youths and adults did not exhibit their knowledge about ‘Joorshital’ comprehensively. The elderly people did not seem to be much interactive due to linguistic impediments though few Tharu leaders and teachers provided the detail of the festival to the students. In this regard, the most important the findings was the level of cultural awareness of the students of heterogeneous backgrounds.

They collected information about the festival through interviews and interaction with the Tharu community people and performed the celebration at school among themselves. Further, the Tharu expert's facilitation and interaction with the students deepened the students' knowledge of 'Joorshital' and 'Siruwa' festivals. Thereafter, the students' model celebration of the festival at school added more flavor and knowledge about the festival. They wore the Tharu typical dresses on that occasion and prepared food items like 'bagiya' and shared them as god's offerings among themselves. They could achieve the practical skills to celebrate the festival.

The empirical knowledge the students gained engaging themselves in this festival was reflected in various pedagogical activities in English language classes. In doing so, their awareness towards the Tharu culture became stronger and intact. The students were engaged in essay writing and quiz program which showed their deepened knowledge of the Tharu culture. The discussion sessions and talk program among the students about the festival helped to enhance their interpersonal skills such as listening, turn-taking, intervening, collaborating, and group work. The medium of instruction while students' presentation and classroom discussions were English and the students who were submissive and backward in questioning and public speaking became more vocal and confident after the implementation of the projects. They improved not only their vocabulary but also their sentence structures and meaning making capabilities.

Conclusion

The Tharu festival 'Joorshital' is an important cultural heritage of the Tharu community. It is an interesting festival with fun and merrymaking as well as a great message for the well-being of the community people. The study also infers that integrating indigenous/local culture, especially the festivals like 'Joorshital' is very effective in enhancing students' awareness about a particular indigenous culture. Most importantly, it helps students to become more motivated and interactive in the learning of English language inside and outside the classroom. Students' engagement and participation increase during the implementation of the activities. They love teaching content borrowed from cross-cultural and intercultural areas. At the same time, English teachers are encouraged to incorporate the local indigenous culture into the course of teaching English, especially at the elementary level because students come from different cultural backgrounds with different prior experiences and knowledge. In such heterogeneous classrooms, integrating local indigenous culture can facilitate target language learning. By integrating the local culture into the English language teaching and learning process, it is proved that students can have intercultural as well as cross-cultural awareness that facilitate them to cope with intercultural communication barriers. As a result, students are encouraged to achieve intercultural as well as cross-cultural competence and promote their own intercultural identities.

Implications

The findings of the present study pointed out that the integration of local indigenous culture can be an effective tool for meaningful learning. This implied that

integration of local indigenous culture can ensure better teaching and learning experience. The students will be able to feel connected with the teaching in the class as they feel comfortable with the local indigenous cultural context.

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