



Technology in optimizing English language learners' classroom engagement: A narrative inquiry

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Abstract

Technology is taking over the world in every sector nowadays, including education. In such a context, this study explores the roles of technology in optimizing English language learners' classroom engagement. It followed narrative inquiry as a research method, considering that non-numerical discursive data support exploring such phenomena. In this study, the data were collected from four purposively selected participants through interview techniques using interview guidelines as the data collection tools. This study revealed that teachers face challenges in ICT integration in school education because of insufficient expertise, a lack of collaborative culture among educators, and inadequate training related to technology integration. This study can be beneficial for those who are interested in exploring technology-integrated education.

Keywords: English language learning, Technology, Education, ELT, Nepal education

1.0 Introduction

Technology basically refers to the use of knowledge in order to achieve practical goals and objectives in a productive way using tangible tools. In other words, it refers to the application of current knowledge for useful purposes (Hooper & Rieber, 1995). In education, technology brings real-world problem-based curricula and provides the tools for enhancing learning in the classroom (Kozma, 2003). It interestingly scaffolds the learners and leads them towards better learning. In this globalizing world, various types of technology aids, such as PowerPoint, Multimedia, and Websites, Internet applications, CD-ROMs, video technology, computer software programs, etc. (Reid, 2002) have been introduced in the education field for open learning (Debevec & Shih, 2006). Moreover, the integration of technology has been highly celebrated in the classroom worldwide (Cope, 2002). So, technology is dramatically taking place in the field of education with its expanded support for learners for open learning resources (Reid, 2002). Thus, technology integration is unavoidable in the field of education these days.

While the field of education is embracing technology integration worldwide, users need to be skillful for its effective and purposeful utilization. In the English Learning and Teaching (ELT) classroom, technology has been regarded as a tool for increasing the learners' engagement in learning and improving their academic abilities, as it lowers learning anxiety (Riasati et al., 2012). However, it has some limitations too. The scholars like Riasati et al. (2012) criticized that the technology-integrated classroom can be affected by various factors: inaccessibility, lack of teacher training, the attitudes of both teachers and students, and lack of time, etc. Despite the challenges, Warschauer (2002) has indicated the gradual changes in the roles of technology,

from tutor to tool, in education in this modern age. Now, technology is regarded as a part of education worldwide.

The technology makes ELT classrooms interactive and creates an authentic environment so that the students constructively learn the language (Wang, 2005). Thus, the ELT classroom demands technological integrity. The use of technology, such as a series of booths (cassette decks), microphones, and headphones, has been in practice since the sixties in educational settings (Singhal, 1997). Nowadays, language classrooms are unimaginable without technology. Terms like CALL (Computer-assisted Language Learning), CAI (Computer-Aided Instruction), CALI (Computer-Aided Language Instruction), and TPACK (Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge) are the technology integration frameworks that are common in language education.

In such a context, the teachers benefit from automated tasks, smooth administration, supportive feedback, and plagiarism detection (Pokrivcakova, 2019), etc., with the help of technology. Moreover, technology offers unlimited open resources to language learners (Bull & Ma, 2001, as cited in Ahmadi, 2018), where teachers need to design suitable tasks for them to optimize the students' learning engagement in the classroom. As today's education, especially language education, is highly influenced by technology, it is significant to explore technological integrity in education. Thus, this study investigates the roles of technology in the optimization of learners' learning engagement and the teachers' strategies for ensuring it.

Contextually, Nepal has also been using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education for decades. Nepalese education policy has introduced ICT as a subject and tool for school education (Dhital, 2018). However, the concept of ICT in the Nepalese educational context seems to be superficial (Shields, 2011). In addition, the human resources for the effective use of ICT in education are barely maintained, as IT-related programs or courses are not included sufficiently in the Nepalese educational institutions.

Furthermore, many of the school teachers are not familiar with the technology, resulting in unsatisfactory ICT practice in school education, though the policies have been made and the technology tools have been distributed to the schools (Joshi, 2017). In such a scenario, this study explores the teachers' understanding of the roles of technology in optimizing the English language learners' learning engagement in the classroom and their strategies for effective use of technology in language learning classrooms. Relating to such context, Pangen (2016) indicated that less exposure to technology has been troublesome for educational practitioners, individuals, and institutions in Nepal. Since today's learning demands ICT as a tool for learning (Shakya et al., 2017), this study has explored the practitioners' ways of using technology and their understanding of its significance in ELT classrooms.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the teachers' understanding of the roles of technology in optimizing English language learners' learning engagement. It also aimed to identify the teachers' experience of engaging English language learners in technology-integrated classrooms.

1.2 Research Questions

The study was carried out on the basis of the following research questions to meet the purposes:

1. How do English language teachers understand the roles of technology in optimizing English language learners' classroom engagement?
2. How do English language teachers engage English language learners in a technology-integrated classroom?

2.0 Literature Review

For this research article, the relevant literature has been reviewed in three strands: technology in the language classrooms, technology in the Nepalese educational context, and sociocultural theory.

2.1 Technology in the Language Classroom

Broadly, the evolution of technology has been crucially influencing the education sector, as it has been influencing other sectors such as trade, business, economy, communication, science, etc. It has significantly changed the educational objectives from routine learning to acquiring information through drill and practice (Shakya & Rauniar, 2002). The technology-integrated ELT classroom improves the learner's motivation, integrated language skills, and their autonomy (Ahmad, 2012) for language learning. So, the presence of technology in the language classroom can increase the learner's learning engagement. Moreover, it supports exploring the new teaching model, benefits for cultivating students' interest in study, promotes communication capacity, provides the flexibility to course content, creates context for language teaching, etc. (Shyamlee, 2012). Eventually, it positively guides the students to do activities in order to explore effective learning initiatives in ELT classrooms.

Modernity demands the maximum use of ICT in language teaching and learning. ICT impacts the ELT classroom by providing open resource materials to the students, positively changing the attitude of learners, promoting learners' autonomy, creating an authentic environment, and helping with learner-centred activities and self-assessment for learners in ELT (Ibrahim, 2010). Nowadays, the ELT classroom would not be possible without technology. The ELT activities have paved the way for new styles of teaching and learning since technological tools, instant messaging, chat rooms, Usenet groups, MOOs, blogs, and wikis (Kern, 2006, as cited in Coskun & Marlowe, 2015) have been introduced for learning language creatively. Moreover, some other innovative technologies, smartphones, social media, and chat/messages, can be significant linguistic and social changers, being more effective alternatives for productive and interesting language teaching and learning activities (Nawaila et al., 2020). So, the integration of technology in English language teaching undoubtedly impacts ELT classes in positive ways.

Though there are positive accounts for technology in education, it also has many challenges in ELT contexts. ICT has brought dramatic modifications in the conventional ways of teaching and learning the language in advanced countries (Poudel, 2022); however, the challenges range from policy to practice in the educational setting (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013) in developing countries. Recently, Ajaj (2021) has explored the difficulties in ICT-integrated classrooms: technical difficulties, poor management of the classroom, unfavourable infrastructure, poor software qualities, teachers' inability to control the classroom, etc. Similarly, Ammade et al. (2018) also claimed that education stakeholders face ICT-related issues in education and suggested that scholars carry out more studies on ICT in education, especially on the types of technology tools that are used in ELT classrooms.

2.2 Technology in the Nepalese Educational Context

The reign of technology has been celebrated worldwide in every sector, from health to education. Nepal, experiencing the rapid growth of technology use, has a history of ICT from the start of telecommunication service in the country in 1913. Later, the country started enjoying the Internet in 1995 (Karki, 2019). Regarding IT in Nepalese education, since IT human resources are extensively demanded worldwide, students are extraordinarily aspiring for IT education in Nepal too (Shakya & Rauniar, 2002). So, it has been indicated that the value of technology is influencing education worldwide, including in developing countries like Nepal.

Regarding the current ICT policy in Nepal, the Ministry of Information and Communication developed the National ICT Policy 2015, focusing on the ICT education system, e-learning, and ICT-based teacher training for computer skills in the teaching and learning process (MoIC, 2015, as cited in Joshi, 2017). However, the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), 2016-2023, frustrates the availability of funding for equipping ICT infrastructure in primary education (Rana et al., 2022). Thus, Shields (2011) has criticized that ideological motivations have significantly driven the ICT policy and practice in Nepal and are offering support for ICT at the surface level without clear intention. The Government of Nepal (GoN) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) have developed and implemented the School Sector Reform Plan (SRRP), which is emphasizing on the use of ICT in education, (Dhital, 2018), though they are unsatisfactory (Joshi, 2017). It shows that Nepalese education system is still struggling to integrate ICT into classroom activities.

However, the recent national educational plan, SSDP (2016-2023), commits to ensuring the appropriate use of ICT, creating a favorable environment based on need and context. It also intends to provide access to learning resources and support for guidelines to be integrated into the curriculum, along with promoting the use of ICT for the efficiency and effectiveness of overall educational governance and management (Dhital, 2018). So, Nepal is prospering in making the ideal policies regarding technology integration in education, upholding the progressive motive.

Since Nepalese education has been introduced to ICT for a long time, some literature has emerged that influences outcomes regarding ICT-integrated education. Most of the studies indicated that the country has been facing many difficulties in technology-integrated education. Recently, Kuwar et al. (2020) identified the technological challenge, pedagogical challenge, time management, inaccessibility, etc., as the major challenges in such education. Similarly, Joshi (2017) has explored some barriers to ICT integration in institutions: lack of infrastructure, digital learning resources, ICT training for teachers, time management in school, technical support, updates with newly introduced technology, etc. Moreover, Rana (2017) found limited technological tools in schools, unsystematic examinations, evaluation, libraries, a lack of qualified manpower, unskilled support staff, and costly technological tools, challenging the effective integration of technology in the Nepalese educational context. Thus, Nepal, as a developing country, is facing many challenges while implementing technology-integrated education system despite the opportunities it offers.

2.3 Sociocultural Theory

Basically, language is acquired through social and cultural interaction. Theoretically, this study leaned on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which mainly posits that social interaction plays a fundamental role in human cognitive development. In other words, Scott and Palincar (2013) said that this theory promotes cooperative learning since it believes that learning takes place through interaction, negotiation, and collaboration. Thus, Vygotsky describes human learning as a social process, and the cognitive development of humans is determined by society and culture. Sharan and Shachar (1988) identified that the learner's engagement in the class significantly determines their academic achievement. So, the learners' engagement in collaboration, discussion, interaction, and negotiation is vital in the ELT classroom.

In this digital age, technological tools have been considered as effective means to enhance learners' language learning. Gee and Hayes (2011) claimed that language can be more interactive if digital media carries it, as digital media has been identified as a delivery system of language. In advanced countries, digital textbooks are very common for ELT or other languages across educational contexts (Bikowski, 2018) which are accessed through mobile digital devices,

increasing learners' engagement. Thus, Williams et al. (1991) suggested that today's language learners are not a monolithic group of people (so-called digital natives) since varieties of technological tools influence language learning. Henceforth, technology has been unavoidable in ELT classrooms as it promotes language learners' engagement and autonomy in learning.

Moreover, technology and language are not considered interrelated only in this digital era, but they have been intertwined deeply with the invention of writing some 5,000 years ago (Chun et al., 2016). So, the digitalization in learning has been a great value to the learners. In this globalized language learning setting, technology sets no boundaries for language learners. Regarding ELT, the use of technology not only enhances the students' ability to learn the English language but also widens language skills such as vocabulary knowledge, grammar skills, pronunciation, and other domains of English (Mallick et. al, 2020). Thus, from the perspective of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, learners' engagement is crucial for language learning, where technology brings about a communicative or interactive environment in the ELT classroom.

3.0 Methodology

This qualitative research employed narrative enquiry as a research design following a constructive paradigm. It has brought the lived experiences of teachers who have been practicing technology-integrated ELT activities in the classroom.

Narrative inquiry offers the human narrative of lived experiences as a source of knowledge and understanding (Clandinin, 2013). In a similar line, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also stated that the narrative approach is both the phenomenon and the method. The narrative approach can also be placed within the sociocultural paradigm as postulated by Vygotsky (1987) and is also an appropriate method (Moen, 2006) for such a study. The teachers are natural storytellers who function together in a social community. Thus, this approach allowed the researchers to engage in conversation with participants who shared stories of their experiences (Clandinin, 2013) on the phenomena under study in this study.

Narrative inquiry is set in human stories of experience that provide researchers with a rich framework through which they investigate the way to research participants' experience of the world depicted through their stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Thus, it helped to probe the holistic views of the teacher-participant in this study. Moreover, it was relevant to this study because it helped to understand the inner psychological worlds of teachers, their inner feelings and their social and educational activities (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Therefore, the narrative inquiry was well-suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experience in technology-integrated teaching. So, this study brought narratives of the participants based on their experiences and understanding of technology-integrated ELT activities for optimizing the learners' engagement in the ELT classroom.

In this study, four secondary-level English teachers from Madhesh province were purposively selected as research participants. These teachers were from the Siraha, Dhanusha, and Mahottari districts of the Madhesh Province. All the teachers had passed their Master's Degree in the English subject. They were selected based on their years of teaching experience and engagement in the technology-integrated ELT classroom.

This study used semi-structured interviews as a research process in order to have an in-depth analysis of the participants' understanding and experiences of using technology in English Language classrooms. We used interview guidelines as the research tools to explore the participants' individual experiences regarding their use of technology in ELT classrooms.

Moreover, this study has maintained credibility, transferability, confidentiality, and dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, as cited in Riyami, 2015) as quality standards for its

accuracy and trustworthiness. Furthermore, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, principle of damage avoidance, and privacy (Hopf, 2004) were taken into account as ethical considerations in the course of this study. Similarly, we also transcribed and thematized the collected data to analyze them for the meaning-making process

4.0 Results and Discussion

This section presents a comprehensive discussion and in-depth analysis of the data pertaining to the utilization of technology to optimize classroom engagement among English language learners. The primary objective of this study was to gain valuable insights into the practices employed by English Language Teachers (ELTs) in the Madhesh Province concerning utilizing technology for enhancing classroom engagement. The Participants were actively involved in instructing the English Language at the secondary level. This narrative inquiry aimed at unraveling discernible patterns, prevalent themes, and underlying factors that contribute to the efficacy of technology in optimizing the classroom engagement of English language learners.

4.1 Teachers' Understanding of Technology in the Language Classroom

The data in this research have shown the participants' profound understanding and familiarity with technology integration in the ELT classroom. The participants exhibited a comprehensive knowledge of various technological tools commonly employed in educational settings, including computers, projectors, smart boards, learning management systems (LMS), online social media networks, televisions, mobile phones, speakers, etc. The participants were found to be remarkably active in utilizing technology-enhanced platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, Cross-Word Lab, Grammarly, and YouTube as integral components of their teaching and learning processes. As digital textbooks have become commonplace in advanced countries for ELT and other language learning contexts (Bikowski, 2018), these digital resources accessed through mobile devices have also been shown to enhance learner engagement in Nepal. However, the respondents in this study revealed that they still lack sufficient digital infrastructure and continue to rely on general-purpose digital devices.

The study uncovered interesting variations in the participants' tenure of incorporating technology in their educational practices. Three of the participants responded that they have demonstrated their long-standing commitment to providing technology in the classroom whereas one of the participants began integrating technology approximately five to six years ago, a timeline closely associated with the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the participants had previously employed projectors, laptops, and computers in their instructional strategies, installing a smart board as recently as 2021. Such distinct patterns within the participants' technological journeys contribute valuable insights into the evolving landscape of educational technology integration in the country. Participants in the study encountered the challenges that Rana (2017) had identified, as several challenges were observed that hinder the effective integration of technology. More specifically, they had to navigate the limitations associated with inadequate technological resources in school and a shortage of competent support staff.

The participants' insights regarding their training experiences in utilizing technology within English language classrooms presented a diverse range of perspectives. Three of the participants revealed that they have not received any formal training specifically given to using technology in teaching and learning activities. They acquired their technological knowledge through self-learning endeavors. As P2 (Participant 2) explicitly stated,

"I've not got any special training to use them in the teaching-learning activities. However, we share some ideas related to the use of technology in the classroom with each other. ELT Professionals associated with NELTA often share ideas."

Whereas another participant reported a different scenario, indicating that the educational training center (ETC) played a pivotal role in providing training opportunities. The participant highlighted that the ETC frequently organizes training programs, wherein a ten-day Teacher Professional Development (TPD) training is mandatory for all public-school teachers. P1 (Participant 1) said:

“The educational training center (ETC) keeps organizing training frequently. TPD training for ten days is mandatory for all public-school teachers.”

The ETC's training initiatives served as a platform for equipping educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to integrate technology into their English language classrooms effectively.

The varying accounts of training experiences among the participants shed light on the disparate approaches to technology training in English language education. While some educators relied on self-learning and peer collaboration, others benefited from structured programs facilitated by educational training centers. Though the teachers are to be up to date with modern technology, available through the internet, equipped with the skills to develop classroom dialogue and discussion using modern technical means; screens, projectors, smart panels, etc. for effective integration of technology in language learning (Mofareh, 2019), the data showed that the teachers were trained for such trend but they were not satisfied with. In this regard, Whipp et al. (2005) also supported the data that the teachers identified improper maintenance of the social learning environment equipped with technology and a lack of teachers' collaborative culture and expertise in schools. They also stressed that, for reasons, the effectiveness of integrating these ICT tools seems difficult, although they are necessary for learners' better engagement in language learning.

4.2 Technology for Optimizing the Learners' ELT Classrooms Engagement

The teacher-participants demonstrated that they focus primarily on utilizing technology to enhance the pedagogical process in their classrooms. They asserted that the integration of technology leads to increased engagement and support for both teachers and students. Incorporating technology into ELT classrooms offers a number of advantages for developing language skills: listening comprehension, speaking practice, reading comprehension, writing exercises, fostering learner autonomy, motivation, and facilitating evaluation (Alsied & Pathan, 2013). The teachers expressed gratitude for how technology strengthened the interaction between students and teachers during the teaching and learning process in the ELT classroom.

The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) has identified the growing influence of technology in the education sector. In response to the growing influence of ICT in various domains, the Ministry of Education (MoE) recognizes the indispensability of ICT utilization and proficiency. The MoE advocates for equipping students with ICT skills and employs ICT as a vital instrument to enhance several aspects of education, including optimization of classroom instruction, broadening access to educational resources, and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of educational administration and oversight (SSDP 2016-2023). Based on the feedback received from the participants, it has been found that the attention level of the government towards this matter has been lacking since there is insufficient provision of training and equipment within the classroom setting. There appears to be a significant gap between the intended policy objectives regarding ICT and the actual implementation in the field.

One of the participants acknowledged the considerable benefits of technology in teaching English, emphasizing students' attentiveness and enthusiasm in class. The integration of technology allows students to readily seek clarification by interacting with their peers. As P1 stated:

Students are very attentive in class. They are excited to respond. If they misunderstand, they ask the questions with their friends. With different colorful images, they can easily get clear concepts about any topic. ICT appeals to both the sense of sight and the sense of hearing at the same time. Most importantly, the class is fully engaging.

The respondent was more fascinated by the use of technology, with the utilization of various colorful images aiding in facilitating a clear understanding of diverse topics. It is crucial for teachers to recognize and acknowledge the value and benefits of technology (Ahmadi, 2018) for optimizing learners' learning engagement in the ELT classroom. The respondents have been found to be identifying the support and training to incorporate technology into language teaching methodologies effectively.

The participants were found to be implementing digital tools to address the needs of both their students and themselves effectively in ELT classrooms. They commonly employed ICT tools such as mobile phones, televisions, extra speakers, and projectors. The technological resources were utilized to teach listening skills, assisting with the pronunciation of challenging words, and presenting visual texts based on the textbooks. However, this study, aligning with Kuwar et. al (2020), found technological challenge, pedagogical challenge, time management, inaccessibility, etc., as the major challenges in technology-integrated ELT classrooms.

4.3 ELT Professionals' Experience in Technology-integrated Classroom

Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory emphasizes the significant role of active engagement among language learners in the process of language learning. Within the ELT classroom, technology is assumed as a crucial function in establishing a communicative and interactive environment. Malick et al. (2020) commented that the integration of technology not only facilitates English language acquisition but also enhances students' proficiency in various language skills, such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and other aspects pertinent to the English language within the ELT context. The participants seemed to verify the idea, noting the utility of technology, specifically the Learning Management System (LMS), in supporting their learning experiences within the classroom. One of the participants expressed about the familiarity with LMS as:

"Familiarity with LMS is another important thing that enables us to go with it in the classroom. Sharing with colleagues assists each other in the meaningful use of technology in the ELT field" (P1)

Whereas the other participant optimized the students' engagement in the classroom by using various technological tools such as PowerPoint presentations, audio-video materials, and synchronous and asynchronous learning. The participant revealed the use of technology in the class, as said:

"I also involve students in individual and group classroom presentations using PowerPoint slides. Sometimes, I apply group work and collaborative work while assigning project work and other tasks where they need to use different technologies" (P4)

Moreover, technical difficulties, poor classroom management, unfavorable infrastructure, inadequate software quality, and teachers' struggle to maintain control (Ajaj, 2021) have been found as the major challenges in this study. The participants acknowledged that technology alone is not a complete solution and should not be relied upon solely. They emphasized that technology should be utilized as a supportive tool, recognizing that its implementation may pose certain challenges. As Participant 4 (P4) stated:

“Technology is just a means, not an end. Just using technology is not enough; it should serve a purpose. Teachers must have a set of skills required to use it effectively in the classroom.”

Similar to the preceding participant, another respondent expressed the need for clear guidelines to facilitate effective learner engagement with technology, as:

First, teachers must be good at handling those technologies. Secondly, schools or classrooms must be techno-friendly. Teachers and students should be supportive. Teachers must be self-motivated and dedicated to their profession.” (P3)

Overall, the integration of technology in the ELT classroom plays a vital role in promoting active engagement and enhancing English language acquisition. The participants of the study also highlighted the usefulness of technology in supporting their teaching and learning experiences. However, the participants also emphasized that technology should be viewed as a supportive tool rather than a complete solution, and teachers must possess the necessary skills to use it effectively.

5.0 Conclusion

The study purposively selected four participants for the semi-structured interview to explore the understanding and experience of the English language teachers in a technology-integrated ELT classroom for optimizing language learners' classroom engagement. The discussion of this study represents only the personal perspectives of participants; thus, it cannot be generalized. Moreover, the discussions of the study have not been influenced by the researchers.

The narrative inquiry has indicated that the ELT teachers acknowledged the role of technology for optimizing the learners' classroom engagement in the ELT classroom. In addition, the study has identified teachers facing challenges regarding the maintenance of a social learning environment equipped with technology, a lack of expertise in schools, and a collaborative culture as the lacuna for running technology-integrated ELT activities, which are necessary for enhancing learners' engagement in language learning. They also account for technology as a supportive learning tool rather than a complete solution. Moreover, the study has shown that the teachers significantly prefer technology in education as they found it as the need of their students and themselves for effective teaching and learning in the ELT classroom. In addition, the participants exhibited a comprehensive knowledge of various technological tools commonly employed in educational settings despite the challenges they face while using them. Thus, the teachers disparately aspire for sufficient teacher training programs regarding technology in English language education.

Furthermore, based on the analyzed data, it has been explored that the teachers assume integration of technology in education that leads to increased engagement and support for both teachers and students in language learning. Thus, the roles of the technology for optimizing the language learner's learning engagement have been found to be an effective tool for effective teaching and learning activities in the ELT classroom.

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