



Scholars' Journal

ISSN: 2645-8381

Published by Scholars' Association of Nepal
A Multidisciplinary Peer Reviewed, Open Access Journal

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.3126/scholars.v5i1.55810>

<https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/scholars>

Causes of Low Performance in English at College Level: Teachers' Perspectives

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Article History: Received: 26 Sep, 2022; Revised: 18 Nov, 2022; Accepted: 27 Nov, 2022

Abstract

This study, “causes of low performance in English at college level: Teachers' Perspectives,” aimed to explore the teachers' perspectives on the causes of low performance in English and suggestions for the improvement for the college level students. The data were collected from twenty teachers teaching at the college level in the Far Western part of Nepal using a general qualitative research design. The study used a questionnaire containing open ended questions to collect their perspectives and shared the question using Google form. Collected data were analyzed, forming two themes based on the questions: causes of low performance and suggestions for improvement. The collected data showed that classroom interaction, teaching methods, learners, curriculum, and evaluation system are the main causes of low performance. They have suggested increasing interaction in the classroom, changing teaching methods at the college level, revising the existing courses, and changing the examination system in the university to improve the level of performance of the students, especially at the college level.

Keywords: classroom interaction, affecting factors, low performance, professional development, learning difficulties.

Introduction

In context of Nepal English is used as foreign language; it means English is taught as subject in school or university level and used English only in specific situations. In the school level some private schools use English as medium of instruction but in government aided schools English is taught as compulsory subject up to intermediate level and for the

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first year semester at the university level. From grade eleven to graduate level, students can choose English as major subject. Most of the private English medium schools also mainly use Nepali as medium of instruction, though they call themselves English medium schools. English is taught as subject from the elementary level and after completing their school education students get choice to choose faculty. Those students who are good at study choose science and other technical faculties and those who believed themselves poor in study choose faculty of education and humanities and social sciences. Those students who get enrolled in the faculty of education, humanities, social sciences, and management perform poorly, especially in English. If we see the pass percentage of the students at the university level, it is not very good, especially in these faculties the students pass rate is very low. The pass percentage of education faculty is 13.04 percent, humanities and social sciences is 27.94 percent, management is 18.14 percent, science and technology is 36 percent, and Law is 17.1 percent, according to the UGC EMIS report (2013/14). in the same way, the pass percentage of faculty of education is 15.11% in 2015, 18.20 % in 2016, 14.04% in 2017, 20.05% in 2018 and 16.65% in 2019 (University Grand Commission, 2019). The above data clearly shows the picture of pass percentages of students at the university level. Out of the total failed students more than 80% failed in English subject which was analyzed from the official records of the campus (P. Joshi, personal communication, December 12, 2021). In the personal communication with P. Joshi, he stated that most of the students couldn't pass English even after multiple attempts and finally they leave their journey of academic career.

I have been teaching college level, mainly in the faculty of education, students for more than a decade and found students poor in English. Some of the students even can't introduce themselves confidently in the classroom; so how could we expect active participation from such students in the class? They have problems even to write a single sentence in English and how can we think them to write a paragraph in English? They have been learning English from the grade one to twelve as compulsory subject but the output of the teaching and learning is not satisfactory. After studying English more than twelve years they feel difficulty in writing a single sentence and speaking an utterance. If we examine their answers copies of the examination we can see some students writing answers of English using transliteration method. Those who write little also make mistakes on even in subject-verb agreement and tense. In my class I tried students to present something in English going in front of the class but they were unable to say anything except reading the notes prepared from home. If they are asked to take part in group discussion or role play they use Nepali language for the discussion.

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English course at the university level has become an obstacle for many students to go ahead in their life. In an informal talk with students, many of the students shared “if there were no English in our course, we could easily pass the bachelor level, but English subject has become a devil who never leaves us.” So, this question always strikes me; why do many students fail in English subjects only? What might be the reason behind this ever-solving problem? Where is the problem; in our pedagogy, in the course content, in the assessment system, Or in the students' background? Considering these hidden questions, I wanted to unpack the hidden cause of the high percentage of failure in English subjects at the university level. Furthermore, I want to explore the teachers' perceptions on this issue. Therefore, I primarily wanted to unpack the causes of failure of students and their solutions at the higher level by taking the teachers' perceptions.

Difficulties in English Language Learning

English language teaching and learning in non-English speaking countries is a challenging job. English is kept as a teaching subject in school and university curricula. Many schools or universities have adopted English as a medium of instruction in countries where English is used as a second and foreign language (Akbari, 2015; Phyak, 2016). The majority of the students fail in English subjects either at the school level or university level due to learners' complex grammatical patterns of language and attitudinal or psychological problems. They believe that English is a complicated subject (Ahmed, 2015). Various factors affect language learning, such as complex grammatical patterns, difficult vocabulary, variation in L1 and L2, motivation, classroom practices and pedagogies, and learners' attitudes. Thu'aimah (1989) states that language learning difficulties may occur through a hearing problem, weakness of memories, impaired speech, mental disorder, introvert, social, individual, and cultural variation of learners (cited in Sokip, 2020). He has concluded that learning difficulties are caused due to socio-cultural and learning strategies of learners adopted.

Language learning is not only affected by individual factors, but it can also be affected by social or cultural factors of learners. Various factors such as low motivation of learners in learning, lack of concentration in learning, lack of confidence, teachers' attitudes, learning facilities, and infrastructure influence the ability and willingness of learners to learn their second (Dimayati & Mudjiono 2010: as cited in Sokip, 2020). Moreover, Sokip (2020) further points out that language learning skills cannot be separated from the aspects of education such as the role of the teacher, the role of teaching materials and curriculum, the teaching method adopted by the teacher, and teaching media, and infrastructure of the institution. For example, the role of the teacher in the classroom as a facilitator may increase

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the learning proficiency of learners. However, if the teacher is authoritarian in the classroom, then learners are just passive learners and do not get opportunities for language practice (Sokip, 2020). Therefore, the teacher's presence and way of teaching in the class play a crucial role in learning a language. So, we can say that language learning is not affected by the individual's learning factors only; other factors cause learning difficulties.

Akbari (2016) reported some problems with learning English in her research article. She researched students of MA English in Iran, and she has noticed the following difficulties MA students faced in learning the English language in Iran; they are limited vocabulary knowledge, limited grammatical knowledge, and weakness in four language skills, limited knowledge of pronunciation and spelling, and lack of appropriate learning strategies. According to Akbari (2016), learning strategies are the special tools for enhancing the learning capacity of learners; adopting a particular kind of learning strategy may boost an understanding of the learners. She further stated that language learning difficulties might occur due to a lack of understanding of the vital role of English in their lives; that means motivation plays a vital role in learning a language. If learners are informed about the use of the English language in their life, they may be highly motivated to learn the English language. Furthermore, if learners are motivated, they show their concentration in study, and learning becomes faster.

Raja and Selvi (2011) found environment, attitudes, and teachers' competence as the significant factors of learning difficulties. They further said that if we could not create a conducive environment in the classroom and focus on students learning needs or abilities, then students may not understand the content easily. In addition, students need to be motivated, or teachers should develop a positive attitude towards the English language in learners' minds for better learning. In the same way, they strongly noted that a teacher's competence is the crucial factor for learning difficulties; if he/she could not deliver the content clearly or based on students existing knowledge, then students may feel difficulties in learning the language. So, they found that teachers' teaching strategies and classroom culture were the main problems in learning English.

In the journal "International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy, and Language," Nor et al. (2019) in their article stated the following problems in learning English as a second language: English is regarded as difficult subject to learn, learners' learning depends on the English teacher's role, lack of conducive environment for language practice, insufficient or lack of appropriate exposure in the target language, limitation of vocabulary proficiency, lack of motivation, teaching pedagogy.

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The research was conducted in the Philippines on “English language difficulties of Korean students in a Philippine Multidisciplinary University” by Guzman et al. (2006). The study aimed to explore the difficulties Korean students of the undergraduate level face in learning English as a foreign in the Philippines. They have summarized the major difficulties students faced during their learning as follow: different pronunciation, Inability to understand what teachers say, limited vocabulary, errors in formulating correct sentences, trouble in expressing oneself, and lack of practice in real life. Their research primarily found an accentual variation of teachers' pronunciation as the main difficulty of learning English. They have also found teachers' presence and teaching culture of the classroom as the main difficulty in learning the English language.

Causes of low proficiency in the English language

English language has become a global language and is taught it as a foreign language worldwide. Most countries have adopted it as a second language, and many of them have been using English as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level. So is the case of Nepal also it has been using it as a foreign language in general and a medium of instruction at the tertiary level in particular. However, the level of students in English performance is very low at the university level. Various studies have been conducted to explore the causes of low English proficiency at the higher level worldwide. The study of Mohammed and Salih (2019) in Sudan pointed out that teachers, curriculum, and students' backgrounds are the major causes of low proficiency in Sudanese universities.

In the same way, Bouangeune et al. (2008) identified textbooks, curriculum, and unqualified English teachers as the main causes of low proficiency among students. Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) explored that less trained teachers, lack of English background knowledge, lack of confidence to use the English language, and do not practice speaking English with native speakers are the causes of low English performance among the students. (Chang, 2010); Musa et al. (2012) presented some factors of poor performance in the English language in their study as limited vocabulary, lack of proper English environment, teacher-centered teaching, insufficient exposure to the English language, and lack of motivation to learn English. In addition, learners' laziness, lack of efficiency in the school, and less exposure for the EFL learners are some causes of low proficiency among students. The study of Al-Mahrooqi (2012) in Oman specified the following causes of low English performance at the tertiary level: ineffective teachers, inadequate curricula, uninterested students, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, unsupportive parents, a poor school system, and peer-group discouragement. In the same way, the study of Parimala (2016) also found out that English teachers were not well-trained, students

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had an impoverished educational background, lack of confidence in students, inappropriate curriculum, and students were less motivated.

From the above studies, it can be said that most of the studies have explored untrained teachers, inadequate curriculum, lack of proper English environment, and lack of exposure are the major causes of students' low English performance. Along with that, Musa et al. (2012) focused on student motivation. Highly motivated students can perform better in their English language than less motivated students. Chang (2010) has pointed out that inadequate school culture and laziness of the students are the other causes of low performance. So, we can say that most of the studies focused on external factors causing students' low performance in the English language, except Chang.

Methodological insights

This study was conducted following a qualitative research design in the Far Western part of Nepal involving the teachers of English teaching at the campus level. Twenty teachers were sampled using purposive sampling procedures. This study used a questionnaire for collecting data, mainly focusing on causes of poor performance of students in English and what improvements we need to consider improving the level of English at college level. The questionnaire was sent to the experts of English language teaching for feedback and finalized incorporating their feedback. The questionnaire was developed in the Google form for collecting the data. Before sending the questionnaire, I telephoned the sampled population, informed them about my study, and asked for their help. After that, I sent the questionnaire in Google form using their email address and messenger. I requested the participants to return the form within a week, and I made a follow-up call to the participants to those who had not filled up the form.

After receiving the questionnaire, I studied all the forms individually and categorized their responses into various themes. With the minute study of all the responses, I generated basic themes, including similar kinds of views into a theme. The responses were thematized into two broad categories: Causes of low English proficiency and Solutions to this problem with other sub-categories of the major theme for the analysis and interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The study was carried out in the Far Western region of Nepal, participating 20 teachers teaching at the college/ university level with the help of Google form. The study mainly contained two broad questions; the first question tried to collect teachers' views on the causes of the low performance of students in English subjects at the university level. The second question focused on the potential solutions to low performance or how the problem

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can be solved or to be minimized. Based on questions findings of the study are categorized into two broad categories: Causes of low performance in English subjects and Potential solutions to the problem.

Causes of low performance in English subject

The collected data were managed into five global themes going through three different layers. First of all, I collected similar responses to the first question into one group and different responses into other groups, which formed 30 different codes. After that, I thematized these responses into 13 broader categories to make the categories more inclusive. Finally, again I categorized those 13 categories into five global themes, including all those intermediate themes given below: Communication factors, teaching factors, learner factors, evaluation factors, and content factors.

Communication factors. Three local themes are included in this theme: lack of interaction, English environment, and exposure. Language is the means used for communication. To communicate easily in a particular language, one must have a good command of that language. Most of the teachers focused on the lack of interaction in the classroom. One of the participants [T1] shared, *“We want pin drop silence in the classroom and so that we think our students can understand better.”* From this statement, it can be seen how interaction we allow in the classroom. Therefore, lack of interaction in the classroom decreases students' communication ability in the classroom as well as in day-to-day life. In Nepal, English is taught as a foreign language, so students have limited opportunities to practice their English. They only get the opportunity to speak English in the classroom if there is a feasible environment in the classroom. However, from the many responses, it was found that there is no English environment in the classroom. A participant [T13] pointed out, *“Many of us use Nepali language in the classroom when we talk with students informally, so that, how can they improve their English language.”* Many respondents have reported a lack of good English environment at the college level, which can be one main cause of the low performance of the students. In Nepalese, in higher-level classes, students are just passive listeners, and teachers go on delivering a speech. Therefore, students do not get any opportunity to practice their English; they lack adequate exposure to the English language at the college level. Nepalese culture has a common saying: *“At the college level, lecturers come and give their lecture and go. There is no one to one interaction between teacher and students.”* The responses of the participants also prove this general concept of the people. There is a lack of proper communication in English in the Nepalese classroom, which can be the main cause of low performance.

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From the above findings, it can be said that a lack of proper communication strategies may cause poor performance in learners. As foreign language learners, students only get the opportunity to speak English in the classroom; if they do not get proper opportunities to brush up their English in the classroom, how can they improve their English. From my own experience, also I found very little interaction and opportunities for students to be active in the classroom. Therefore, I also think that the lack of proper opportunities and interaction in the classroom for the students is the main cause of low performance.

Teaching factors. In Nepalese classes, students are fully dependent on the teacher, so the teacher and his/her teaching style directly impact learning. Improper teaching method [T5] can cause low performance because many classes are led by the GT method, even at the university level. Most of the participants pointed out the lack of skilled faculties; they have said that teachers are less trained and unskilled in teaching adult learners. The grammar-translation method is the popular method for teaching English in Nepal stated by T2.

Along with teaching methods and trained teachers, some participants also pointed out the class size as the primary cause of low performance. They further explained that even if they try to do some activities, the number of students is unmanageable. In Nepalese classes, 50 to 80 students in a class are a widespread trend. One of the teachers [T10] pointed out "Overloaded faculties" as the causal factor. At the university level, sometimes a teacher has to teach ten classes per day; how can they think about creativity in the classroom.

From the above results, it is clearly shown that teachers' teaching style and the activities students perform in the class is taken as the important factor for the student's performance. New techniques and methods of teaching language have been emerging globally, but Nepalese classes are still directed by the old-fashioned teaching method. Therefore, we cannot get the desired outcome on completing the course or academic degree.

Learner factor. Learners are also key factors in their performance. The participants' responses found that students' motivation is the main cause of low performance in English subjects. According to their responses, university students should be self-motivated to learn English, but it was found lacking. A participant [T9] stated that students take English as a complex subject, and they do not give much time to this subject while learning, so they become poor in English subject. Some of the teachers strongly asserted that students' schooling is the major cause, among others. According to them, the majority of the students who get enrolled in the Faculty of Education and Humanities come from government (public) schools where English is not given much importance; therefore, their English has become poor. Few respondents also indicated that almost all the students use their L1 while talking to their classmates or teachers to discuss the subject matter. Therefore, most college-

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level students decrease their confidence in speaking the English language. In the same way, peer group was also found to be a causal factor for poor performance. A respondent [T15] shared, *“When one student tries to speak in English, then others in the class start laughing at him/her, and the student stops speaking in English and shifts to his/her mother tongue in the class.”*

Based on their responses, it can be interpreted that among the various causes, learners themselves are also one the cause. Their self-motivation, peers, and schooling directly impact their performance in higher-level study. Of course, adult learners need to be self-motivated and be aware of their studies, but in Nepalese classes, it was found lacking; students are very lazy and inactive in the classroom.

Curriculum factor. The curriculum should be developed by collecting the needs of students (Richards, 2001), but in the Nepalese context, this process is violated. A participant [T13] pointed out, *“Course content offered to students are not sufficient or based on communicative needs of the students, and the course should focus on developing the communicative competence of the learners.”* So, the course contents of universities are more traditional and teacher-centered, where students do not get a chance to perform in the classroom. If there are flaws in the curriculum, how learners can get better proficiency in a particular language. Some of the respondents showed fault in the process of curriculum design. Along with curriculum as a causal factor, some responses focused on the use of materials to deliver content in the classroom. One of the respondents [T20] explained, *“Materials used in the classroom are the major cause of low performance in our classes because we use non-authentic and exam oriented materials (guide, guess paper, capsule etc) then how can we improve the quality of students.”* In this way, course or curriculum and materials used for the content delivery are also the affecting factors of low performance in English.

Evaluation system. The evaluation system plays a vital role in determining the quality of education. What sort of system is dominant in an institution discloses the potential output of the teaching. *“We have written focused examination system in our university, so that students involve in rote learning to pass the particular course,”* asserted a participant [T7]. He further claimed that the evaluation system is result/ exam-oriented, not performance-oriented in all language skills. The summative evaluation system is highly dominant at the university level. Students do not get any feedback during class and mainly focus on getting good grades in their final examination. In this way, the examination system is also regarded as an important factor affecting students' performance.

Suggestions for the improvement

The study also collected the participants' views on the possible solutions to the mentioned problem, and their views are categorized into the following sub-themes.

Classroom Interaction. Interaction in the classroom occurs between students and teachers, students and students, and students and texts. From the responses of most of the participants, it was found that to enhance students' performance in English, we need to increase the interaction in the class among teachers and students and students to students. In their responses, they have suggested activating students for their study. One of the participants [T17] also suggested forming a speakers Club of students in the university so that they can organize various types of programs related to language. Moreover, students talking time should be maximized in the classroom to enhance their English performance of the students. One of the participants [T10] stated, *"To overcome from this problem, all the teachers should think that the course is designed for their students not for them, so that students can practice their English in the classroom, otherwise teachers go on talking for an hour in the classroom."* In Nepalese classrooms, teachers are quite active, and students are very passive during the class. So, from their responses, it can be said that teachers need to change their traditional mindset of all in all and let learners share their opinion and be active in their class.

Revision of exam system and curriculum. The university-level evaluation system is grade-oriented. If the student gets a higher grade, he/she is regarded as a very talented student. So our evaluation system should focus on overall performance in the English language. Most of the respondents pointed out that the exam system is the main cause of this problem, and the university should change the evaluation system. One of the participants [T7] shared, *"If we want good performance of students in the English language than we have to evaluate all four skills of students to determine whether the students have passed that particular course or not."* This means if we evaluate four language skills of language then students also focus on the four skills and can increase their performance in the English language. Some of the participants also suggested a problem in our course, therefore, we need to change the existing course contents. One of the participants [T14] pointed out, *"Present course primarily focuses on writing system and students also give more time on writing."* To be competent in a language, one needs to have equal knowledge of the four skills, but existing English courses do not include all the four skills. Therefore, most of the participants suggested changing the current course and maintaining balance among the four skills in the curriculum to increase students' performance.

Professional development and classroom practices. There is a direct effect of teachers' qualifications and teaching methods on students' performance. *"If the teachers are well skillful and trained then they can make their classroom very effective and creative"* [T4]. From the participants' views, teachers need to be trained time and again and be involved in professional development. Generally, at the university level, teachers follow lecture methods for teaching any subject, in which students could not get the opportunity to be active in the classroom. Those teachers who are trained and active can make a difference in classroom activities. Therefore, the majority of the respondent suggested involving teachers in professional development to change their teaching methods, especially for adult learners. One of the participants [T11] stated, *"We do not use different style of teaching English in the university, we follow the same method as we were taught, therefore we need to change our teaching methods in the university classes."* Their responses found that teaching methods in the university are the main problem in students' low performance in English, so they have suggested changing the teaching methods. Some of the participants also suggested creating an English environment in the classroom to practice English and enhance their performance. Similarly, one of the participants [T18] mentioned, *"University faculties do not motivate their students in the class to use English; therefore, they must be motivated to use the English language with their friends and teachers maximum time."*

From the above results, we can say that our teaching methods and professional development may hamper or facilitate students' performance. Therefore, teachers need to change their teaching methods, encourage learners to use English, be involved in professional development, and help create an English environment in university classes.

Discussions

The findings of the present study share similar opinions to Harmer (2001). He has stated that if teachers do not allow students to talk in the classroom, they can never learn that language. On the other hand, if learners are given much time to talk in the classroom, they can boost their confidence to speak in English. Similarly, the present study's findings are also found in line with the concept of Siddig and Alkhouday (2018). They have also stated that student-teacher interaction helps develop social and academic competence in learners; if they are not given the proper opportunity for interaction in the class, they cannot develop their performance. The findings of this study have similar kinds of findings of the study (Bouangeune et al., 2008; Mohammed & Salih, 2019; Parimala, 2016; Souriyavongsa et al., 2013). In these studies, less trained teachers, poor students' schooling, and curriculum were found as the main causes of low performance. In Souriyavongsa et al. (2013), students' lack of confidence was found, which is different from the present study. Furthermore, the study

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findings of Musa et al. (2012) are in line with the present study. Both studies have found that lack of a proper English environment, inappropriate teaching methods, and insufficient exposure are the main causes of low performance. In addition to the present study, Al-Mahrooqi's (2012) study also stated most similar findings except for unsupportive parents and discouraging peer-group. From the above discussions, it can be said that most of the causes of the low performance of the students in the EFL context are the same irrespective of their geographical variation.

Conclusion

The present study was carried out in the Far Western part of Nepal on the university-level teacher to explore the causes of low performance in English subjects in university students in Nepal. The study also aimed to get suggestions to improve the students' performance. Data were collected using a general qualitative research design involving 20 teachers. Collected data were thematized into two: causes of low performance and suggestions for improvement. From the collected data, the study concluded that the major causes of low performance in English subject at the university level are: lack of interaction in the classroom, teaching factor, learner factor, course content, and evaluation factors. The study also found out that the main problem in our education system is the teaching methods used to teach the adult learners and the examination system. As a result, students focused more on achieving good grades rather than improving their performance. Teachers were found using the traditional teaching method, and there was no interaction in the classroom. For all those reasons, the study states that to increase the performance of students: classroom interaction needs to be increased, teachers need to be updated with recent teaching techniques, the existing curriculum needs to be revisited, and the primarily examination system should be changed. Evaluation should focus on all four language skills to make students communicatively competent.

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