

Exploring the Lived Experiences of ELT Teachers: Nepali Teachers' Voices

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of Nepali English language teachers teaching English in Nepal, with a special focus on the challenges and transformations they face as learners and educators. Drawing on interviews with four high school teachers from institutional schools in the Kathmandu Valley, the research employs a transformational theoretical framework to transcribe, code, and thematically analyze data. The findings highlight persistent traditional teacher roles and reveal critical challenges, including discriminatory policies, multilingual classroom dynamics, and inadequate pedagogical training. The study also emphasizes the shifting status of English from a foreign to a second language and the influence of pedagogical advancements and technological innovations, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have redefined teachers' roles, transforming them from knowledge dispensers to guides, mentors, and facilitators.

Keywords: English language teachers, changing roles, pedagogical shifts, hardships and transformation, communicative learning

Introduction

I am Dinesh Pandey, a teacher and principal of a private school where I have been teaching for more than 10 years. During my journey as a teacher and a principal, I have encountered layers of roles and responsibilities a teacher has to demonstrate. Supporting the discourse, Awasthi (2023) specified that a teacher should have the ability to adapt to changing educational contexts, balancing the roles of a knowledge provider, mentor, facilitator, and lifelong learner. In my experience, teaching goes far beyond delivering lessons in the classroom. I have often found myself addressing my students' emotional, social, and academic needs, guiding them through personal challenges and helping them realize their potential. As a principal, I have also taken on the role of a leader, motivating my team of teachers to embrace innovative practices and ensure a learner-centred environment.

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One vivid memory is from the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were forced to transition to online teaching. I had to quickly learn digital tools and platforms, train my staff, and provide continuous support to students and parents. This period emphasized the importance of being a flexible and tech-savvy educator, a role that I had not anticipated in my earlier years of teaching. These experiences have taught me that the role of a teacher is dynamic and ever-evolving, shaped by the needs of learners, societal demands, and technological advancements. A teacher is not just an instructor but also a mentor, guide, and lifelong learner who continually transforms to meet the needs of the time.

My Anecdote

As an English Teacher, I found myself navigating the ever-evolving landscape of the ELT classroom, where my role continuously shifted and adapted to meet the diverse needs of my students. One memorable instance that encapsulates the dynamic nature of my teaching journey occurred during a lesson on Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet."

While discussing the complexities of the play's themes and characters, I noticed a student, Raju, who appeared disengaged and distracted. Sensing an opportunity to explore alternative teaching methods, I deviated from the traditional lecture-style approach and instead encouraged open dialogue and group discussions.

I asked Raju about his thoughts on the play, expecting a hesitant response due to his reserved nature. However, to my surprise, Raju's eyes lit up as he eagerly shared his interpretation of Juliet's character, drawing parallels to his own experiences growing up in a conservative household.

Inspired by Raju's newfound enthusiasm, I encouraged other students to share their perspectives, transforming the classroom into a vibrant hub of discussion and exchange. In that moment, I realized the transformative power of embracing dynamic roles as an English teacher, fostering a supportive learning environment where students felt empowered to voice their opinions and explore their identities through literature. This anecdote exemplifies the narratives of Nepali teachers in ELT classrooms, where flexibility, empathy, and innovation are key in navigating the ever-changing landscape of education.

My experiences as a teacher and principal, navigating the dynamic roles and responsibilities in a constantly evolving educational landscape, sparked my interest in conducting this research. Witnessing firsthand the challenges teachers face, from adapting to technological advancements during the COVID-19 pandemic to addressing the diverse needs of students in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, I realized the importance of understanding and documenting these transformations. This journey inspired me to explore the shifting roles of English language teachers to reflect on my practices and contribute to the broader discourse on teacher development and educational policy.

Literature Review

With the purpose of this study in mind, I reviewed national and international literature from different courses to find the research gap and provide the theoretical grounding for this research.

English Teachers in Nepal: Then and Now

I learned to write and read English from a teacher who had passed only grade 10. Later, we were taught English words and sentences by a teacher with an Intermediate in Education (I. Ed.), and in grades nine and ten, our Teacher held a two-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.). A four-year bachelor's degree with an English major qualifies one to take the licensing test required for secondary-level teaching in community schools (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). Community school teachers undergo in-service training supported by the government, whereas private schools prioritize English proficiency and pedagogy over licensing requirements when hiring (Sharma, 2019). Two decades ago, an intermediate-level qualification sufficed for lower secondary teaching, but today, private schools require at least a bachelor's degree for primary levels and a master's degree for secondary levels (Khanal, 2021).

With over 17 years of teaching experience in Nepal's institutional schools, I still recall starting as a teenager, tasked with teaching grades six and seven using a bulky English course book filled with complex vocabulary alongside a grammar practice book with structural drills. Carrying an Oxford dictionary was essential for me and my students. In contrast, during my high school years, large classrooms of 145 students were taught by a teacher who translated lessons into Nepali and provided grammar tuition at home. Today, teaching has evolved significantly. In this note, Livingston (2017) stated that modern classrooms' smart boards and grammar-translation methods have given way to communicative approaches. English is now part of integrated courses, reflecting changing pedagogical practices driven by diverse and complex teaching contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996; Cranton, 1994, 1996), emphasizing changes in frames of reference and structured assumptions that shape perceptions, cognition, and actions. Transformative learning encourages learners and educators to develop frames of reference that are inclusive, self-reflective, and integrative, enabling them to adapt to evolving circumstances. It advocates autonomous thinking, empowering individuals to make independent meanings rather than relying on others' beliefs. In education, transformative learning highlights the importance of teachers and principals in fostering critical reflection and adapting teaching methods to meet rapidly changing societal and technological demands. As Harari (2018) suggests, future education will prioritize the ability to synthesize and interpret information over acquiring knowledge. This aligns with the principal's role in guiding teachers to embrace critical incidents, concept mapping, and life histories, which foster reflection and adaptability. By leading transformative practices,

principals ensure teaching strategies remain relevant and prepare learners for dynamic future challenges.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to explore the evolving roles of English teachers in Nepal. The data collection process involved interviewing four high school teachers from institutional schools in the Kathmandu Valley. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing participants to express their experiences while enabling researchers to probe deeper into specific areas (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up.

Table 1:
Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Teaching Experience	Qualification	School Type
P1	Female	15 years	Master's in English	Institutional School
P2	Male	10 years	Bachelor's in English	Institutional School
P3	Female	12 years	Bachelor's in Education (B.Ed.)	Institutional School
P4	Male	18 years	Master's in Education	Institutional School

Participants were purposefully selected based on their teaching experience, qualifications, and representation of diverse school settings. The analysis was guided by a transformational theoretical framework (Mezirow, 1991), facilitating the interpretation of findings regarding changes in teaching practices, pedagogy, and professional roles. The findings provide valuable insights into the shifting dynamics of English teaching in Nepal, which are influenced by socio-cultural, technological, and policy-related changes.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study, derived from in-person open interviews, illuminate the transformative roles of teachers throughout their careers. The analysis categorizes these roles into four key themes: teachers' learning experiences, the challenges they faced during the early stages of their jobs, their professional transformations through in-service training, and their evolving responsibilities during the pandemic. Each theme highlights the dynamic nature of teaching and the continuous adaptation required to meet personal and systemic challenges.

Learning varies during student life

I found diverse experiences in learning English among current English language teachers in Nepali institutional schools, shaped by factors such as age, background, and

schooling. Teacher H, Teacher S, and I fall within the same age group—our late 30s. Despite following similar syllabi and pedagogy during our time, we endured comparable challenges in learning English. However, Teacher H was more fortunate, having attended an institutional school in the Kathmandu Valley. In this context, Smith (2019) points out that the challenges teachers face in their early years of learning a language are often influenced by their educational background and the resources available. In this regard, Teacher H and Teacher S share their experience as followings:

Though I was born in eastern Terai, Nepal, I grew up in Kathmandu Valley. I completed my schooling at a private boarding school in Kathmandu. In the beginning, learning English was a challenging experience because I had studied up to grade two in government school, and I had not learnt even the English alphabet until then. I got admitted to the UKG in boarding school. We had to read all subjects in English except Nepali. Though the medium of instruction was English, we learned English using the grammar-translation method. Memorizing the meaning of English words with their meaning in Nepali was very tough. Teachers used to beat very hard with a duster if we forgot the spelling and meaning of even a single word.

Teacher H's response can be interpreted through the lens of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991). Initially, Teacher H's experience of learning English was painful, mainly due to the abrupt transition from a government school to a private boarding school where English was the primary medium of instruction. This aligns with Mezirow's concept of a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991), where individuals are confronted with experiences that challenge their existing frames of reference. Teacher H's struggle with the grammar-translation method, marked by harsh discipline for mistakes, reflects the restrictive nature of early educational experiences that hindered their ability to engage with the language meaningfully. According to Cranton (1996), transformative learning occurs when individuals critically reflect on their experiences, leading them to adopt new perspectives and more inclusive, reflective ways of thinking. Despite these early difficulties, teacher H's eventual transformation in embracing English exemplifies this shift from a rigid, memorization-based approach to a broader understanding of language learning.

This transformation also resonates with Brookfield's (1995) emphasis on critical reflection in adult learning, where individuals reconsider their past assumptions in light of new, more empowering experiences. Teacher H's experience highlights how educators' transformative learning journeys can reshape their pedagogical views, ultimately influencing their teaching practices and roles in the classroom. Similarly, Teacher S shared:

My school was in a rural area of Rupandehi district. It was a government school. Most of my friends were from the Bhojpuri language-speaking community. Our English Teacher was from the Maithili language community. But my mother tongue was Nepali. Our Teacher used to translate every English word into either Maithili or Hindi. For us, English was the most difficult subject. We were never motivated to learn English.

Teacher S's response can be interpreted through Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), highlighting the challenges of learning English in a multilingual context. The Teacher's use of Maithili and Hindi to explain English reflects a frame of reference shaped by cultural and linguistic differences, which may have restricted the students' engagement with English (Mezirow, 1991). This aligns with the theory's concept of a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991), where learners encounter difficulties that challenge their existing language-learning assumptions. The lack of motivation and the absence of a conducive learning environment suggest a missed opportunity for critical reflection and transformation, essential for meaningful learning, as Cranton (1996) points out.

Teacher H's experience, while not as difficult as Teacher S's, reflects a transition from rote learning to a more structured yet rigid approach to English learning. As Mezirow (1991) suggests, transformative learning involves a critical shift in one's frame of reference. Teacher H's experience with early exposure to English, followed by strict grammar-focused instruction and frequent punishment for mistakes, exemplifies the challenges posed by an education system that prioritizes memorization over meaningful engagement with language. There is a heavy emphasis on traditional pedagogical approaches to grammar but not innovative teaching (Brookfield, 1995). It limited opportunities for critical reflection and real-world application of English, aligning with the barriers to transformative learning.

On the other hand, teacher P and Teacher R have different and mixed experiences in learning the English language. Both studied in community school, but the syllabus and pedagogy were different from those of our time.

English was my most difficult subject at the beginning of primary classes. But in high school, we were encouraged to speak and act in drama using English. We used to get 25 marks for that. It somehow motivated me to speak English, at least in English class.

Teacher R: My school was a government school, but our English Teacher was outstanding in speaking and writing English. He was a renowned English teacher in the district. He used to make us write stories and leave letters regularly. Though it was a challenging subject for us, we always had fun learning it.

Transformation During an In-Service Career

In-service career transformation refers to how teachers evolve in their roles, adapting and refining their teaching practices in response to changing educational contexts, professional experiences, and personal growth. This transformation involves significant shifts in their knowledge, teaching strategies, attitudes, and beliefs throughout their careers. Teachers who enter the profession are often shaped by the pedagogical practices they experience as learners. Still, they incorporate new approaches, methodologies, and curriculum changes into their teaching practice over time. In this support, Mezirow (1991) stated that these changes are often a result of ongoing professional development, exposure to new theories, and the evolving needs of students.

All my participants shared their experiences of transformation in their knowledge, pedagogical skills, attitudes, and beliefs during their careers. Present English teachers were taught when they were learners in a context where they dictated, controlled, and followed the prescribed books in the classroom. And at the beginning of their career as teachers, they were guided by the same principles. But time changed, and the teachers incorporated the transformed pedagogy and syllabus. The participant teachers narrated how they transformed from a dictator teacher to a mentor and facilitator, curriculum follower to curriculum designer, and finally transformed from a sage-like Teacher to a guide. Teacher H shared:

I have learned that the role of the Teacher has been shifted from active agents to passive guides. Now, students have to play more active roles than teachers. The Teacher's role is to arouse interest in learners and keep them engaged in the classes. Due to the availability of online sources, learners can learn new things independently; teachers have to assist them in their tasks. And we have to adapt to the present situation to meet the requirements of the present-day world. Teachers no longer claim that they are the only sources of knowledge. Their roles have shifted to helping the students find and select information to match the course requirements. Textbooks are not simply enough to quench the thirst of the students.

Teacher H reflects the shift in the role of educators from being active agents of knowledge delivery to passive guides who facilitate student-centred learning. As Mezirow (1991) suggests, transformative learning requires an ongoing adaptation process to new realities, with teachers increasingly supporting students in their independent learning journeys. Teacher H emphasizes the importance of engaging students and fostering their autonomy, as they can now access vast online resources that allow them to learn independently. This aligns with the shift from traditional, teacher-centred approaches to more collaborative, learner-centered models, where teachers help students navigate and select information that meets course requirements (Brookfield, 1995). The above sharing indicates an evolving understanding of the Teacher's role in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

Similarly, Teacher P shared:

Within the five years of teaching experience, I have experienced many changes in my teaching styles and means. The significant distinction between yesterday's and today's teaching is that I was the sage on the stage, but today I'm the guide at my students' side. I have been using many established pedagogical techniques, and sometimes I have established myself. I enjoy experimenting with different communicative strategies with my students.

Teacher P describes a significant shift in their teaching approach, moving from a traditional "sage on the stage" model to that of a "guide on the side," a transformation that aligns with the principles of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). The Teacher emphasizes the adoption of various pedagogical strategies and the enjoyment of experimenting with communicative techniques. This reflects a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches, where the Teacher's role is to facilitate and support students' active engagement

in learning rather than simply delivering content (Brookfield, 1995). His openness to experimentation highlights the dynamic nature of teaching, underscoring the importance of adaptation in response to changing educational environments. Teacher R highlighted:

In the beginning of my teaching, I was just like a dictator. I favoured a silent classroom and thought they must listen to my lecture. I was one to tell everything true. However, over time, my role as a teacher has been to provide a friendly, cooperative, and fun environment for the students, which can be achieved by being creative and patient in teaching. My role in the classroom is not only a teacher but also a good mentor and facilitator.

Listening to Teacher S, I came to know that his narrative describes a significant shift in their teaching approach, moving from a traditional "sage on the stage" model to that of a "guide on the side," a transformation that aligns with the principles of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). He emphasizes the adoption of various pedagogical strategies and the enjoyment of experimenting with communicative techniques. This reflects a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches, where the Teacher's role is to facilitate and support students' active engagement in learning rather than simply delivering content (Brookfield, 1995). Finally, Teacher S stated:

I used to get very irritated by the noise made by students in the classroom, for which I punished them several times at the beginning of my career. Later, I participated in trainings organized by ECEC and other teachers' training programs. From training, I learned to be a caretaker, guide, advisor, friend, and supporter of students.

The above sharing illustrates a significant shift in their approach to classroom management and student interaction, aligning with transformative learning principles (Mezirow, 1991). Initially, the Teacher's response to classroom noise was punitive, reflecting a more traditional, authoritarian stance. However, after participating in professional development programs, he embraced a more supportive and nurturing role, recognizing the importance of being a caretaker, guide, and mentor. This transformation aligns with Mezirow's (1991) notion of critical reflection, where educators question their previous assumptions and adapt their practices to create a more inclusive, student-centred learning environment. The Teacher grew as he shared the role of ongoing professional development in fostering transformative learning and pedagogical change.

Hardships and transformation during COVID pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a seismic pedagogical shift in the academic world, forcing teachers and students into prolonged isolation within their homes. Despite these constraints, the dissemination of knowledge could not be entirely halted. Technology emerged as a critical enabler, with virtual learning evolving from a supplemental tool to a dominant mode of education delivery during the pandemic. This rapid expansion of online teaching and learning established it as a reliable alternative to traditional classroom settings (Dhawan, 2020). However, this shift was not without challenges. The adoption of advanced technologies,

such as personalized online learning services and artificial intelligence (AI)-powered platforms, has not only transformed instructional methods but also raised questions about the future role of teachers in education (Selwyn, 2021). For English teachers in Nepal, the transition was particularly demanding, marked by technological, pedagogical, and logistical hardships. While many have successfully adapted to the new norms, the process of transformation is ongoing, underscoring the need for continuous professional development and support systems to bridge these gaps (Adhikari & Shrestha, 2021). In this discourse, I invited my participants to share their experiences. Teacher H shared:

In the beginning, it was weird to use technology to conduct classes online. It was my first experience. I had to take three days training conducted by PABSON. I learned making PowerPoint slides from computer teacher. Both teachers and students suffered a lot in the beginning. Now it is like walking in the park in terms of preparing teaching learning materials and presenting in the virtual class. We can instantly share whatever we have with the students on the screen. So, the role has been changed from the authoritative Teacher to an ICT expert teacher.

Teacher H's response illustrates the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching practices, particularly in adopting technology for online classes. Initially, the experience was challenging and unfamiliar, requiring formal training and peer support to develop skills such as creating PowerPoint presentations. This reflects broader findings that educators globally faced significant hurdles in embracing digital tools (Dhawan, 2020; Ali, 2020). Over time, Teacher H adapted and found online teaching manageable, appreciating its efficiency, such as instantly sharing materials with students. This journey underscores the evolving role of teachers from traditional authoritative figures to technologically adept facilitators, aligning with the paradigm shift in education highlighted by Selwyn (2021) and Adhikari & Shrestha (2021). At the initial phase, I was very perplexed about the procedure of conducting online class before since I had never done it before. This has taught me a lesson. A teacher should always be proactive to cope up with any advert situation. Now I have learned so many techniques I can implement in online class that I had never heard before.

Conclusion

This research was conducted with the aim of exploring explored diverse learning experiences of present English teachers during their school life. The diversity in learning was due to the discriminative educational policies since Rana regime and the establishment of Durbar High School in 1854. The complex multilingual society and the English language itself being very unusual those days made the learning of students in rural areas complex and painful. Whereas students from privileged guardians got the chance to go to the institutional schools, and learn everything in English medium. In conclusion, this research highlights the evolving roles of English language teachers in Nepal, shaped by historical, social, and technological transformations. From the early struggles of students and teachers due to discriminatory policies and inadequate pedagogical approaches to the shifting demands of the modern educational landscape, teachers have undergone significant transformation.

The rise of English as a prominent language, coupled with advancements in pedagogy and technology, has redefined teachers' roles from authoritative knowledge providers to facilitators, mentors, and technological experts. The study underscores the need for curriculum designers and educational institutions to address these changes, ensuring that teacher training and recruitment align with the evolving status of English and the multifaceted roles of educators in today's classrooms.

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