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Journal of English Language Education (JELE) Praxis

The Department of Language Education, Kathmandu University publishes the Journal of English Language Education (ELE) Praxis annually. ELE Praxis is a peer-reviewed journal focusing on the contributions of student communities. This Journal aims to contribute to the building process of English language education by providing a forum for scholarly discourse on enhancing the understanding of the impact of English language education in indigenous communities. JELE Praxis promotes sharing experiences, knowledge generation, values inculcation, and skills acquisition among individuals and institutions. We concentrate on analyzing and developing theories in localized contexts and comparative perspectives to achieve these aims. We welcome papers from scholars on English language education, particularly on classroom practices, language policies, media of instruction, and the impact of English in local indigenous communities, which brings issues from local, regional, and global contexts. We welcome full-length research papers, opinions, reflective notes, review papers, book reviews and abstracts of students' defended dissertations.

Scholars often debate the advantages and disadvantages of English language education in South Asia. Some see it as full of opportunities for young aspirants to see and understand the high-tech world of the West. On the other hand, some argue that this system of education homogenizes Western ideology, exterminating our indigenous knowledge system, displacing our linguistic and cultural diversity and attacking the very self-identity of our age-old traditions. In such a scenario, we need a balanced approach to English language education, preserving our linguistic and cultural knowledge systems and accessing the potential for human development in the West through English. We believe such an approach enables us to save ourselves from possible conflicts of ideologies and transform ourselves into a just and peaceful society. JELE-Praxis promotes critical discourse on all these aspects to build new theoretical and practical insights. The Journal encourages theorizing local phenomena and perspectives based on empirical data. This approach enables us to interpret our realities from a novel perspective.

JELE Praxis invites scholarly papers from all authors, including research students. We expect your contributions to enrich the existing knowledge and help us understand this complex phenomenon better.

Inquiry and Comment

For any general questions and comments about the double-blind peer-review process, the Journal, or its editorial policies, we encourage you to contact us at elepraxis@kusoed.edu.np

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Editorial

Home vs School Language Conflict: An Auto-ethnographic Inquiry

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Abstract

Children from minority communities speaking a different home language from the language of instruction at school face multiple forms of social injustice. I explore the experience of a learner who faced learning hardships when the home language was different from the language of instruction at school. Methodologically, I follow the principles of the autoethnographic approach, reflecting on the nuances of my experience navigating the conflict between home and school language disparities. I connect my anecdotal reflections to show the larger social and political mechanisms, such as policies, laws, and power imbalances that sustain and perpetuate these inequalities. Based on my auto-ethnographic anecdotes, I explore the experience of a learner from the theoretical construct of ideological and structural injustice (Fricker, 2007; Fraser, 2010). For this paper, I understand ideological injustice as an unfair treatment of a socially marginalized group by a dominant group based on ideological and social affiliations (Fraser, 2010). It discriminates and further marginalizes members of the socially marginalized group, creating artificial differences in ideas, personal value systems, and social identities, ignoring the intellectual abilities, actions, and characters of marginalized groups. On the other hand, structural injustice arises from deeply rooted social, political, and educational systems (Fricker, 2007). Individuals experience discrimination because of the broader patterns of social inequalities that emerge from social structures, policies and practices (Fraser, 2010), which restrict access to resources and opportunities. This paper contributes to the discourse on language education in the context of South Asia by connecting my reflections to the larger social context for just and inclusive policies. It aims to create awareness to eliminate the challenges of bias and prejudice by dismantling existing underlying social structures and advocating for an equitable and just social system.

Keywords: *Home language, school language, language conflict, social justice, structural and ideological injustice*

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Introduction

In this auto-ethnographic account, I explore the multifaceted issues of injustice that I experienced as a child because I spoke a different language at home from the language of

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instruction at my school. I rely on the theoretical framework of ideological and structural injustice (Fraser, 2010; Fricker, 2007). I am interested in exploring the detrimental effects of conflict on learners like me that result in social inequalities.

Ideological injustice refers to the unfair treatment of a socially marginalized group by a dominant group, based on ideological and social affiliations (Fraser, 2010). It discriminates and further marginalizes members of the socially marginalized group, creating artificial differences in ideas, personal value systems, and social identities, ignoring the intellectual abilities, actions, and characters of marginalized groups. I attended a Hindi-medium school in Manipur, a northeastern state in India. Our class was a multilingual one. At my primary level, most came from the Nepali community, but the language of classroom instruction was Hindi. In addition to Hindi, we had to learn the language of the state, i.e., Manipuri, and English, the international language. My home language was Nepali, and the school's language was first Hindi, and then, gradually, we had to learn Manipuri and English. I encountered an unfamiliar linguistic environment at my school. This unfamiliar linguistic environment at school barred me from actively participating in classroom discourse. This shift from my home language to a different language of instruction at school violated my linguistic human rights (Awasthi et al., 2023). So, my case was one of the forms of ideological and social injustice.

The conflict I had to go through was not unique to my case. Bernhofer and Tonin (2022) report that German- or Italian-speaking children, as their L1, were instructed and took exams in English, German, or Italian. The study found that children taking exams in a non-home language lost 9.5% in their grade points. They argued that this difference impacted the overall academic performance of children because they could not comprehend the classroom content and the language used in classroom instruction. Gradually, these children turn into introverts, alienated, and go for social isolation. I recall struggling to comprehend the text and articulate my understanding in a language I had never encountered before. For me, integrating unfamiliar languages like Hindi, Manipuri, and English into the academic and social settings of the school increased my difficulties in achieving high academic performance, and it also caused unnecessary stress. I had to exclude myself from participating in usual school activities, such as debating competitions and poem recitations, which are vital for personal and academic growth.

Gradually, I learned to speak Hindi after a few months, as it was not much different from my mother tongue, since both evolved from the same parent language, namely Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) languages. However, there were enough instances of bullying my accent and grammatical errors. I still recall the stereotypical gender marking in Hindi and the phonemic differences between long and short vowels. These phenomena are not prominent in Nepali grammar. My peers often laughed at me when I said, '*shaam hota hai*' (it becomes evening), i.e., with a masculine gender marking on the verb. Later, I learned that Hindi has gender marking for inanimate objects and abstract concepts, such as *shaam* (evening). I felt insulted when they laughed at me for such minor linguistic issues. As an introvert, my linguistic exposure was limited, and my peers took my limitations further to perpetuate bullying. This continuous bullying excluded me from the usual exposure to social interaction. Consequently, I was unable to access the educational and social opportunities to which I was entitled as a student.

Gradually, the dominant languages of school restricted my freedom of expression, critical thinking, and discursive participation in classroom interactions (Fraser, 2010). The members of mainstream linguistic groups, as well as students and teachers, perceived my accent and social values as stereotypes. I felt disparaged, dehumanized, and finally marginalized (Fricker, 2007). This process of stereotyping and dehumanization perpetuates

disparities in accessing the resources available in the community due to power dynamics. This process ultimately results in systematically depriving individuals of opportunities (Fraser, 2010). This systematic deprivation of prospects leads to structural injustice. Structural injustice arises from deeply rooted social, political, and educational systems (Fricker, 2007). I experienced discrimination due to the broader patterns of social inequality. These patterns of inequality arise from social structures, policies, and practices (Fraser, 2010).

I adopt an auto-ethnographic approach to understand the nuances of a learner's experience when facing conflict due to a language difference between their home language and the language of instruction at school. I reflect on personal narratives to capture my experiences of encountering several facets of injustice. I share my stories of struggles with the hope of raising awareness about the deep-rooted social injustices embedded in our education system and advocating for inclusive and equitable educational practices so that no child will suffer as I did.

I am particularly interested in how an individual is systematically marginalized because of his/her social identity as a member of a linguistic community. Social and political mechanisms such as policies, laws, and power imbalances sustain and perpetuate these inequalities. In this way, these social mechanisms exclude the indigenous communities, barring their social identity. To address structural injustice, discriminatory policies and laws need reform to promote inclusive policies and challenge biases and prejudices by dismantling underlying social structures and advocating for an equitable and just social system.

Structural and Ideological Injustice

Structural and ideological injustices systematically marginalize individuals, particularly from minority communities, barring them from mainstream social platforms. Sociocultural and political mechanisms, such as policies, laws, and power imbalances, perpetuate these conditions (Fraser, 2010). These mechanisms exclude and suppress individuals from minority communities, impeding their social identities and leading to social inequalities (Fraser, 2010; Fricker, 2007).

Structural injustice emerges from social, political, and educational systems. An individual feels discriminated against because of broader patterns of inequality that arise from the structures, policies, and practices. These injustices create patterns of discrimination and inequality, hindering the personal growth and well-being of individuals of marginalized communities (Fricker, 2007). Discriminatory policies and laws require reform to overcome exclusion and further marginalization, thereby creating a just society. We need to dismantle deep-rooted social structures to overcome these biases and prejudices and establish a just society (Fraser, 2010; Fricker, 2007).

In this paper, I examine the structural and ideological injustices that learners face when their home language differs from the language of instruction at school (Fraser, 2010). Ideological injustice refers to unfair treatment based on ideological beliefs and social affiliations. Individuals from minority communities are discriminated against and marginalized based on their ideas and personal and social values, but not on their intellectual abilities, actions, and characters. When a child speaking one particular home language encounters a different, unfamiliar language at school, they face discrimination in socialization due to their lack of proficiency in the school language. He is unable to participate actively in classroom discourse. Consequently, his inefficiency in the school language results in isolation and alienation. Over time, he struggles to participate in classroom discourse; he gets bullied for his accent and grammatical errors, leading to further alienation and exclusion from

opportunities like debating or poetry recitation competitions, which are prerequisites for his personal growth and well-being.

Gradually, the dominant ideologies erode the oppositional ideologies, limiting freedom of expression, critical thinking, and open discursive participation, while silencing and marginalizing them. Dominant ideological groups consider opposition ideological beliefs of marginalized groups as stereotypes, disparagement, and dehumanization. This process of stereotyping and dehumanization results in disparities in resource access because of power imbalances, leading to systematic deprivation of opportunities.

The construction of structural and ideological injustices is the product of strategic and planned processes of the dominant group over time. In the following paragraphs, I discuss this process by drawing on the concepts of colonial elitedom (Thiong'o, 1986), hegemony, organic intellectuals, and false consciousness (Gramsci, 1971).

The dominant group imposes its ideological belief systems on the minority groups. The language of the dominant group functions as an instrument of this process. Imposing an unfamiliar and culturally different language and its values on learners who speak a different language from that of the dominant group invades the learners' mental universe. This imposition is often deliberate and instrumental in undervaluing and destroying indigenous people's cultural and intellectual practices, as manifested in Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education of 1835 and in educational policies such as Wood's Commission (1956) in Nepal. Thiong'o (1986) conceptualizes this process of undervaluing people's culture by imposing other cultural values as colonial elitedom. He argued that a Kenyan student could graduate from school without any knowledge of their community's language, culture, and belief systems, but could not without having high proficiency in English.

The colonial elitedom produces organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971). In the South Asian context, Macaulay's Minute of 1835 (Macaulay, 1972) exemplifies colonial elite domination and organic intellectuals. Macaulay's class and Thiong'o's colonial elite produce organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971). Members of civil society, such as teachers, professors, managers, and bureaucrats, are examples of organic intellectuals. These intellectuals act to extend the dominant ideology to different sections of society. Since the ideological system of the dominant group produces these intellectuals, they disparage the indigenous belief and knowledge systems and prioritize and authenticate those of the dominant group. This process creates a false consciousness (Gramsci, 1971), i.e., disparaging cultural and linguistic knowledge of the local communities and the superiority of the cultural values of dominant groups.

Over time, this discourse of false consciousness convinces the ordinary people of local communities of the hegemonic ideology of the dominant group. An attachment of organic intellectuals to the dominant group's ideology benefits them due to their higher social capital and additional economic security (Poudel, 2022). Consequently, these intellectuals, i.e., professors, social leaders, and activists, continued instilling the dominant group's ideology. Ultimately, the dominant group's ideology shapes all decision-making processes in policymaking across various sectors of society, including education. On the other hand, the language, belief, and cultural systems of minority groups never create a decisive discourse because their discourse is subjugated.

Language Disparity: A Process of Marginalization Barring Classroom Interaction

Language disparity occurs when a dominant group fails to recognize the language of minority groups, marginalizes their members, and limits opportunities based on their linguistic background. In an educational setting, when students, particularly those from

minority communities, struggle to gain equal access to language resources and opportunities because they speak a different language from the one used in the classroom, language disparity occurs (Phillipson, 2016; Recento, 2006). Because of the hegemony of the dominant group, their language holds a privileged status in the educational setting. It systematically excludes creating barriers for the underprivileged group to participate in the educational process (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). Language disparity devalues the indigenous languages and marginalizes them, and the marginalization further leads them to limited access to mainstream education and reduced opportunities for higher academic achievements.

In multilingual societies, language disparity is a common phenomenon. Minority languages lack the social and economic capital of dominant languages. To eradicate this linguistic injustice, policies should ensure educational access regardless of one's linguistic background.

> Learning begins at home, so the language I use to communicate with my family and friends affects my academic achievements at school. Therefore, continuing our formal education at school with that language is a prerequisite. However, in my case, this did not happen. We were a small minority community where we resided. The members of my community did not speak my mother tongue or home language in the larger social space. As a result, my mother tongue had no chance against the language of the school I attended. Consequently, my school language differed from my home language, i.e., Manipuri, the state language. I had to struggle to master the language in order to participate in classroom discourse. My lack of proficiency in the school language hindered my communication with my peers and teachers.

I faced a significant challenge in my academic life due to the difference between my home language and the language of academic instruction in school. To understand this challenge, I looked into Fricker (2007) and Fraser (2010) for their theoretical constructs of structural and ideological injustices. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) introduced me to the concept of colonial elitedom, and I drew on Gramsci (1971) for the concepts of hegemony, organic intellectuals, and false consciousness. In my case, the conflict between my home language and the school language significantly disrupted my educational achievement. I understood that my home language is a prerequisite for academic progress because transitioning from my home language to the school language was not always easy for me.

Since I came from a minority linguistic community, my community did not share its home language in the larger social space of my immediate community. As a child, when I left my home for school, I found a different social and linguistic space in my school premises that further marginalized me. At my primary level, the language of instruction at school was Hindi, and my immediate social environment used Manipuri for daily survival. This sudden linguistic transition significantly challenged my academic performance in mastering the language and effectively engaging in classroom discourse.

Examining the analysis of language disparity through the theoretical framework of structural and ideological injustice, I gained insight into the role of power dynamics, particularly linguistic power dynamics, at play. The dominance of Hindi in educational settings and Manipuri in social spaces limited my academic performance and socialization process in the broader social context. As Thiang'o (1986) argued, historical colonial patterns limit an individual's social and academic life through the imposition of dominant languages. After the merger of Manipur into the Indian Union in 1949 (Government of India, 1949), Hindi was imposed on the people of Manipur in the name of national integrity. The inclusion of English in school curricula with high priority is a manifestation of the linguistic hegemony

of the British *Raj* (Poudel, 2021). These linguistic situations disregarded my personal linguistic and cultural rights, further marginalized me, and perpetuated the cycle of marginalization and linguistic assimilation.

My teachers functioned as the organic intellectuals and perpetuated the concept of false consciousness (Gramsci, 1971). They instilled in the consciousness of young children that Hindi, Manipuri, and English had higher values for academic and personal life. The high values attributed to these dominant languages created a distinct space in my consciousness and perpetuated a negative attitude toward my language and culture, including food and dress.

I suffered from an inferiority complex because I felt excluded from the mainstream, as this impeded effective communication between myself, my peers, and my teachers in classroom discourse. This inferior complexity and feeling of exclusion hindered my academic progress and challenged me to integrate into the academic environment. Now I realize that to address these issues, academic spaces need to foster an inclusive educational environment that respects the linguistic and cultural rights of individuals from minority communities.

Reflecting on the dark memories of my primary school in a rural school in Manipur, a NE Indian state, the majority of my classmates experienced the same trauma that I went through. My 30 classmates came from diverse linguistic backgrounds and spoke more than 15 different languages. They also faced the issue of language disparity in classroom discourse, as well as teachers' attitudes towards ethnic languages and cultural systems. Hindi and Manipuri were the languages of our books and teachers, respectively. Only a few of us spoke these languages fluently. Examining this language disparity through the theoretical lens of structural and ideological injustice (Fraser, 2010; Fricker, 2007), I reflect on my experience to consider the implications of dominant languages and classroom power dynamics. My teachers, who spoke the dominant languages, used these languages for classroom instruction and discourse. Consequently, several of my peers and I, as speakers of minority languages, remained passive in classroom interactions. This classroom situation forced us to engage in rote learning and take exams without fully understanding the content taught in the class.

The language disparity I experienced in my school life reflects the operation of structural injustice. The dominant languages, i.e., Hindi and Manipuri in the early stage and English in the later stage, made it difficult for minority language-speaking learners like me to participate actively in classroom activities (Fraser, 1997; Flicker, 2017). The social power dynamics of the educational system perpetuate inequalities by excluding learners who do not possess the necessary linguistic competence in the dominant languages, as the prevalent power dynamics rarely prioritize their languages in classroom discussions.

In my case, dominant languages like Hindi, Manipuri, and English restricted my educational opportunities and resources, a form of ideological injustice. The state machinery created colonial elitedom through its educational system, and that system produced organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971). My teachers, the representatives of organic intellectuals, imposed their ideology on minority groups. My teachers perpetuated the false consciousness (Gramsci, 1971) that dominant languages, such as Manipuri and Hindi, were essential for understanding the functions of the state at both local and national levels. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of English, arguing that quality education was only attainable through the English language. This continuous reinforcement of a false consciousness created a feeling of hatred toward indigenous languages. They gradually exclude these minority children from mainstream social consciousness because of their incompetence in dominant languages.

My anecdote is evidence of the consequences of language disparity that minority students like me face limitations in active engagement in classroom discourse. As a result, the teachers monopolized the discourse, perpetuated our silence, and caused an imbalance in classroom talking time. We were forced to engage in rote learning and write exams reproducing the text we never understood, because we were not equipped with the necessary language skills required for classroom discourse (Fraser, 1997; Flicker, 2017). As a result, the structural system hindered my ability to communicate with my peers and teachers, impacting my academic performance. In the present state, educational institutions and, more importantly, teachers can help dismantle language disparity, promote linguistic justice, and create equitable educational opportunities that respect the values of all linguistic communities.

The Power of Home Language: Imparting Educational Values and Social Concepts

Home language is crucial for the cognitive development of a child (Hamuddin et al. 2025). It shapes cognitive growth and academic success. However, when the home language does not get its space in academic activities in schools, the child is deprived of cognitive development. In my case, I had to make a transition from Nepali to Hindi, Manipuri, and English. A person's home language or mother tongue enables them to think critically, express emotions, and develop an understanding of the world around them. However, when I entered the educational system, which prioritized Hindi as the instructional language and Manipuri as the dominant social language, I encountered significant challenges.

The transition from home language to a different school language hinders one's ability to engage in classroom activities and discourse, which are essential for developing language ability and cognitive maturity (Wells, 1980). At the age of three, children can communicate with their family members about their immediate environment, food, and other children's daily activities. This proficiency in their home language serves as the foundation for learning at school. However, in my case, the school language was alien to my experience, and it hindered me from participating in daily classroom activities, such as engaging in classroom discourse, asking questions when concepts were not understood, and barely understanding the teacher's instructions. As a student from a minority community, I found that my cognitive skills, developed through my home language, became disconnected, and I struggled to bridge the gap between the skills of my home language and the school language, which impacted my academic performance (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009).

The classroom was not a comfortable space for me. I felt marginalized because everyone was alien to me; I could not communicate with my classmates or my teachers. While anecdoting my childhood experience today, I sense that my experience was a case of epistemic injustice, particularly a testimonial one (Fricker, 2007). In the classroom discourse, I always struggled to communicate in the dominant language, and many times I failed to convey what I wanted to my peers and teachers. This situation devalued my contribution to the process of knowledge generation through classroom discourse and led to the development of an inferiority complex and alienation. As a result, I remained silent, even though I felt my ideas were significant in advancing the discussion. Continuous insistence on Hindi or Manipuri from the school administration and teachers put me in a situation of linguistic exclusion, isolating me from the mainstream discourse.

For mainstream discourse of the dominant languages, the language disparity discussed above could be a source of emotional toll (Canestrino et al. 2022). However, for me, my mother tongue is not just a tool for communication; it is my identity, the very essence of who I am. This language connects me to my family members, my cultural past, and my inner self. The refusal of minority languages like Nepali to be acknowledged in my school curriculum is

an act of denial of the indigenous knowledge system, a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). The dominant languages gained prominence in the school curriculum because they were considered superior, thereby limiting the use of minority languages that were required for social mobility. I describe the phenomenon as false consciousness, borrowing a concept from Gramsci (1971). These forms of false consciousness and epistemic injustice reinforce the children of minority communities' further exclusion in the wider social space.

Reflecting on this, the implications of linguistic hegemony become clear. The state's educational policies, which favored Hindi and Manipuri, mirrored a larger structural injustice that excluded minority-language students from full participation in society. Excluding a large number of children from speaking their mother tongue leads to linguistic genocide through rapid language shift (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). In my case, this exclusion had a significant impact on both my academic performance and personality.

I understand my experience was not unique. More than 50% of my classmates came from minority communities and spoke a language that was not intelligible to one another. In a class of 30 students, we spoke more than 15 languages. Like me, these students relied on rote learning and memorization for their exams. I never realized that a lesson is to be understood and has a practical use in our daily lives. The structure of the education system in the early 1970s excluded the voices of minority linguistic communities, a case of structural injustice (Fraser, 2010). In a case of linguistic structural injustice in a school context, the class conducts academic activities in the discourses of dominant languages, and learners from minority communities remain passive listeners, as their language is not acknowledged. Today, I feel that if my home language had been incorporated into my school environment, I would have been a different person, not an introvert, but a loud extrovert. Therefore, excluding my home language from the educational space is a case of broader social and ideological exclusion, carefully designed through educational policies.

Conclusion

In this paper, I looked into the issues of structural and ideological injustices (Fricker, 2007; Fraser, 2010) in educational spaces within a rural school setting in Manipur, an Indian state, during the 1970s, drawing on anecdotes from my own schooling. As seen through the lens of power dynamics and hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), the dominance of Hindi and Manipuri in my educational context perpetuated linguistic marginalization, similar to colonial language policies (Thiong'o, 1986). This disparity created barriers to my active participation in classroom discourse, hindering my academic progress and social integration. Recent studies, particularly those by Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar (2010) and Phillipson (2016), highlight the need to promote linguistic justice in our educational policies to protect the linguistic rights as indicated in Article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015). Multilingual education and support for indigenous languages are crucial in mitigating the effects of language disparity, enabling students from diverse linguistic backgrounds to fully participate in educational processes and increase their chances of academic success.

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The CFER in English and Communication Competence: A Decolonial Perspective

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Abstract

The process of migrating from a non-English-speaking and developing country outside Europe to an English-speaking developed country is a prerequisite to having communicative competence in English to work and reside in an English-speaking country, particularly the United Kingdom (UK). The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) assesses and describes the communicative competence level of a foreign language speaker in a European language. The development of English language competence as a foreign or second language learner is gradually phased out in favour of English or other European languages. Preliminary findings suggest a growing demand for communicative competence in English in higher education, a need that has paved the way for the CEFR to be adopted in non-English speaking countries outside Europe. The communicative approach aligned with the CEFR descriptors dominates English Language Education. This paper argues that communicative competence has dominated linguistic competence, and UK-based organisations and publishing houses have contributed to this dominance, utilising the CEFR descriptors as a tool.

Keywords: *CEFR, communicative competence, language competence, decolonisation*

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Introduction

The English language dominates former British colonies, such as India, fostering connectivity across linguistic, economic, and cultural boundaries. During the British *Raj*, English functioned as a unifying medium in India, enhancing connectivity, building human relationships for trade and commerce, and providing a platform for deliberations and negotiations in favour of the *Raj*. From where we stand, English seems to be the only language connecting us with the rest of the world, even after Independence. For reasons embedded in colonial rule, or for other varied reasons, along with countries that are not English-speaking, the English-speaking countries seem to fit in the category of the first world (Kachru, 1985). Citizens of India, Nepal, and many other countries flock to English-speaking countries for higher education and better job opportunities. People in developing countries often believe that English-speaking countries offer status, reputation, and a comfortable

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lifestyle. To achieve a comfortable lifestyle, a B2 to C1 level (as per the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors) in English is a catalyst for such a lifestyle, and Communicative English leads one to the corresponding CEFR level of proficiency. The CEFR has accelerated communicative competence over linguistic competence. Prior to the dawn of communicative competence, language competence served a higher purpose in learning and acquiring English as a foreign or second language. What bearings does the CEFR, aligned with the Communicative Approach, have on developing language and communicative competence?

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (North, 2006) established a standardized assessment of learners' proficiency levels in learning a foreign European language in Europe. The outcome of extensive and deep research in finding and creating familiar grounds, assessing competence in all European languages, and using similar yardsticks has resulted in the CEFR descriptors. The CEFR descriptors have become the point of reference for assessing the proficiency levels of learners learning a foreign European language. Kassim and Hashim (2023) argue that numerous countries outside Europe have accepted the descriptors as original, while others have customized the descriptors to align with learners' standards and local needs. The Thai localised version is the FRELE-TH; the Japanese version is the CEFR-J. Project 2020 in Vietnam and Malaysia was synchronised to meet local requirements. Due to the strong presence of the British Council and Cambridge University Press, the CEFR is recognized in India, but it has yet to be formally accepted, if at all, as a means to assess English proficiency levels. The core purpose of the CEFR, according to Mislevy (1993), is to assess proficiency in communication and "identify the learner's state of competence at a given point of time" (Mislevy, 1993 as cited in North, 2006).

The language descriptors in the CEFR have influenced several aspects of English language education, including curriculum design, syllabus design, teaching methodologies, and assessment. Having determined this, I believe that the course of English Language education globally endorses language and communicative competence on a large scale. The CEFR, as presently projected, does not have to be the end or the only standardised method of assessing communicative competence. If language competence development is emphasised in our school and higher education system, the CEFR may be customised to cater to local needs and promote language competency development. It promotes language competence from the perspective of the communicative approach, a skill-based approach to using English, and the functional use of English. With a concrete support system ranging from a trained teacher-facilitator to learning materials from authentic situations, the development of language competence will aid in the development of communicative competence. The CEFR stresses and assesses communicative competence over language competence; the role could be reversed.

The British Council, Cambridge Language Assessment and Accreditation, Pearson, and Macmillan, all UK-based organisations, have stressed the importance of the CEFR in their support of English Language Education and Assessment in India and worldwide. The CEFR aligns with their programmes in Communicative English, such as the Interchange and Empower programmes, as well as related English language proficiency tests, including Linguaskills, IELTS, Aptis, and Pearson PTE. The English language curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment now revolve around the CEFR, as it prioritizes communicative competence over language competence.

Language Competence and the CEFR

A Google search on comparative studies and other research works conducted to analyse if there is a difference between the levels of language competencies of learners from the convent schools and that of government schools show that works by the *National Council of Educational Research and Training* (NCERT, 2012) and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2020) indicate that students from private schools and convent schools have shown to have acquired competence in use of English as a second language. In contrast, those from the government and vernacular schools struggle with fluency in English. The research findings indicate that learners in private and convent schools have acquired language and communicative competencies. On the other hand, learners from vernacular and government schools struggle with language and communicative competence. These findings suggest that little importance has been given to language and communicative competencies, for unknown reasons.

The term' competence' refers to "the ideal internalised knowledge" (Chomsky, 1965), which includes syntax, vocabulary, and grammatical rules. The internalised knowledge "consists of speech (phonetic), lexical, phraseological and grammatical (morphological and syntactic) competencies" (Jumanazarov, 2021, p. 42). Thornbury stresses that linguistic competence is the ability of language speakers to compose "newly formed sentences" (Thornbury, 2006, as cited in Jumanazarov, 2021, p. 43). Competence activates the "language faculty" (Marbaniang, 2016, p.91, para. 2) of the learner. The activation occurs through continuous exposure to the target language, providing learners with the language competence required to communicate effectively as a foreign or second language.

Often, competent speakers of English as a second language find it difficult to recall how they learned English. They may recall the methods they used to learn English in school. It is possible that an effective methodology or a skilled English teacher had a significant impact on the learner's education, particularly in the English language. The lifelong impact is the learners' ability to communicate competently in English. While the English language classes offered instruction in composition, comprehension, writing, and grammar, the English literature classes focused on prose, poetry, and drama. There were few opportunities for formal communicative classes in English education. Yet, exposure to literary works provides learners with an opportunity to become competent users of the English language. Based on the research findings stated earlier, one would assume that these learners are either conventionally educated or have been educated in private schools.

One can draw two arguments from this: the term 'language competence' is the control one has over language, as most of us have with our mother tongue. The ability to play with foreign words pragmatically, using proper syntactical arrangement, stress, and tone, and driving home an intended meaning, depending on the context, may be considered a sign of having language competence over a foreign or second language. The learner who has acquired 'language competence' or has adequate and suitable exposure to English as a foreign or second language may choose to opt out of the CEFR radar, as they would have met the parameters that describe the CEFR proficiency levels (A1 to C2).

Communicative Competence and the CEFR

A survey (unpublished) was conducted between February 2025 and April 2025 among the students of Assam Don Bosco (ADBU) to identify their English language needs. The survey was titled "*Where Am I?" Where do I want to proceed?* I sent a structured questionnaire to 361 students from the School of Social Sciences and the School of Bio-Sciences. 28% of the students indicated a need for Spoken English, 13% indicated a need for

written English, 33% wanted to enroll in the Communicative English programme, and 26% showed no interest in further support for learning English. In this scenario, one can assume that the language pedagogy in schools has given little importance to language and communicative competence. One would assume that the learners have been educated in the vernacular or public schools. This is an encounter with learners from one little corner of the world. How has the English language education world addressed this gap, where learners desire to be competent in using English as a foreign language or a second language?

From the 1940s to the present day, regulatory bodies have introduced various programs and testing systems to promote English language communication. The Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Linguaskills, Aptis, Pearson PTE, are some of the standardised tests that are presently available for those who can avail them which have sought to address the gap in communicative competence in English. Thus, there has been a surge in the promotion of Communicative English as an alternative and more effective method of acquiring English speaking skills. Emphasis is therefore being given to communicative competence over language competence. Chomsky (1965) termed performance as the "actual use of language in concrete situations" (Chomsky, 1965, p 4). We assess a learner's performance as a measure of competence, which is impossible because it is an abstract notion that is not realized in reality. The utterances, the conversations, are the application (conscious or otherwise) of the knowledge (prior and procedural knowledge) of a foreign or second language to which the learners have been exposed.

The CEFR has its foundation in Hymes' Communicative Competence and the Communicative Language Teaching method, assessing and describing learners' functional language ability, which includes interaction, discourse, and pragmatic use of the language. The CEFR describes the proficiency of the learner as "he or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and what to talk about, with whom, where, when, in what manner" (Hymes, 1972, p 277). Within this function, it is clear that CEFR conditions the performance (the communicative ability) of the learners, by drawing parameters on how much is too little when communicating in English (A1) as a foreign or a second language, and yet puts a cap on how far one can go (C2) in communicating in English in a given context. Socio-cultural factors for countries such as India have not been considered when assessing communicative ability using the CEFR guidelines.

Modes of Assessment

To possess the skill of playing with the English language, juxtaposing between the lower variety and the higher variety, is a feat that, once upon a time, could be achieved by those who had adequate exposure to the English language within and outside the educational institutions. The exposure was to the medium of English instruction, supplemented by an environment that augmented the use of English in casual conversations. This process of acquiring the English language and using it in the academic and social realms was not limited to any specific form of assessment parameters (such as the CEFR) for how the English language was used (activities) or whether it was used accurately. The focus was on the conscious and unconscious processes by which learners acquired the language in a natural setting and applied it in both academic and social contexts.

While the medium of instruction was English, the pedagogy and assessment were teacher-centred. The pedagogy and assessment focused on developing receptive skills, including listening and reading comprehension, as well as building vocabulary and improving

accuracy in grammar and pronunciation, when using the productive skills. The teacher-centered strategy was appropriate for an environment that supported the acquisition of English as a second language. Competency in the English language was the result among many learners who come from this environment. With sufficient subject knowledge and critical thinking skills, such learners become proficient in what we call Communicative English. Thus, the responsibility for teaching and assessing learners' language competency or language proficiency in school education and higher education rested with the teacher, whose knowledge, experience, and skills contributed to developing language competency among students.

The CEFR is a relatively recent development and is currently in its initial implementation stage. The implementation of the CEFR descriptors started in 2001. As a descriptive and standardised document, the CEFR describes learners' language proficiency levels. The aligned courses and tests, however, are more prescriptive in nature. The English language courses prescribe materials and methods that would 'enable' learners to reach a higher level of proficiency as per the CEFR descriptors to meet the following objectives: to 'enable', or to make the learners' more proficient' in communicative English, or to 'improve' English Communication skills, or to 'develop English Communicative English'. Indeed, it has brought with it a wave of quick learning of a foreign language, focusing on how English could be used in specific situations. The focus is on proficiency in language use to reach a goal of communicative competence. The learner takes the centre stage in this approach. What they think and how they feel is essential as they work on their communication skills. It is important for the learners to 'feel good', boost their confidence, and gain communicative competence within a given socio-cultural setup.

Dominance of the Common European Framework

Within 24 years, the CEFR has become a point of reference and a standardised global benchmark. With non-English speaking countries outside Europe adopting the CEFR descriptors and proficiency levels to assess proficiency levels among English learners, English language proficiency testing, as prescribed by the CEFR, has become globalised and 'standardised', making English language proficiency testing mandatory. This has led to the rise in dominance of the CEFR globally.

Globalisation and standardisation of the CEFR have given impetus to organisations and publishing houses such as the British Council, Cambridge University Press, Burlington English, Macmillan, Pearson to have courses and testing systems lined up, preparing learners for Communicative English with communicative competence, the aim of English language learning over language competence in English. Courses and testing systems include Interchange, Empower, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), offered by Cambridge Language Assessment, as well as the Certificate of English Teaching to Adults (CELTA), Linguaskills, and Aptis, both offered by the British Council, and Pearson PTE, a testing system provided by Pearson. The mentioned courses and testing systems have been aligned as per the proficiency descriptors of the CEFR. The courses and testing systems serve as a prerequisite for applications for scholarships, jobs, and citizenship in first-world English-speaking countries and other non-English-speaking countries. This has become a norm due to the recognition and acceptance of the CEFR as a standardized set of descriptors and proficiency levels at the global level.

Decolonisation of English and the Western Forms of Assessment

The emphasis on the CEFR descriptors has found its way through the Communicative Approach in teaching and learning English. The emphasis on communicative competence,

aligning with the CEFR descriptors, has crept into higher education, a misconception that communicative competence in English is a pathway to better performance in English. There are two conclusions that can be drawn from this.

The colonial rule of the British Empire has enabled the global spread of the English language, leaving behind a wide variety of English being used across all continents. English has developed regional varieties to accommodate local socio-economic and cultural influences from indigenous communities. The CEFR, a European framework, is now adopted in non-European countries, paving the way for the rise of another form of colonization. Countries have been decolonized, but colonization once again hovers in non-English-speaking countries, through the emphasis on the Communicative Approach, which is aligned with the CEFR descriptors. The standardization of the CEFR, although adopted by non-European countries, was designed primarily for European nations.

One of the drawbacks of learning English using the Communicative Approach is learning to communicate in English only within a specified context, making it difficult to use English beyond a given situation. Communicative English has narrowed the focus of English learning to specific purposes, where learners acquire specialized vocabulary and learn to respond to queries related to their particular jobs. Performance in this context does not refer to the academic realm, or the use of a high variety of English, where there is a play and manipulation of words during intellectual discourse, with appropriateness and accuracy being used at all levels. Performance, as one would interpret it, is a regular conversation, an interaction that aims at the functionality of a job assigned or the functionality of day-to-day life. Preparing learners along the CEFR may be particularly relevant for learners who aspire to migrate and move abroad, especially those from the working class. Communicative English conditions the learning of English, confining communication only to specified situations, limiting the cultural influence on how the English language is used, and adhering to the CEFR descriptors.

Within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, the use of English as a foreign or second language, as well as its purpose, is determined by the socio-economic and cultural factors particular to each country. Based on this argument, it would be interesting and beneficial for the SAARC nations to explore whether a standardized form of assessment is likely for nations under this umbrella, one that aligns with the sociolinguistic norms and reflects the socio-cultural context of each SAARC country. The first step towards this is the decolonisation of English and its Western assessment forms.

Conclusion

Regarding language competence and communicative competence, it is clear that establishing supportive pedagogical systems develops language competency, as was the case in the pre-CEFR era. Supporting learners in developing language competence enables communicative competence, which the UK-based organisations have so enthusiastically emphasised, by promoting communicative competence through courses and materials aligned to the CERR.

English is considered the *lingua franca*, especially in international relations; yet, English also has a range of distinct varieties, which are outcomes of socio-cultural and economic influences. The CEFR limits the way English is perceived worldwide. Over a period of 24 years, using the CEFR descriptors as a standardised form of assessment of English language proficiency has become a norm in non-European countries. However, a few have adopted and customized the CEFR according to their requirements. Keeping this in mind, the article calls for decolonisation of the forms of assessment of the English language

for reasons that non-English nations, especially those under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), are free from being conditioned even along linguistic lines, by aligning the English language assessment methods in the SAARC countries along socio-linguistics and socio-cultural lines.

On this note, therefore, one concludes that standardization of assessment can be based on the socio-cultural and linguistic norms of nations, and thus, pedagogy and materials can be aligned accordingly. If this is proven to be successful, the CEFR will no longer dominate non-European nations, but will coexist as a pioneer alongside other forms of standardized methods of English language assessment in the English Language Education arena.

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An English Teacher's *Currere* from Cocksureness to Critical Self-Awareness

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Abstract

In this paper, I narrate my transformative journey as an English language teacher in relation to my understanding of curriculum theory and practice in higher education. Using the currere *approach, I reflect on my evolution from initial overconfidence to critical curriculum awareness at Kathmandu University since August 2000. The paper addresses a common phenomenon in higher education, where students receive superficial exposure to curricular processes during their academic journey, subsequently developing unwarranted confidence in the curriculum upon graduation. Through systematic reflection and critique, this* currere *aligns my personal curricular experiences with established theoretical frameworks, particularly drawing upon Schwab's curriculum commonplaces, Schubert's curricular images, and Baptist's conceptualization of curriculum as a garden. The study contributes to curriculum discourse by presenting a customizable framework for understanding and implementing curriculum as a developing educational guideline. The reflections demonstrate how theoretical grounding in foundational curriculum concepts helps transform practitioners from unreflective implementers to critically aware developers and implementers of curriculum.*

Keywords: *Transformative journey of a teacher, currere, curricular process, theory of curriculum in practice*

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Introduction

The following narrative is organized through the four dimensions of *currere*–the regressive, progressive, analytic, and synthetic phases of one's educational journey (Pinar, 2020, p. 50). I also draw insights from Reiff (2017) the idea of *currere* as being "a profound method of personal reflection" (p. 12), from Baszile (2017) the notion of it being "a kind of mindful inquiry" to "harness the power of contemplation, reflection, introspection, and imagination" (p. vii); and from Mahjani (2018) the aspect of "trying to make connections between past, present, and future" and "identifying and unpacking my biases" (Mahjani,

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2018, p. 56). I largely utilise the ideas that have emerged from retrospection. Notes from personal journals and posts from my weblog substantiate the reflections.

The Cocksure Beginner

I begin my argument with a brief account of the regressive phase of my *currere*. I joined Kathmandu University (KU) in August 2000 as a Teaching Assistant in English under the School of Science. My primary assignment was then to teach general English and Communication Skills courses. I had entered the university while in a state of utter confusion about my career path. As a "fresh MA with a not-so-bad Nepalese percentage in English [meaning final marks in percentage]," I thought KU was not a great choice. The Kathmandu market, in fact, was much more attractive with "half a dozen vacancy announcements per day" (Kafle, 2016, p. 55). And I was certain that I would ultimately shift to Tribhuvan University (TU), a public institution. The journal I maintained during those days reveals this: "It [KU] is no doubt a private institution, but far better than any other private ones. … I shall therefore work there as long as I like and until I pass the TU Service Commission examination for a permanent position. KU is far better than boarding schools and higher secondary schools, popularly localized as plus twos." I wonder how I chose to join an institution without learning about its nature and type. It was sheer cocksureness, indeed.

In the early months at KU, I was tasked with teaching courses in language, literature, and communication skills. The key textbooks for language included *"Meanings into Words"* and *"Reading between the Lines,"* and those for literary readings were *"The Magic of Words" (a compilation of brief texts), "Shakespeare's Macbeth," "Herman Hesse's Siddhartha," and "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein."* The primary components of communication included oral presentations, routine correspondence, proposals, reports, and academic essays. I thought these were not much of a challenge for me. Compared to the volumes of fiction, prose, poetry, drama, and critical theories that I had studied in the curricula of Bachelor and Master programs and the amount of engagement with the Master level thesis, the syllabi of the Intermediate (now grade 11 and 12) and undergraduate levels at KU looked to me very limited and easy to cover. The reason was simple. TU was a principal point of reference. Since I was considered qualified to teach at the Master's level courses at TU, and was already invited to a public campus of Kathmandu to teach a course in literature in the third year of the Bachelor level, what was the meagre amount of compulsory English at the intermediate and undergraduate levels of KU? I thought so and was cocksure about being more qualified for the KU courses.

A year passed, and I got a promotion to the position of lecturer. To the Dean's question, "How do you evaluate your last year of teaching?" During my brief interview, I explained, "Since no one has so far directly complained about my weaknesses, I must be doing fine." My response carried a tinge of discontent that no one had monitored my work, nor had anyone ever seriously mentored me. It also involved the sarcasm that I was being offered a promotion without being told how well I had performed in the formative year.

At that time, I had a somewhat vague understanding of the concept of curriculum. In fact, I believed that the courses I taught formed my entire curriculum. I did not plan to grow with the curriculum at the outset because I thought it was too little to exploit my potential. I did not want to grow with the given curricular responsibility because I had a wild fancy, shifting to another university with a permanent position. Did I, after all, have to understand curriculum development? Was I educating youngsters, or was I doing my job that paid for my family's subsistence and my aspirations? No doubt, I was humble and modest in my

demeanor as a person, and honest in my teaching performance. But deep within my conscious self, I hid the conviction that I deserved more and higher, and I had great faith in myself and my potential. If there was any problem, I did not blame it on my being new and inexperienced at the university. I believed that the students were indifferent, uncooperative, and spoiled. Many of my colleagues who experienced indifferent responses from the students expressed similar beliefs that 'this generation' of youngsters was not serious, disciplined, and studious.

The Confident Seer

I now move to the progressive phase of my *currere*. It has already been more than twenty-five years now. I landed at the KU School of Education, based in the Kathmandu Valley, after serving twenty-one years and seven months at the university's main campus in Dhulikhel. I am now in the academic environment I coveted in August 2000. This shift constitutes the dream classes of the graduate and postgraduate programs in English Language teaching, English language education, English studies, and writing and literacy studies. From this ambience, I can comfortably envision several plans. I see several opportunities ahead. I believe they are achievable. Such confidence underlies the vibrancy of the team at the School, in general, and at my department, in particular. My plans are stated in the message I crafted as the former Head. These include such promises as helping the department to grow as a prominent center of English studies in Nepal, forging innovative and sustainable programs, continuing the legacy of mentorship, institutionalizing the writing and communication center, extending services to other KU Schools and affiliated institutions, and increasing the graduation rate, among others ("Message from the HoD"). Even though these plans might have sounded ambitious when I wrote them, I am reasonably sure now that my working conditions are favorable towards meeting those aims. The team has grown with the induction of our own dedicated graduates. I am an associate dean capable of supporting growth through greater authority and mentorship potential. Additionally, I hold a Master's degree in Higher Education, which has enhanced my competence in higher education leadership. I am wary of my intellectual limitations, but I am confident about my institutional scope. This awareness has resulted from over twenty-four years of active teaching, administrative service, and leadership roles.

I joined as an English language teacher, with almost no awareness of the need to take on challenges as time passed. However, in 2001, I began to partake in program development initiatives. Later, I was engaged in a partly conflicting and largely challenging leadership role for two years (from 2011 to 2013) as one of the two Associate Directors of Student Welfare. With the inception of the Humanities and Management Unit in 2013, the launch of the BBIS program in 2014, the establishment of the Department of Management Informatics and Communication in 2019, and the launch of the MPhil program on the main campus, I began to see myself more as a manager than a leader. Now that I am completing twenty-five years, the passion for mentoring defines my identity and ethos. Mentorship is about creating learning and transformation spaces for those seeking intellectual guidance from me. It transcends teaching and management. I am trying to make an even more profound sense of it in the days ahead (Kafle, 2021).

Critical Self-Awareness

The analytic phase of my *currere* features multiple understandings of the present situation. Despite evolving into a successful faculty member and participating in curriculum teams multiple times, I confess that I have not been formally trained in curriculum development. I was smug in my understanding that a curriculum was a program with one or two specializations. Exposures made me overconfident in having achieved competence, to

such an extent that I hardly ever volunteered to study the basic theories and practices of curriculum. I could indeed have noted some of these even during the unfinished one-year B.Ed. My journey at TU began around the same time I joined KU (Kafle, 2016). I could have bothered to internalise at least a few of the curriculum theories every time I took up membership on curriculum committees.

My formal orientation to curriculum began only with the classes for the Master's in Higher Education, which I joined in August 2022 and completed in December 2024. This fresh exposure to theories and practices of curriculum has helped me make sense of my past work and offered me some directions for my present and future curriculum design initiatives. Primarily, three readings have been instrumental in expanding my understanding of curriculum. These include Schwab's (1973) five commonplaces of curriculum, Schubert's (1986) curriculum images, and Baptist's (2002) metaphor of curriculum as a garden.

The Commonplaces

The five commonplaces suggested by Schwab and extensively discussed by Null (2011) are subject matter, teacher, learner (or student), milieu (or context), and curriculum making. Although I may have attempted to strike a fair balance of these factors earlier without knowing the terms, familiarity now prompts me to seek their alignment with my curricular practices. To begin with, 'subject matter' has been a perennial interest of mine. While I was teaching in the Intermediate program at KU, the subject matter was something handed to me with no opportunity for modification or improvement. In those days, I thought the 'teacher' did everything and the 'student' had no role except to respond to the former's questions and do homework as assigned. Since the curriculum and inherent syllabi were teacher-led, there was no consideration of the 'context' except that the temperature, hygiene and noise of large classes impacted us. 'Curriculum making' did not feature in my everyday work for quite a while until I became a part of an informal curriculum development initiative in 2001.

I see my present faculty role in new dimensions. Through continuous engagement in curriculum and syllabus development and teaching, I have come to perceive these commonplaces as having been fully internalized in my practices. Now, as a 'teacher,' I tend to assert my authority as someone who wishes to replace a rigidly bulleted traditional syllabus with one with a more contextual, progressive set of contents, with the prospect of being updated regularly. Now, I even ask learners to challenge a particular syllabus and comment on the curriculum in general. To me, a student is as much a learner as a co-creator of curriculum, learning environment, and knowledge.

After I initiated the launch of an MPhil in English Language Education (ELE) cohort at the university's main campus in 2019, the need for contextual adjustment became apparent. As the immediate coordinator of the cohort, I had to reshuffle the courses, find a new team of faculty members, and allow them to prepare the syllabi as they saw fit to deliver. So, the cohort experienced the curriculum slightly differently from the regular spring group. Moreover, when the COVID-19 outbreak pushed everything online, nothing could be more revealing about the 'context' (milieu) than the need to cope with the circumstances through timely (re)adjustments.

As a faculty member at the graduate and postgraduate levels, I currently experience 'curriculum making' in two dimensions. First, it is a continuous process in that you tend to allow the syllabi to evolve with every batch of students. At the same time, the fundamentals, such as curricular objectives, learning outcomes, and assessment rationales, remain constant. Second, it is a scheduled task designed to create an entirely new program or revamp an

existing one. Although a seemingly structured process, we allow ideas and concepts to unfold as we design or implement a curriculum. Moreover, the curriculum is the result of a dedicated team's work. They might conceptualize a very representative structure and outline, but the process of arriving at a consensus structure works best.

The Dominant Image

Several crucial factors unfold now when I observe the existing curricula of KU, especially the MPhil program, in the light of Schubert's (1986) 'curriculum images' (which include subject matter, planned activities, intended learning outcomes, cultural reproduction, experience, discrete tasks and concepts, agenda for social reconstruction, and *currere*. The MPhil curriculum features 'subject matter' as the area of specialization (e.g., English Language Education) or the degree offered, which integrates subjects in English, English Language Teaching, and Applied Linguistics. The planned activities are tailored to the individual courses, set according to the objectives and expected learning outcomes of each subject. Nevertheless, activities are conducted with minimum common pedagogical approaches, assessment systems, and personal assistance and institutional services. The intended learning outcomes have been stated in each course. We emphasize these, but have not frequently measured and monitored actual achievements.

Our curriculum is partly a 'cultural reproduction' in the sense that we frequently tailor it to meet the expectations of prospective applicants who wish to succeed in the competitive academic environment. Additionally, our work is partly influenced by changes in governmental policies and the evolving aspirations of society at large. What becomes acceptable in a particular era significantly influences the development of the curriculum. Furthermore, for a faculty of my stature, experience is foundational to curriculum development. Naturally, when the system matures, curriculum development becomes a regular and comfortable affair. When faculty members mature into authorities in certain disciplines, they engage in curriculum development with the understanding, competence, and resources necessary to determine what truly functions best.

I now believe that a university curriculum should be able to cross-pollinate diversity. I may have developed such a preoccupation because I am a product of the humanities, having extensively studied programs in science, engineering, the arts, management, education, and medicine. Thus, the image of 'discrete tasks and concepts' implies the absence of a transdisciplinary orientation in a curriculum. Even though prioritizing specialized, disciplinary contents and pedagogies may make the program time-friendly and easy to run, with course delivery and assessments being comfortable, the prospects of holistic training remain minimized if the curriculum is designed as 'discrete tasks and concepts.'

In its history spanning more than three decades, the 'agenda for social reconstruction' has been one of KU's recent priorities. The thrust of taking the classroom from the campus to the community, along with the diverse curricular integration of community outreach initiatives in undergraduate and graduate programs, best represents (if not implements) the agenda of 'social reconstruction'. We have tried to enhance broader community ownership and emphasized gradual transformation in the lives of the people we work with. Should universities inculcate universal, all-applicable knowledge, skills, and competencies in their own premises, or go out to (re)build the society? This question continues to haunt the KU fraternity at the leadership level. But with the launching of the Integrated Rural Development Program in 2017, the establishment of the Community Engagement Division in 2019, and the operationalization of the Continuing and Professional Education Centre (CPEC) in 2022, serving the community in specific thematic areas has become a dictum inspiring gradual alignment of the programs to community needs. In the wake of widespread awareness that

KU is a public university, I have personally feared the increasing influence of political and ideological interests by the power elites of the communities in recent years. But we have maintained relative autonomy in defining and implementing the scope of our social engagement so far.

Now I come to '*currere*,' the most intriguing image of curriculum. I was almost ready to dismiss this concept after discussing the seven perceptible images above. A little curiosity led me to learn the connotations of it as a verb form. I happened to delve into a vast philosophical terrain drawn towards and drawing from humanistic thinking. Several questions and propositions began to surge in my mind. How does one experience curriculum? How did I live through it? How does any program of ours allow the students to experience it? Pinar (2020) helped me appease my curiosity. He elucidates that curriculum operates as much through "conversation, ongoing dialogical encounter among students and teachers in classrooms" as "within oneself in solitude" (p. 51). Curriculum, thus, is not only the program you join in an academic institution, but also what comes into your life the moment you are a part of the program and the institution. This has provided me with a new thesis for further ruminations: Everyone has their own curriculum and is allowed to experience and internalize it in their own ways. Thus, people who undergo the same courses and adopt the same pedagogical orientations are likely to develop different competencies and sensibilities. Despite appearing to be one system, the curriculum provides separate tracks for every student to run their own races.

Does the curriculum run itself? Curriculum now appears like the earth to me, like nature with all potential to live itself and nurture those who come around. However, the nurture manifests best through what Pinar (2020) calls "intensified engagement with classroom life, supported by the cultivation of a consciousness that remembers the past with an eye on the future while focused on the present" (p. 52). I understand this as the potential for infinity. However, without regular engagement from people and the utilization of its nourishing supplies, the curriculum may become a barely tilled piece of land.

The Garden

Baptist's (2002) garden as a metaphor for curriculum has further enriched my understanding of curriculum at large. The idea of a garden as a place and manifestation of life in totality resonates with me as a complement to the notion of curriculum as currere, in relation to the lived experiences of both educators and students. To allude to curriculum as gardening is to acknowledge "the lived experiences of the person within" as the "synthesis of orchestrated and phenomenological experiences," and in the light of one's enrichment through "physical movement, intellectual engagement, and creative imagination" (p. 20). The six views of the garden metaphor—faith, power, order, cultural expression, personal expression, and healing—are of perennial intellectual value to me as a participant and implementer of curriculum.

The notion of 'faith' reflects a pious convergence between curriculum implementers, educators, and learners. In this sense, curriculum embodies the "human need for connectivity" to nurture "mutual understanding through caring thought and action" (p. 27). 'Power' as the "symbol of individual or political prowess" (p. 27) represents to me a natural condition in which educators and learners are placed in a vertical relationship, while also being conditioned to comply with the dictates of a hegemonic institutional mechanism. But 'order,' in contrast, denotes the coherence and cohesion maintained in and by the curriculum. Baptist (2002) elucidates it as "the implicit meaning system," which constitutes "aesthetic, phenomenological, normative, critical, action-based, religious, and hierarchical framing

modes" (p. 29). This, to me, represents the unity in diversity of subjects and symmetry in seemingly loose aspects of implementation and practice.

Baptist's meaning for both curriculum and garden as 'cultural expression' in terms of the "reflections of their place and their time" (p. 29) echoes Schubert's image of curriculum as cultural reproduction. In other words, like a garden, curriculum can also be place- and culture-specific. However, since each place is different, the curriculum is influenced by and tends to accommodate factors such as cultural diversity, demographic requirements, and popular expectations. I, therefore, acknowledge the fact that "place downplays the isolation of overspecialization" as it promotes "interdisciplinary diversity and connectivity in thought and action" (p. 30). Next, to associate curriculum with 'personal expression' is to acknowledge the "opportunity for personal creativity and expression" (p. 31) for both educators and learners. In this line, curriculum matures in "an evolving process of self-knowledge," which allows the learner to go through "spiralling progressions of self-understanding and informed meaningful action" (p. 32). Finally, the dimension of 'healing' in the Baptist's garden metaphor attributes a therapeutic character to the curriculum, enabling it to "promote healing and growth" by reestablishing a sense of "personal meaning and balance" (p. 34). Like Baptist, I adhere to the postulation that curriculum should "reinvigorate new forms of knowledge" (p. 34), thereby liberating practitioners and learners from the confines of conservatism and unidisciplinary indoctrination.

Conclusion: The Synthesis

Through attempts to internalize Schwab's five commonplaces, Schubert's eight images, and Baptist's six views on curriculum, I have come to realize that my team and I can and must revisit the existing programs in English and work cautiously to conceive any future programs. No doubt, through project-based experiential learning, group work, research orientation, and community engagement opportunities, the programs have performed quite satisfactorily, regardless of the size of their intake. The recently revised MPhil ELE program certainly promises to 'reinvigorate' itself and our approach as implementers. The Master's program(s) in English language teaching demand transferring this new promise in and from the upcoming intake.

The idea of specialization in graduate and postgraduate programs sounds somewhat oxymoronic to the vision of holistic learning. We must, therefore, seek transdisciplinary potential in the given constraints of place and time, integrating dynamic contents, productive activities, and engaging assignments. My curricular premise (read it as a promise as well) is to attract and train students through the transdisciplinary integration of English studies, applied linguistics, language teaching, and research orientation. I would continue to advocate the commonplaces of contextual subject matter and dynamic curriculum making, the images of learning outcomes and *currere*, and the views of healing and personal expression as foundational to curriculum development at Kathmandu University.

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Oral Narrative Studies in Assam: Exploring Three *Tantric* Myths

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Abstract

Integral to folklore studies, oral narratives have garnered significant academic attention since the previous century, particularly among Western academia. These academic discourses largely influence the methodologies adopted for studying oral narratives worldwide. However, upon examining the diversity of indigenous oral narratives, particularly in regions such as the Northeast of Assam, several genres are identified that have not yet become significant documents in folklore studies. One such variety of oral narratives is the Tantric myths in Assam, India. The accessible tantric myths in Assam are important materials for folkloristic analysis as they represent a virgin area of folkloristic investigation. An integral part of the everyday practices of various tribes inhabiting Assam, their existence and relevance inform us of two major things about the people. First, the people of Assam have an intrinsic belief system, where they believe in the power of tantra as a magic-inducing factor. This is not only a result of 'fear' of the unexplained/unpredictable, but also a faith that the omnipotent and omniscient, if there is any, is Nature herself. Humans need to be in harmony with Nature at all times if they want to achieve their desired objectives, results, or protection. The 'magical' in Assam is not about the miraculous or the impossible, but actually about a 'wonder' to be gifted as a blessing by Nature, if/when appeased. Secondly, there is a sense of relevance in these myths among the people of Assam, as they are still practiced and performed, often with a sense of secrecy to preserve their mystical nature. A folkloristic investigation is attempted here, utilizing three available Tantric myth texts. The investigation includes a structural analysis, adopting Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of breaking down a myth into its smallest units, along with an exploration of the forms of the myth using the epic laws of folk narrative by Axel Olrik. I carried out the functional analysis of the myths using the participant observation method, the basis of which is formed by Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe Brown, and William Bascom's conceptions of the functions of folklore. Additionally, the investigation also ponders the process of transmitting narratives to establish the relevance of such myths in folk life.

Keywords: *Folklore studies, oral narratives, myths, mantra*

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Introduction

As an important part of Assamese folk life, the idea of 'magic' has been prevalent among various tribes and folk groups. In the Assamese tradition, magic is expressed through practice and awe; the mantra serves as the medium for practicing magic. Some *mantra* books in the Assamese language claim that the Atharva Veda has a profound influence on mantra practice in Assam (Gogoi, 2008). Many legends and folktales are loaded with examples of mantra practice. Some examples of written *mantras* include the Karatiputhis (Rudra Karati, Brahma Karati, etc.), Kamratna Tantra, Yogini Tantra, and the Kalika Purana, among others.

Mantra is a valuable component of religious practice, particularly among tribal communities. These are non-Vedic mantras and have been carried forward from their pre-Vedic, non-institutionalised religious practices. The Tantric practice of mantra usually involves the conversations between *Siva (Sodasibo)* and *Parvati (Parboti).* They are representatives of *Siva* and *Shakti*, respectively, who, in the Hindu philosophy, are the powers that govern life and its course on earth. *Tantric* mantras connect these powers to different parts of the human body.

Tantric myths are mantras in the form of a story used for tantric practices. As myths, they deal with the origin of matters and entities that disturb the human mind, such as supernatural powers, evil deities, illnesses, diseases, accidents, and the anxiety of conducting a certain activity smoothly, which is observed in the popular day-to-day practices of ordinary people. These myths and their usage completely depend on the folk psyche and the matters they believe in and are concerned with. Most of these *tantric* myths, which are part of the tantra practice, have been preserved in secrecy within practicing families for generations. The main practitioners of such practices are known as the *Bej* or the *Oja*. However, most of the time, the written sources are either lost or untraceable. Therefore, certain individuals are trained to recite these mantras orally. The language of such myths is usually a mixed one. The influences of Sanskrit, local dialects, and neighboring languages are evident in the language used to tell those myths. Some of the myths are also chanted in a lyrical form. The characters of *Sodasibo* and *Parboti* also frequent these myths.

The main purpose of tantric myths is to ward off illness, diseases, injuries caused by animal bites, etc. The people believe that chanting the mantra or reciting the myth related to the problem/occasion by the designated Bej will protect them from ghosts and other supernatural beings that hinder their peaceful and healthy day-to-day life. In folk life, people believe that canting myths shoo away ghosts and other supernatural beings that are harmful to a healthy lifestyle. Certain other myths are chanted so that an important activity, usually economic, runs smoothly. Folks and practitioners believe that the explanation of their origin reminds evil powers of their apparent powerlessness or the original purpose of their existence. This, along with the confident and fearless tone of the chanter, brings a positive effect to the folk psyche, accumulating strength and positivity in the sufferer's mind. This can be a psychological explanation of the effects of *mantras*. However, even at present, these means of healing are considered the only reliable method among certain groups of people. Some examples of *tantric* myths include the myths of poison, the myth of dogs and snakes, the myth of evils named Khuba and Khubuni, the myth of the *muga* cocoon, and others.

Origin myths, especially local variants of origin myths such as the *Tantric* myths, are less explored areas of folkloristic analysis. The main reason for this can be the non-availability of the texts, as these texts, even in their oral form, are not a part of folks' daily activities. They are, however, essential elements of folk life, especially in remote areas. A study of these myths, viewed through a folkloristic lens, will reveal facets of the tribal belief systems, symbols that convey social messages to guide individuals towards a particular

behavioral pattern. In this paper, by studying selected *tantric* myths from Assam, the researcher explores structural commonalities to understand their function in folk belief systems and the process of their transmission. The study aims to explore the commonalities within the structural patterns of tantric myths, using the selected myths as a basis. In addition to the structure, the study will look at the form of the myth narratives. To establish the relevance of the myths in folk life, a study of their functionality and transmission process will be conducted using accessible elements from the performance events of the myths.

Methodological Procedures and Theoretical Framework

The three *tantric* myths selected for the study are "The *mantra* of snake bite", "The *mantra* of evil eye", and "The *mantra* of growing *muga* cocoon". The tales are identified and collected from Birinchi Kumar Baruah's Asamor Loka Sanskriti (1967) and Nirmalprabha Bordoloi's Assamor Loka Sanskriti (2004). However, more such myths are yet to be documented for research, as they are still treasured within practising families only and are not passed on for public use. The folkloristic approaches referred to for this research are:

Claude Levi-Strauss's Theory of Structural Analysis

Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) belonged to the structural school of critical analysis. According to Levi-Strauss, a myth, like language, is made of constituent units. His methodology for the structural study of a myth involved breaking down the story into the shortest possible units or sentences. These elemental units were used to analyze the underlying structure of relationships and binary opposition among the elements of the myth. According to him, "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution" (Levi-Strauss, 1963), i.e., myths basically consist of binary oppositions, which are (a) elements that contradict each other, and (b) elements that mediate or resolve these oppositions. While developing his theory of structural analysis of a myth, Levi-Strauss also proposed that universal laws must govern mythical thought, as similar myths exist in different cultures. These universal laws also resolve the paradox that, while mythical stories are fantastic and unpredictable, there are myths in different cultures that are surprisingly similar.

However, for the present research, Levi-Strauss's idea of breaking down the myths to the smaller (not the smallest, in this case) units only is applied to arrive at the various stages of a common structural pattern for the three selected myths. Each sentence of a myth is observed in relation to the corresponding sentence of the other two myths to identify the pattern.

Theories of Functional Analysis of Oral Narratives

From a functionalist point of view, the reality of the events is found in their manifestations in the present. Hence, their contemporary functioning should be observed and recorded to understand the events. The functionalists attempted to interpret societies as they operated at a single point in time. The earliest proponent of this school of thought, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), suggests that individuals have physiological needs (such as food, shelter, and reproduction) and that social institutions exist to meet these needs. His contemporary A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), a structural functionalist and a founding father of functionalism, suggests that society is a system of relationships and there are orderly sets of institutions whose function is to maintain the society. In other words, the social life of a community refers to the functioning of its social structure. The methodological emphasis of the functionalists is, hence, on intensive fieldwork involving participant observation. Later, the functionalist and anthropologist, Bascom (1954), suggests four primary functions of folklore. They are, (a) Folklore helps people to escape from repressions imposed by society,

(b) Folklore validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them, (c) As a pedagogical device, folklore reinforces morals and values and builds wit, and (d) Folklore is a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control.

Axel Olrik's "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative"

Danish folklorist Axel Olrik, through his paper, introduces some principal laws that govern the composition of folk narrative. He maintains that these laws are found to be effective in some folk narrative genres, which he collectively terms the "Sage" or "Sagenwelt." Sage incorporates genres such as folktales, myth, legend, and folksongs within its purview. He argues that folklore composition maintains its own laws rather than the laws of everyday life; hence, the folk narratives are found in certain definite forms. Some of the laws introduced by Olrik include the Law of Opening and Closing, the Law of Repetition, the Law of Two to a Scene, the Law of Contrast, and the Law of Three, among others.

A Folkloristic Study of the Selected *Tantric* Myths

The myths selected for this study, i.e, "The *mantra* of snake bite" (Myth 1), "The *mantra* of evil eye" (Myth 2), and "The *mantra* of growing mugacocoon" (Myth 3), represent three different activities. Myth 1 is used as an accompaniment of a brief performance to treat the victims of snake-bite; Myth 2 is used to cure a person believed to be possessed by an 'evil eye' or a supernatural entity; Myth 3 is an activity-related *mantra*, which is believed to be invoking the magic of prosperity in growing the *muga-polu* (Muga-cocoon).

Since these myths are locally used, based on local belief systems and activities, they do not travel much. Therefore, numerous elements of local cultures are reflected in the myths, including characters, incidents, moments, gods and goddesses, and their names. Some elements are picked up from local cultural habits and religious practices. Gods and goddesses in the myths are sometimes local deities that are given superior status by societal beliefs, and at times are localized from institutionalized religions, mostly Hinduism. For example, the *Dimasas* call God *Siva* Brai Sibrai, the Lalungs call him Mohadeb, Assamese-speaking people call him Sodasibo, the Rabhas call him Rudra, and the *Deuris* call him *Burha*, and so on. Goddess *Durga* is also known as *Parboti, Burhi, Kesaikhati*, etc. The gods of institutionalized religions are localized and, at times, humanized in their myths. *Mohadeb*, in a *Lalung* myth, drinks a lot of local beer and falls asleep on the roadside. In the tantric myth of the Evil Eye, Siva begs for a livelihood, and Parboti fights with him for being unable to manage a household with a meager amount. *Siva* then borrows the necessities from minor gods and cultivates.

Exploration of the Structural Patterns of the *Tantric* Myths

A significant factor about *Tantric* myths is that their structures differ from other myth structures. The major difference is that these myths start abruptly, sometimes giving the impression of being in the middle of an ongoing half-told tale, then explain the origin of the 'being'/subject in question, its role in the world and among humanity as desired by the creator, and ends either with a suggestion of a way to appease this being or with a message of threat from the creator about punishment, if it deviates from its role.

Table 1 presents a basic structure for the *tantric* myths in Assam, using the three aforementioned myths as examples. The structure that arrived at is not absolute, as the nature and lengths of the mantras used as mediums to narrate the myths do not always hold uniformity. Many of these mantras are narrated in lyrical form too, and sometimes they are accompanied by certain archetypal utterances such as "*Hringhring*", "*Phuhphuh*", "*Thah, thah*", etc., at different stages, and there are manual activities also.

Table 1

Structural pattern of the tantric myths

Myth 1 **(Snake Bite)**	**Myth 2** **(Evil Eye)**	**Myth 3** **(Growing *Muga* Cocoon)**	**The Resultant Structure**
Once, *Sadasiva* wanted the company of *Parboti* during midday.	Once, *Parboti* told *Sadasiva* that they had had enough of begging and should now grow their own crops.	*Sadasiva* and *Parboti* fought over a domestic matter.	The abrupt beginning introduces a problem unrelated to the reason behind the mantra's utterance.
Parboti got angry and abused *Siva*.	She advised *Siva* to obtain the seeds from *Kuber*, the plough from *Balaram*, land from *Indra*, and the buffalo from *Yamaraj*, and to use his own cow, *Brishabha*. *Siva* did accordingly.	*Parboti* started crying and left the place.	A reaction to the problem occurs.
Out of the abusive language were born lots of snakes, including *Kali Sarpa*.	With the help of the can of seeds, he grew a vast cultivation from one mountain to another. The crops grew, and *Siva* forgot to go back home while being busy with cultivation.	Her teardrops became Muga cocoons.	The result or the outcome of the reaction.
Siva told *Kali Nag* to be the ruler of the Malaygiri Mountain. He divided the venom among all the snakes.	*Parboti* created a tiger and asked it to go and scare everyone away from the cultivation. The tiger went and scared the cow and the buffalo. So, *Siva* had beaten it up and shooed it away to *Parboti*.	While she was contemplating whom to give those cocoons to, she saw an old *Kachari* man. She gave the cocoons to the man, and the man left with them. He left the cocoons on a tree and	After the result or outcome, the search for a shareholder for execution.

		started guarding them from birds and insects.	
Kali was given a thousand *tolas* of venom, while *Dahi* snake got 7 *tolas*, *Kalantak* got 8 *tolas*, and so on.	Now, *Parboti* herself went to bring *Siva* back.		The next action.
After receiving the venom, the *Karsola* snake went to the hillocks, while *Dhorasap* had hidden his share in cow dung and went to the river. *Panimarolisaw* the hidden venom and drank it.	Seeing the prosperous cultivation of *Siva*, *Parboti* uttered the word "Aah!" Out of that word were born two supernatural beings. A male named *Khuba* and a female named *Khubuni*.	Many days went by, but the cocoons were still not ripening. He went to *Siva* and *Parboti* to seek help.	Another problem occurs.
Hence, *Panimaroli* is very poisonous, while Dhorasap is non-poisonous.	These two supernatural beings are said to have evil eyes on anything beautiful and prosperous.	They gave him a boon, saying the *muga* cocoons would be small in size and they would eat small amounts of leaves. The one who tells the story of the origin of the muga cocoon in their house, the muga cocoons will prosper.	The final result or outcome that explains the cause behind the utterance of the *mantra*.

The basic tantric myth structure arrived at with the help of the three myths is,

1st Stage: The abrupt beginning that introduces a problem, not linked with the reason behind the *mantra* utterance.

2nd Stage: A reaction to the problem occurs

3rd Stage: The result or the outcome of the reaction.

4th Stage: Following the result or outcome, the search for a shareholder for execution.

5th Stage: The next action.

6th Stage: Another problem occurs.

7th Stage: The ultimate result or outcome that explains the cause behind the utterance of the *mantra*.

One important factor about the structure of these myths is that they often imbue a particular practice or activity with which the community is generally involved. Practice, social or religious, finds expression in several myths. For example, the reference to cultivating activity in the tantric myth 'Evil Eye', in which *Parboti* forces *Siva* to cultivate. Growing *muga* cocoons to produce muga silk is a traditional occupational practice in Assam. Its importance is evident from the fact that there is a *mantra* (the 'Growing *Muga* Cocoon' Myth) in Assam for the prosperous growth of the silk.

A Study of the Form of the *Tantric* Myths

The study of form reveals several similarities among narratives. These similarities are evident in the structure of the narrative (including the opening and ending, climax, different stages, themes, etc.), the storyline or content, the characters, and other aspects. The narrative's storyline or matter is structured into different stages, the study of which reveals a certain definite pattern or form common to the narratives. In long narratives, the arrangement of the message is elaborated, but typically follows a rigid structure. In this context, folklorist Axel Olrik introduces thirteen Epic Laws of Folk Narratives (1965), which he claims are factors that affect the structural formation of folk narratives. Out of the thirteen laws suggested by Olrik, certain laws that seem relevant in the present context are,

Law of Opening and Closing

The law of Opening and Closing is important in the discussion of the form of oral narratives. It is through the stylizing of these two points in the narration that the narrator attempts to fulfil the purpose of the narrative. These two points decide the fundamental structure of the narrative. Usually, certain specific types of Opening-Closing molds are noticed in different narrative genres. Thus, at times, it is possible to arrive at certain basic structural models for narrative genres. The tribal *Tantric* myths exhibit an abrupt opening. In these *mantras*, the narration is abruptly opened at a certain point, and the previous situation, in reference to the narrative, is usually unknown. Such openings directly introduce the problem, the focal part or the climax situation of the narrative. Similarly, abrupt closings are also important factors in the structuring of the *tantric* myths. The mantras end when the purpose of the recitation is accomplished. *Mantras* are context-dependent, and hence they opt for abrupt endings as soon as the desired part is uttered.

Law of Repetition

Repetitions are frequently noticed in folk narratives. Whether as repeated incidents, characters, objects, or as the repetition of particular lines, stanzas, or even the story itself, repetition remains an integral part of folk narratives. With the help of repetition, emphasis is

usually put on the repeated part, thus making it a necessary and strong element in the performance of the mantra.

Law of Two to a Scene

This law suggests that only two characters interact with each other at a certain stage in a folk narrative. Other characters may also be present at the same scene, but unlike literary texts, their role is limited to that of a mute onlooker. At any point in time, only two characters must interact, maintaining their characteristic attributes. This law also holds well in the *tantric* myths, as evident from the abovementioned myths.

Concentration on a Leading Character

It goes without saying that folktales and other folk narratives about a particular character are structured around the fate and adventures of the character. This law summarizes all the laws of folk narratives discussed so far, as suggested by Axel Olrik, in that the protagonist's life or a particular life event determines the storyline. Folktales about a person—imaginary or legendary— often feature other characters that also play the roles of helpers and harmers, influencing the protagonist's life in a certain direction. However, the focus is on the actions performed by the protagonist to tackle the adverse situations with the help of the helpers. For example, in Myth 2, we find Gods such as *Indra* playing the role of helpers to *Siva* to attain his goal, or the tiger in the same myth is another helper. In myth 3, we can see a *Kachari* man as a helper to *Parboti*.

Exploration of the Functions of Tantric Myths

The lifetime of a folk-narrative, from its creation to its eventual disuse, is decided by its function or usability. Analyzing these functions brings to light different aspects of the community that keep folklore alive. However, the functions of folk narratives can be well understood only within the context of performance, as when removed from this context, a narrative remains only as a text for literary analysis. Oral literature of a folk group is generally considered to be a vital source of their cultural survival information. Therefore, the primary function of oral narrative is to convey and transmit essential survival information to future generations. Folk beliefs about life, death, and survival, as well as nature, men, and their surroundings, are infused in the oral narratives and are thus stored and passed on with validation. As mentioned above, tantric myths are uttered only in their performance contexts.

Some common functions that the myths display are identified through the participant observation method, which involves the researcher's personal engagement with the Assamese community. The first function that the myths serve is as a medium to pass on information and wisdom of human experiences across generations. The contents of the myths display detailed instructions for physical, psychological, and worldly information necessary for survival, as well as other practices. For example, in Myth 3, the *Kachari* man instinctively knows that the cocoons he received from Parboti need to be kept on a tree and guarded.

Secondly, myths function as tools to disseminate the traditional knowledge of the world or the worldview of a community. In the second Myth, *Parboti* asks *Sadasiva* to cultivate their own crops, which teaches the people about the importance of hard work for survival, setting the gods as examples. Thirdly, myths develop a sense of self or community identity and help distinguish their position in the world. In this process, these myths lend meaning, whether good or bad, to the actions performed by human beings throughout their lifetime. Lastly, these narratives have maintained a sense of awe due to their secretive nature and non-regular, (only) occasional performance events. This sense of 'awe' or 'fear' gives birth to a sense of belief in the minds of the folks. The belief, on the other hand, can be viewed as a psychological agency that ultimately helps to manifest the desired result.

Process of Transmission of the *Tantric* Myths

The study of the accessible process of myth mantra performance reveals a development that is instantaneous and extended at the same time. The most important factor in the transmission of oral narratives is the bearer. In case of the performance of the myth *mantras*, the bearer is the *Bej* or the *Oja*. It is the responsibility of the bearer of tradition to decide how he understands the culture, what he acquires from it and what he decides to convey every time he delivers the folk-narrative. He is called the active-bearer, and the entire process of transmission of folklore depends on him. The next factor is the receptor and whether the receptor is an insider or an outsider to the tradition. The insider receptor acts as a passive bearer of the tradition. If the passive bearer decides to or is given access to transmit what he acquires from an active bearer to others, he too assumes the role of a responsible active bearer. In the case of the *tantric* performance, the receptor is often the sufferer or intender in dire need of the ritual. Such receptors do not usually become active bearers. However, the disciples or trainees of the *Bej* do acquire the status of active bearers after the knowledge has been completely passed on by the trainer *Bej*. The third important factor is the context and purpose of transmission, as the contextual requirement and the immediate purpose of summoning the myth *mantra* decide what is being conveyed and, more importantly, what is not being conveyed.

Specific important characteristics noticed in the transmission of *Tantric* myths are, first, that they are passed on orally between persons physically present in the same context. They are not available to others at the same time unless they are passed by word of mouth. Unlike other folk-narrative variants, these myths typically do not undergo a process of change. The myths, although at times dependent upon generationally preserved written sources, are often found to be in orally accessible forms, preserved in the memories of a few chosen tradition-bearers. Since the *tantric* myths are context-dependent and result-oriented, their transmission necessarily involves a strongly contextualised performance. However, such performances are typically conducted discreetly, out of the public eye.

Conclusion

Based on the above study of the three oral tantric myths, folks accept that a definite structural patterning is consciously or subconsciously accepted and adopted by folk composers when creating narratives of the same nature. Therefore, several different myths composed for different occasions, with a similar structural pattern, are found. The *tantric* myths carry forward many facets from the lives of the people. The *tantric* myths preserve and convey social messages in a covert manner. This is one of the basic characteristics of oral narratives. At the same time, these messages are ready-to-use survival information. They are heavily loaded with references to and examples from the practices of their bearing community.

Localization of imagination is also a major factor at work in the creation of the oral narratives. For example, localization is noticed when the Aryan god *Siva* assumes the name *Sodasibo* (*Sadasiva*) and behaves like an ordinary human being, fighting with his wife over petty matters. Several references to local names, gods and deities, household and social practices, beliefs, and local histories are noticed in all the oral narrative forms. This process of humanizing the divine is frequently adopted by ordinary people who picture their gods in situations not dissimilar to their own. In folk imagination, the humanized character of the goddess *Parvati (Parboti)* scolds her husband, Lord *Shiva*, for the hardships of running a household with the little income he brings home by begging.

Folk beliefs are intricately imbued in the oral narratives. Folks believe in what they know to be true. They consider their beliefs to be authentic information, passed on and experienced by their predecessors in practical incidents. The information and knowledge of predecessors needed validation for their survival in the lives of posterity. Therefore, the myths serve as one of the instruments to validate that information. On the other hand, for posterity, the information transmitted by the predecessors creates a belief system. However, the performance of these tantric ritual-based myths is usually rigid. Usually, a particular way of performing the ritual that correlates with the associated belief is accepted, and only a strict performance of the ritual is believed to yield the desired result. Therefore, functionality serves as a crucial factor in structuring performance. Mantras are believed to result in the success of the ritual only if they are uttered or sung in the proper order with correct pronunciation and tune, accompanied by proper breathing movements and the correct movements of the body, hands, and fingers.

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Women Teachers' Identity Transformation: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

In this autoethnography, I, Sharada Khanal, as the first author, explore my transformative journey as a woman English teacher through personal experiences and educational milestones. This autoethnographic narrative analyzes each narrative account through the theoretical lens of dialogical self-theory to interpret the connections between my (first author's) narratives and my identity transformation in relation to different I-positions. Evocative autoethnography in research enables me to apply flexible modes of inquiry derived from my life experiences, creating a more equitable and supportive environment for women educators. This study not only projects my professional growth but also offers a poignant reflection on the broader challenges and accomplishments women face in academic circles.

Keywords: *Evocative autoethnography, women teacher, identity, transformation*

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Introduction

This paper explores the transformative journey of Ms. Khanal, an English language teacher, through a series of her anecdotal reflections and their theoretical interpretation by the second author, Dr. Poudel. Women English teachers' professional identity is shaped by the socio-cultural and institutional context where they perform their roles (Sunar, 2023). Teachers interact with communal norms, values, and practices. This interaction affects their sense of self and identity. They navigate and familiarize themselves with these influences through interactions, which leads to their realization of who they are as individuals and professionals (Neupane & Bhatt, 2023). Similarly, they face numerous hindrances, including a lack of professional development opportunities and unfair treatment in terms of gender and societal expectations, despite the teaching profession being a precursor to all the professions we encounter (Khanal, 2023).

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Moreover, school administration should give the women teachers time, space, and support to reflect on their identities, values, and visions in relation to curricula, examinations, and the factors of girl student accomplishment because it is necessary to acknowledge the culturally formed beliefs that shape women teachers' values and identities (Clarke et al., 2023). They transform their personal and professional identities as teachers over time, focusing on intervening factors like necessary content knowledge and abilities to revise or design materials (Kim, 2023). Likewise, internal factors such as establishing a close relationship with one's inner self, teaching experiences, and self-positioning influence the identity reformation of experienced teachers (Suhr, 2014). This study explores the identity transformation of women teachers through evocative autoethnography, focusing on my personal and professionally significant memories and epiphanies within the broader cultural and social context of Nepali public colleges.

Mainali (2021) concluded that Nepali women English language teachers construct their professional identity through prolonged involvement and devotion, but it is not a ready-made cake to be eaten. Furthermore, Xing (2024) found that personal and professional factors, including strong beliefs, shape the dynamic nature of teacher identity. Parke (2018) states that she transitioned from a strict, content-based teacher to a constructivist facilitator with an emphasis on critical thinking. Parke (2018) analyzed the shifting nature of her identity through the reflexive interviews and a first-person narrative of the autoethnographic writing. Similarly, Kamali (2021) revealed that practicing autoethnography can make educators emotional, which helps maintain a balance between the emotional and rational aspects of human personality, leading to professional development.

In a similar vein, Kandel (2022) stated that teachers reconstruct their identities by publishing articles, engaging in journal writing and action research, disseminating research reports through national, provincial, and local peer-reviewed journals, attending seminars and workshops, and presenting papers at ELT conferences. A woman teacher feels isolated because of the irresponsible act of the college administration and not paying attention to their voice (Sitaula, 2023). Relating it to organizational justice, Guven (2020) argued that teachers' organizational job satisfaction, performance, motivation, and loyalty are determined by how fairly they treat all individuals, regardless of their sex or equal competency.

Yang et al. (2022) argue that it is essential to understand the process of resilience, rather than just focusing on personal limitations regarding identity tensions and challenges, in order to enhance a sense of agency and encourage action for the development of professional identities. Similarly, Bhandari (2022) found that developing optimism and a strong sense of achievement can be achieved even in the face of resource scarcity, as family support, teacher guidance, and one's intense desire to improve social status can serve as motivating factors. Likewise, reflecting on his experience, Lepcha (2024) noted that English language learning has been a catalyst for a paradigm shift in the linguistic, socio-cultural, educational, and political life of an indigenous person. Identity construction relates to autonomy development. In the absence of autonomy, women English learners from rural areas cannot make a difference. This fact made their choice of teaching a rational and realistic decision rather than an understanding of their potential through education. Patriarchy challenges in rural areas and negotiate social willpower.

Earlier studies, such as Parke (2018), Kamali (2021), Lepcha (2024), and Sitaula (2023), focused on reflective practices that have the transformative power for educators and researchers. Similarly, Bhandari (2022), Mainali (2021), and Yang (2022) emphasized the importance of continuous professional development and adapting teaching approaches to local contexts. Likewise, Xing (2024) and Guven (2020) identified that autonomy and

supporting educational initiatives, including fair treatment and personal happiness, are transformative factors in teachers' identity. Involvement and autonomy of women teachers are necessary to achieve gender equity, allowing them to choose their roles and utilize their decision-making power, along with resilience, to move forward. However, in the context of Nepal, researchers have overlooked the issue of women English language teachers' identity transformation from an evocative autoethnographical lens. However, the construction of women English language teachers' identity in the Nepali context is not well documented. Concentrating on this area, I contribute to this knowledge gap. Similarly, this approach is particularly powerful in highlighting the subjective and emotional aspects of identity transformation, offering rich and evocative insights that traditional research methods might overlook.

More particularly, I provide insights into the factors influencing the professional identity of women English teachers by assessing their personal experiences and the hindrances they face. Understanding experiences helps systems foster their professional growth. Likewise, it contributes to the existing body of literature on teachers' identity transformation through evocative autoethnography, which explores the depth of personal experience and evokes an emotional response from readers, fostering empathy and understanding. Thus, such an understanding raises awareness about the broader socio-cultural context.

Autoethnography as a Method

Autoethnography is a qualitative method of storytelling and writing lives (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). It is an influential and rigorous research method that uses creative methods of data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Atherton, 2020). It focuses on the transformative nature of teacher identity and the significance of reflective practice and community support in nurturing professional development. Further, vignettes based on memory and storytelling have been a golden thread that has enabled me to position and understand my lived experiences (Cairns, 2023). Weaving personal stories into captivating narratives (Narayan, 2008) and researching our life experiences reconstructs the mental and emotional well-being of the researcher (Pearce, 2010). Through researchers' defenseless selves, emotions, spirits, and bodies, evocative stories are produced that generate the effect of reality. Such real-life experiences become the best means of assessing human experiences and even help us understand how to live and cope (Ellis, 2008). The uniqueness of evocative autoethnography is the refusal to exclude the "I", the first-person voice that is always the author on the pages of a journal, a book or a monograph (Bochner & Ellis, 2022). It transcends conventional limitations of objectivity and adopts the subjective and emotional domain of personal experiences.

When I (the first author) constructed my self–reflexive narrative, first I re-remembered my experiences that relate to my identities as a woman, English language teacher, user, and teacher educator. I had discussed most of my experiences with my classroom colleagues or students. Hence, my analysis involved re-experiencing and reinterpreting these experiences, which helped me understand how I transformed my identities by sharing my critical stories with others. I wrote a narrative account of each episode, which is the initial analysis. Then I analyzed each narrative account with the theoretical lens of dialogical self-theory to interpret the connections between my personal narratives. While analyzing, I retained only the prominent narrative accounts that reflected my identity transformation in relation to different I-positions.

Theoretical Lens in the Narratives

Dialogical self-theory, developed by psychologist Hubert Hermans in the 1960s, focuses on the dynamic and relational nature of the self as a bridging theory that exposes unforeseen associations among various phenomena (Hermans, 2012). I-positions refer to various roles or identities that an individual may assume. That is internal, for example, being a woman, the caring guide, the supporter for students, and the lifelong learner. It involves the internal dialogue that shapes one's thoughts, feelings, and actions. External I-positions involve interacting with others and receiving feedback, support, and other forms of assistance. The second one is the dialogical relationships of different I-positions. Other positions are meta-position and promoter position, which help to make sense of different voices and drive transformation and development within the self, respectively (Xing, 2024). It reveals the nature of human understanding, normally of the mind (Ho et al., 2001). DST assisted me in analysing my perceptions and experiences of transformative changes through the lens of internal dialogues and multiple self-positions.

Episode of Drawing Inspirational I-Positions in Teacher-Learner Relationship

Inspirational teachers have a profound impact on their students' lives. They serve as catalysts for students' personal and academic growth. Teachers' inspiration promotes students' engagement in the classroom (Sammons et al., 2014).

> *I (the first author) grew up in a remote village of a hilly region in a middle-class family. In 2052 BS, I was in class eight. I remember my English teacher, late Krishna Rana, speaking fluently and confidently, which captivated me. He suggested to me, "Read at least two new words along with their better pronunciation, and parts of speech every day, and make sentences of your own using those words immediately." I did almost the whole year round. I consulted the dictionary whenever I saw new words, especially in the newspaper. Even in writing, he said, you should write some lines or paragraphs about anything around you every day." I found a change in my vocabulary and writing. Later, I came to realize that I had developed confidence in the English language.*

It was the moment when I was determined to learn English. That period ignited the hunger for learning the English language. Creating an environment that inspires learners (Johnson, 2017) promotes their autonomy. It initiated my transformation from a curious schoolgirl to a determined learner. Later, majoring in English at the Intermediate in Education (I. Ed.) level was a result of that inspiration. It was my watershed period that shaped my language learning journey.

No sooner had I completed my intermediate education than I started teaching in a local private basic-level school named Vijaya Co-operative Boarding School. It was the beginning of English language teaching. As a novice student teacher, I faced numerous challenges in managing a mixed-ability, multilingual, and multicultural classroom.

Additionally, novice teachers face challenges in preparing lesson plans, motivating students, and maintaining relationships with students and parents (Septiani et al., 2019). There was a predominance of students from the Tharu and Magar communities. Similarly, I was able to attend only a few classes in college in the morning throughout my three-year bachelor's degree, as I worked as a teacher during the day. According to dialogical self-theory, my internal i-position as a lifelong learner and student interacted with my external I-position as a caring teacher, maintaining relationships with students and parents. Dialogue with students influences their internal conversations, shapes identity, and enhances growth (Khong et al., 2023).

Episode of Dialogical Interactions in Initial English Language Pedagogy

Teaching English in the initial stage of a teacher's career is both challenging and exciting. Teachers must be familiar with new responsibilities, interact with students, and meet the expectations of the administration, guided by traditional values (Bickhar, 2014).

> *One day in 2058 BS, I entered a class of grade seven. The students were so alert. I asked them to open the English Delight textbook. I maintained a pin-drop silent classroom. I directly started reading the text for them. After completing the lesson, I wrote down all the answers and asked them to take notes. The school principal said, "It's perfect." I even asked them, "Learn those answers by heart."*

Rote learning has been the cornerstone of the education system for decades, where students are often encouraged to memorize exam-oriented textbooks (Thankachan, 2024). The routine of teaching the English language continued in the same manner, using the same methods and practices. However, school administrators were pleased because I was assigned to discipline class, and parents were satisfied because I provided a ready-made answer and had them memorize everything. I was a strict teacher. But, how cruel I was in the classroom, and I was still thinking of myself as a good teacher in the school. I tried to make them understand the topic, but hardly let them raise questions. Sometimes, I would punish them for being unable to answer what exactly I had written for them. The punishment system may temporarily control behavior, but it's not a long-term solution. The class used to be in my control, and students were passive listeners. It was a banking model of teaching. The priorities of parents and school administrators influence the choice of a better pedagogical approach. According to the multi-voiced nature of the self in dialogical self-theory, I, as a strict teacher, engage in internal dialogue that focuses on personal and professional values, and I follow administrative expectations. Here, administration and parents have become external I-positions with whom teachers have dialogical practices, where the self is influenced by society.

Episode of Dialogical Journeys through Challenge and Growth

Women student-teachers face challenges of managing the dual roles of student and educator, including balancing academic responsibilities with societal expectations. Though women teachers are burdened by their dual career, they strive to move ahead with determination (Laaboudi, 2021).

> *After a few years, at the end of the year of my bachelor's degree in 2060 BS, I got married and took on additional responsibilities and roles simultaneously. It was a great victory for me to have the opportunity to attend Kirtipur to pursue a master's degree in the same year of my marriage. Almost twenty-two years ago, sending a daughter-in-law from a small village in the Chitwan district to study in a hostel was quite revolutionary. In the healthy and competitive environment of the girls' hostel, I refocused on my career, having taken on the great responsibility of bearing and rearing a child. It caused a delay of some months in dissertation writing.*

The demands of motherhood, such as childbearing and caring for a child, interfere with my academic progress, causing delays. Married women often have to balance conflicting demands between family responsibilities and academic work (Amos & Manieson, 2015).

> *I recall my pregnancy days in 2073 BS. I was teaching at a public college. I could not make such a loud sound to control the large class size. I felt dissatisfied with my own classroom management. Even after childbirth, I had to resume the class just after forty-five days. I could not drive my vehicle myself. So, I booked an auto every day for some hours. When the auto started moving ahead on the bumpy road, I felt excessive*

pain in my belly, and with tearful eyes, I requested the driver to drive slowly. So did he; perhaps he understood the situation. At the same time, I had a great problem with babysitting. I often called my mother and my mother-in-law alternatively. But it was not always possible. Sometimes, I had to rely on neighbours. It's not free from stress.

Although the Nepali government has sanctioned a paid maternity leave of a minimum of ninety days for working women in government, non-government, and private organizations before or after childbirth (Forum for Women, Law and Development [FWLD], 2018), it is not being implemented properly. Only government organizations followed it, but public and private institutions still adhere to the outdated system of granting only forty-five days of maternity leave. Moreover, there is a notable absence of flexible working hours and babysitting provisions, which further complicates the situation for women in balancing their professional duties with their maternal responsibilities. Women teachers are effective time managers who care for their children, manage household chores, and teach (Barik, 2017). The Dialogical Self Theory emphasizes the needs and voices of working mothers that should be identified and integrated into organizational practices to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

In 2066 BS, I was busy during the day shift at a renowned public college. In the morning shift, I decided to engage in another institution. I learned about the vacancy announcement for a private +2 college. I submitted all required documents. They even observed my class and found it impressive. Later, they didn't call me to join it. When I inquired about the reason, one of the founders of that institution said, "You have only one child, and later you may have another child, and that will create disturbance here." He further said, "We prefer a male candidate."

I was resilient in maintaining my professional identity despite such external challenges. According to the Dialogical Self Theory, there is an internal dialogue between my professional goals and the societal expectations. The comment from the founder is offensive and discriminatory, representing an external societal voice that challenged my professional identity. Later, I transformed this experience into my source of strength to fight against such external challenges.

Another incident I recall is that immediately after completing my MA at Tribhuvan University, I returned to my hometown, Chitwan, in 2063 BS. The first time I went to a private +2 college, I faced an impressive interview. However, in the middle of the observation class, I heard two or three students calling me "Mummy." I could see distrust in their eyes because they thought of me like their mother or sister. I was the first woman to apply as an English language teacher. I continued taking classes. After a few days, they believed me. Later, they said, "You are our best teacher."

The students' initial reaction to calling me "*mummy*" replicates an external dialogue where they anticipated familiar roles in me. These external perceptions influence my internal self-dialogue, which likely prompts questioning of my professional identity as a teacher. However, I continued interacting and teaching, finally changing students' perception from seeing me as a maternal figure to identifying me as a competent and the best teacher. The social and cultural narratives that structure teacher identity formation. However, the changing nature of women English language teachers within the socio-cultural context of the teaching environment develops my self-concept.

Dialogical Journey of Locating Professional Transformation

The professional transformation of women teachers is a multifaceted process. There are many aspects of professional growth involving continuous learning, development

opportunities, and attending workshops and seminars. Kandel (2022) focused on participation in English language teaching conferences, conducting research, and the use of information and communication technology to promote the professional identities of women teachers. Even though a co-operative knowledge community of mentors and friends assists women for their professional growth.

> *One day in the summer of 2019, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was taking an online class for second-year bachelor's degree students in management. I found it difficult to handle Microsoft Teams, although we initially conducted classes via Messenger and Zoom. Many students were not attending the class. I asked one regular student, Niraj, "Why are your other friends not joining the class?" and he replied, "Many of them do have internet access, even if they have, their network is very poor." At that moment, I realized I should do a survey on students' attitudes towards virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. I received help from my daughter and friends in creating a Google Form Questionnaire, which I sent via a messenger group and email to students from multiple colleges. It was the first step to the research journey that was ignited by the toughness of coping with technology.*

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of technology in the learning process (Khanal, 2021). At the same time, I faced a problem with an online teaching platform that represented an external dialogue with my internal self-positions, as I held multiple roles - a teacher adopting technology, a researcher, and an educator aware of learners' difficulties. The interaction with Niraj explained the issues surrounding internet access, which represents an external dialogue that influenced my internal self-positions. This communication stimulated me to adopt a new I-position as a researcher to investigate students' attitudes towards virtual learning. Eventually, adopting technology enhances innovative teaching and transformative learning. Similarly, I remember:

> *In 2023, I attended the National conferences organized by Balkumari College and Boston International College as a presenter in Chitwan. For the first time, I learnt how to present a paper. I met scholars from various disciplines. Most importantly, I came into contact with my friends. My first acquaintance with numerous professors from Kathmandu University, Tribhuvan University, and Pokhara University impressed me greatly with their research activities. Moreover, my meeting with professors from Kathmandu University, along with my already engaged friends at the same university, motivated me to enroll in the MPhil English Language Education (ELE) program at Kathmandu University.*

According to Dialogical Self Theory (DST), my experiences at those conferences reveal a multifaceted relationship of internal and external dialogues that shape my identity transformation as a woman English language teacher. Here, I took on multiple I-positions, such as I-presenter and I-learner. Mentoring is always positive and plays a vital role in transforming a teacher's professional identity (Hayes & Pridham, 2019). Engaging in professional organizations is notable for promoting identities. My encounters with scholars, friends, and mentors are external dialogues that had important impacts in inculcating my interest in new professional aspirations and personal growth. Eventually, such mentoring helps to produce quality educators (Bowman, 2014).

Conclusion

This evocative autoethnography focuses on my personal and professionally significant memories and epiphanies within the broader cultural and social context, revealing the challenges, inspirations, and growth that come with piloting the academic situation. It also

projects the dialogical interaction of personal experiences with scholarly voices, including internal and external conditions that assist the evolving identities of women educators. It reflects the transformative composition of multiple I-positions in dialogue, such as a learner, a teacher, and a woman directing personal and educational situations. This study, which involves personal stories, aims to provide evidence of adaptability, resilience, and the continuous pursuit of knowledge that pave the way for women teachers. It contributes to the existing body of literature on teachers' identity transformation through the use of evocative autoethnography, which explores the depth of personal experience and evokes an emotional response from readers, fostering empathy and understanding. Thus, such an understanding raises awareness about the broader socio-cultural context.

Author Contributions

Sharada Khanal, the first author, is a woman teacher. She generated the information for this paper from her own experience and told her stories in a first-person narrative. She interpreted and analyzed the information in the initial stage. Tikaram Poudel, the second author, guided Ms. Khanal in conceptualizing and designing the study. He contributed to framing the theoretical construct and refining the analysis and discussion. This paper is the product of the collaboration of Ms. Khanal and Dr. Poudel. Both authors approve the manuscript.

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English Learning Experiences Pre-, During, and Post- COVID-19 Pandemic: Narratives of College Students from the Bara District

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Abstract

This study explores the narratives of college students in the Bara district of their English learning histories before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the narrative inquiry approach, this study examines students' accounts as they navigated the transition from face-to-face to online classrooms during a global crisis unprecedented in human history. The study documents the experiences of these students during this transition and examines the difficulties of learning English in various learning environments affected by the pandemic. We used in-depth interviews and reflective accounts from our research participants as data for this study, drawing on the connection between Social Constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the digital divide (van Dijk, 2006). A critical data analysis yielded the prevailing themes of access to online materials, emotional resilience, teachers' support, motivation, and learning outcomes. The results highlight the discrepancy in students' learning experiences, the digital divide, and the resilience demonstrated by learners as they adopt online learning. The study contributes to the discourse on emergency education, focusing on transforming students' attitudes towards learning English and creating more flexible, inclusive, and caring learning spaces in post-pandemic higher education contexts.

Keywords: *Learning across COVID-19, pandemic, education, post-pandemic, learning English in rural spaces*

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Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to the global education system, disrupting conventional learning spaces and forcing a hasty transition to online and alternative forms of learning. Nepal, particularly districts such as Bara, where digital penetration and accessibility are significant challenges, poses a special challenge for college students to continue their studies (Gupta & Poudel, 2024). Learning the English language requires interaction, practice, and exposure to spoken and written communication, which has become especially challenging due to a lack of physical classroom interaction and limited technological facilities in online learning spaces. Undergraduate students' stories are presented in the form of learning difficulties, perspectives, and the impact of technological challenges while adapting to online learning platforms, and also reflect the roles of instructors, institutions, and their long-term effects on language acquisition (Bakia et al., 2012). Exploring students' perspectives on learning experiences in the transition from physical to online learning spaces, this study aims to understand their learning experiences and adaptation strategies in new online learning environments.

The COVID-19 Pandemic drastically reshaped the education sector, forcing a sudden transition to online learning and exposing both opportunities and difficulties. As Tarkar (2020) realized, the pandemic disrupted life across the world, culminating in school and university shutdowns. When online education was introduced as an alternative to traditional education, it presented significant challenges for students, teachers, and parents (Greer, 1991). Technological access has led to a loss of social interaction and increased psychological issues, only exacerbating the issues for students. Meanwhile, policymakers were wrestling with enacting measures to mitigate these interruptions and minimize long-term educational setbacks.

I, Puja Kumari Gupta, the first author, directly relate this study to my experience as a student and assistant lecturer at Bara College. My experience during the COVID-19 pandemic motivated me to conduct this research. When the pandemic broke out, I was studying in the first semester of my Master's degree. All of us faced a countrywide lockdown just before my first exam in March 2020; consequently, I was unable to appear for the exam. Ever since, I have had to continue my studies in an online mode, relying heavily on ICT tools and digital platforms. However, being in a rural setting (pseudonym: Kalikapur), I frequently encountered a series of issues, particularly sporadic internet connectivity and irregular power supply. These technological and infrastructural limitations consistently disrupted my classes, delayed my assignments, and negatively affected my learning process entirely (Gupta & Neupane, 2024).

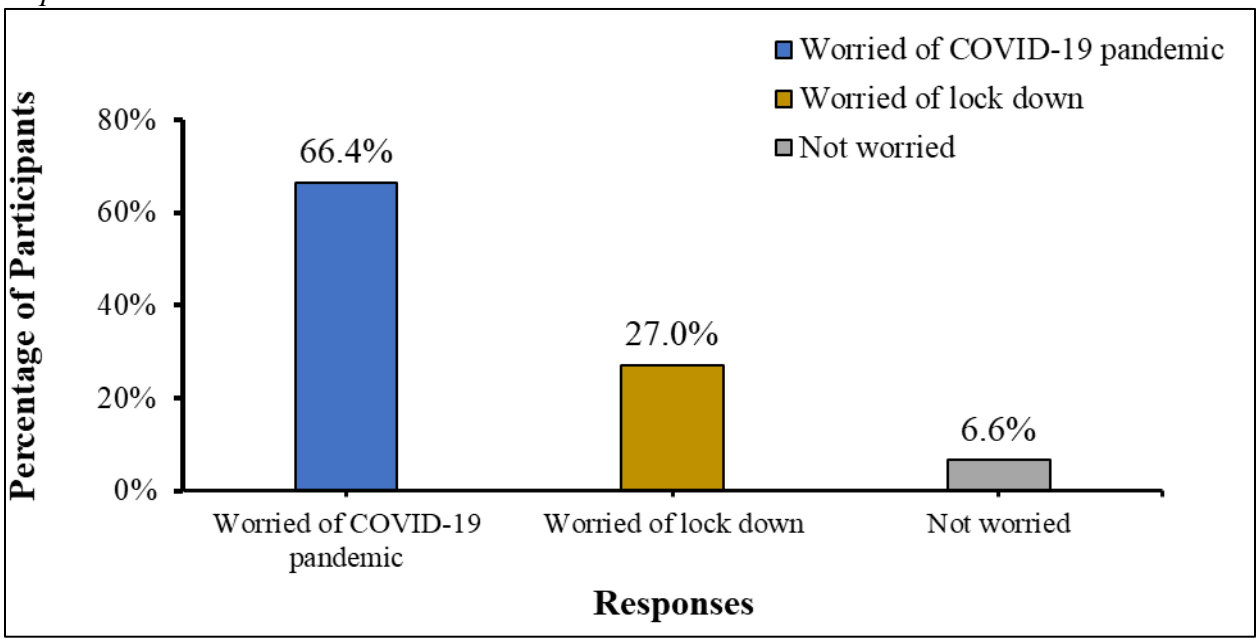
The COVID-19 pandemic affected the career goals of students as it caused unprecedented fear, anxiety, and confusion. In a national-level study of Nepal, Chaudhary et. al (2022) found that more than two-thirds of students were anxious or stressed because of the uncertainty about their classes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, 27% of students worried because of the lockdown, and 6.6% did not become anxious or stressed about either of these (Figure 1).

While conversing with peers, I realized that I was not alone in having faced such issues. The majority of college students living in rural and semi-urban areas also face network disruptions, a lack of access to required reading materials, and inadequate technical support. I also found myself among those 66% in Figure I above. This realization made me more curious about how students from various backgrounds coped with the sudden transition to online learning during the pandemic. Upon examining the relevant literature, we found that most

research studies have concentrated on school education, addressing the problems faced by students and teachers at the school level during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhawan, 2020; Poudel & Gnawali, 2021). Few studies focused on higher education in international settings (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020). However, we felt this area is under-documented in the context of Nepali university or college students. There appeared to be a lack of research specifically targeting the unique experiences of Nepali students, particularly those from rural and lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Figure 1

Percentage of participants becoming stressed or anxious about the study because of the COVID-19 pandemic/lockdown



Source: Chaudhary et al. (2022)

This revelation led us to explore the broader learning crisis caused by the pandemic. Shifting to online study, uneven evaluations, and shortages in face-to-face instruction left significant knowledge gaps among learners. International educational debates reflect a crisis in education, where, if properly assured, learning means learning outcomes that are reflected among students. It would neutralize setbacks (Greer, 1991).

This study documents the experience of students' journey through English language learning before, during, and after the pandemic, with an emphasis on their resilience, challenges, and shifting connection with the English language in a post-pandemic classroom context (United Nations, 2020). We examine the impact of technological issues, pedagogical transformation, and emotional and learning problems faced by students through their narratives. Moreover, we document their strategies for coping with the problems and adapting to new learning spaces. Since learning loss continues to have its impacts, interactive pedagogies and student-led approaches are crucial in bridging learning gaps and facilitating academic resilience. Through these narratives and the theoretical construct of social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and digital divide theory (van Dijk, 2006), we answer the question:

- How do college students of Bara narrate their experiences of learning English before, during, and after COVID-19?

Method of Inquiry

We employed narrative inquiry as our research method under a qualitative research design. Enquiring narratives from research participants enabled us to explore the complex facets of pandemic education in a rural setting in Nepal, as this setting is ideal for capturing the stories of individuals. We selected participants purposively from the Bara district, focusing on students who faced challenges due to COVID-19, to ensure that the participants could provide rich, detailed accounts of their English learning experiences. The following are the details of the participants with their pseudonyms.

Table 1
Personal information of participants

Samhita	**Amrita**	**Raj**	**Dhiraj**
She is a 20-year-old undergraduate student at a government college.	She is enrolled in an undergraduate program at a public college in her local area.	He is a 22-year-old undergraduate student.	He is a 23-year-old undergraduate at a community college.

We collected the data from these participants by obtaining consent from their respective college principals to conduct interview sessions. We conducted interviews and had casual conversations in different locations at their convenience. During the interviews, I (Puja Kumari Gupta) recorded the participants' responses using my mobile phone. We interviewed each participant three times, each lasting approximately 30-45 minutes, to ensure the richness of the data. After the first round, we conducted a preliminary analysis to ensure the temporal, spatial, and social aspects of narrative research. The preliminary analysis enabled us to identify the gaps in the data and those indicated in the literature. After identifying the gaps, we met with the research participants for further interview sessions and casual conversations as part of an in-depth data collection process. We were attentive to avoid repetition in the collection of information.

We also observed the participants' language use during the interviews, reading several times to understand the patterns. After that, we transcribed the recorded narratives and translated them into English. Then we coded and categorized them according to Saldana (2016) to identify recurring themes and patterns. We followed the thematization process of Braun and Clarke (2006). Finally, we interpreted and discussed our findings within the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and digital divide theory (van Dijk, 2006).

English Learning Experience before COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, students enjoyed and appreciated classroom learning, particularly due to teacher support, peer interaction, and traditional yet structured routines. Interactive methods were more effective for urban students, while rural and semi-urban students

relied heavily on teacher explanations. Samhita shared her experience of learning before COVID-19:

> *Before the pandemic, I used to attend regular classes and my English teacher was punctual as well as adhered to the blackboard approach. We had group discussions, writing practice, and grammar classes. I felt more connected. I loved learning English, but sometimes I was afraid to speak in front of the class. My teacher would explain complex concepts in Nepali and provide us with some grammatical exercises through drills. I also practiced by reading aloud, which helped me with pronunciation.*

Students' memory of pre-pandemic English learning brings to attention some of the most salient aspects of successful language pedagogy in the Nepali context. Our participant enjoyed regular face-to-face lessons, in which the teacher used the blackboard approach and translated the material into Nepali (Rana, 2023). I interpret it as the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching, whereby teachers mediate instruction through learners' native language to facilitate comprehension and understanding. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the mediation of learning through social interaction, a set of specific capabilities, each of which is, to some extent, independent of the others and develops independently.

In spite of feeling shy about speaking in front of the class, she benefited from formal classroom activities such as group discussions, reading aloud, and grammar practice. These activities lower her speaking anxiety, a common phenomenon in second language acquisition. This research shows that the mind is not a complex network of general capabilities—such as observation, attention, memory, judgment, and so forth (Vygotsky, 1978). Grammar-based teaching remains a significant component of English language learning because it provides learners with explicit structures and rules, making it easier for them to understand (Neupane & Gnawali, 2023).

Similarly, Amrita explained a collaborative and interactive classroom where the teacher used Nepali to explain English grammar and encouraged students to read aloud. Learning is more than acquiring the ability to think: it is the acquisition of many specialized abilities for thinking about various things (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, she was able to pronounce it more easily due to such practice. She delighted in learning English in class. Her teacher used Nepali to explain concepts, focused on grammar exercises, and encouraged her to read aloud, which helped improve her pronunciation. Students felt comfortable asking questions, and the instructor promoted active participation. There were many group discussions as well as peer-checking activities. Through these group activities, she gained confidence and was able to learn from the ideas of others. She was heard in class, fostering a sense of learning community (Rana, 2023).

As a response to the question on how his experience was before COVID-19, Raj, another participant, responded:

> *I was fully engaged in creative activities, such as role-plays and class games. Our English lessons were always full of energy and fun. I was exposed to modern teaching methods, such as presentations and word games, which were exciting to master. My favorite subject was English. There was a very open atmosphere in our class. Our teachers spoke to us in a very informal and friendly way, and these activities motivated us to use English freely.*

The participant's experience demonstrates the positive effects of interactive and student-centered English teaching. Exercises like role-playing, games, and presentations made learning exciting and boosted his confidence in speaking. These activities affect the overall development of learners when learning elements, material, and processes are similar across specific domains (Vygotsky, 1978). Communicative methods improve oral fluency in low-exposure contexts (Dewan et al., 2022). The calm, casual classroom environment also alleviated tension and encouraged frank expression of the importance of safe learning spaces. Finally, the participant's willingness to try new words underscores the importance of learner autonomy.

Similarly, when Dhiraj experienced it, he was in a mood of explanation about English being very challenging, but it became fun because of the assistance of his instructor. He explained things clearly and was extremely patient, which made him increasingly more confident. He primarily learned through the use of the grammar-translation approach and read books. These methods made it easier for him to understand things, although he still had difficulties at times.

In spite of the absence of interactive activities, the teacher significantly encouraged the learners to boost their confidence (Dewan et al., 2022). The development of consciousness is the development of a set of particular, independent capabilities—or a set of particular habits (Vygotsky, 1978). The pre-COVID-19 experience was characterized by teacher-centered learning, with a focus on lectures and grammar-translation methods. Limited interactive activities were available, and face-to-face learning and teacher support were highly valued, even for those attending irregularly. Most participants felt inhibited when speaking English and used Nepali to ask questions, and listening to teacher explanations and discussions helped them learn (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Experiencing Learning Difficulties during COVID-19

Another central theme from the participants' experiences was learning English during the COVID-19 pandemic. They experienced difficulties in learning due to poor internet access, a lack of online skills, and less interaction, especially for students in rural areas. Learning English during the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for students, particularly those attending under-resourced learning centers. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning as well as development are deeply interconnected processes. With minimal face-to-face communication, with Samhita explaining her COVID-19 learning strategies:

> *I had tremendous challenges during the lockdown. Without internet access at home. I often could not attend online classes. My teacher tried to reach out to us by sending voice messages, but the distorted voice quality and fuzzy instructions made learning difficult. Without face-to-face guidance, I was usually lost. At times, I would have to climb trees to receive a mobile signal, which highlights the difficulty of getting guidance for students like myself in rural schools.*

Vygotsky emphasized that the ZPD is a space where children learn best with the support of a more knowledgeable other, such as a teacher or peer. Samhita's experience reveals that restricted internet access, as well as poor sound quality, interfered with online learning for rural students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Paudel, 2021). Climbing up trees to access a stronger internet signal reveals an infrastructure problem. Additionally, household chores limited her study time, a challenge especially faced by female students. These conditions disrupted her

learning, as well as highlighting the need for greater support during times of adversity (Poudel & Kapar, 2024).

She acknowledged that home learning fragmented her attention and did not allow for immediate support, either from the teacher or peers. The sudden shift to online and remote learning environments disrupted the natural scaffolding process that Vygotsky viewed as essential to development. Her drop in confidence and rising anxiety reflect emotional struggles noted during online learning (Poudel, 2020). When further asked about her creative strategies to improve English learning during crises, she explained, "During the Pandemic, she improved her English by writing a diary, listening to the news, and joining English-speaking Facebook groups. She reviewed dubbed cartoons, used vocabulary apps, heard Teacher Education Development talks, and read them aloud to herself."

Usage time and number of applications increase with social categories as digital media merge into daily lives. Listening as well as speaking were facilitated by watching TED Talks and cartoons (van Dijk, 2006). Without regular teacher facilitation, students search for themselves beyond their current independent capabilities, leading to stagnation or regression in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Strategies reflect enhanced learner autonomy (Krashen,1982). When another student, Raj, explained:

> *Although I had access to technology like a laptop and Wi-Fi, I struggled to manage my time during the pandemic. I had to help with my family's business. So, I often missed online classes. Learning at home had many distractions, and I couldn't concentrate.*

Although the participant was exposed to technology distractions, home duties also affected his learning, as documented by Adhikari and Rana (2024). Lack of organization in online lectures reduced motivation and consistency. Moreover, he explained his experience concerning the influence on perception and attention.

He found it difficult to maintain concentration during online classes. Even though he had a personal study room, the lack of classroom discipline led to frequent distractions. Sometimes he felt bored or sleepy during virtual lectures, which showed he was less engaged. In contrast, online learning gave him flexibility. It didn't have the same interactive and motivating feel as face-to-face classes (van Dijk, 2006). Participants' low attention and boredom in online classes reflect common issues in virtual learning, where a lack of structure reduces engagement (Laudari et al., 2021). The limited interaction also affected motivation as well as understanding.

He asked about time constraints: "*My confidence dropped during the pandemic. I forgot some grammar rules, and my writing became weaker, although my speaking and vocabulary slightly improved. Here, most of my skills declined*." Participants' writing and grammar skills declined due to the reduced number of practices and feedback in online courses. Some improvement in listening and vocabulary was noted, but overall confidence declined (Adhikari & Rana, 2024; Gajurel, 2023). When I asked Dhiraj about the practice, he had to share one smartphone with his sister, resulting in missed classes or delays in accessing materials. Internet access was unstable with constant interruptions that would last for days. He had no space to study, and his teachers were not supportive, only sending PDFs occasionally without follow-through. All these factors contributed to a learning deficit, making him feel isolated and demotivated; however, the motivation to obtain digital media increased quickly (van Dijk, 2006). Learning and development occur together; however, in the case of my research participant, it failed to account for the emotional, cognitive, and social setbacks students experienced during

lockdowns. Cognitive development is unevenly affected, especially in emergencies, and is not merely for those without digital access or adult guidance at home (Vygotsky, 1978).

Furthermore, Dhiraj has confessed to an impact on concentration and comprehension:

> *My irregular schedule compromised my understanding. Following hours of work spent commuting home, I was exhausted. I could not learn information when at school. I tried to work around this. It's playing taped lessons repeatedly and using self-study devices. Although it helped to some extent, it was still not quite as effective as attending an online class.*

The challenge for learners to study after work highlights how fatigue and a lack of immediacy through contact can reduce learning outcomes in online education (Poudel, 2020). Similarly, reports identical findings that asynchronous learning materials, such as video lectures, offer flexibility but not immediacy, and an emphasis on live teaching. This resulted in a weakening of understanding, particularly among working students who are conscious of self-study. Particularly, van Dijk (2006) explains the concept of social and information inequality based on online platform learning. Inclusion and exclusion in particular types of social units are common concepts in terms of learning. Students need structured support, emotional scaffolding, and targeted instruction tailored to their current developmental stage to recover their lost learning trajectory (Vygotsky, 1978).

Learning English transitions after COVID-19

After the COVID-19 pandemic, students transitioned to a blended approach in learning English, combining classroom instruction with digital tools, which enhanced autonomy but also posed adjustment challenges. While talking with Samhita about Learning English transitions after COVID, she argued:

> *When the college resumed offline classes, I found English very challenging. When I was in lockdown, I didn't have regular classes, but I received some notes from teachers via WhatsApp. I couldn't have discussions or even communicate. It felt like being a beginner once again after COVID. I was too timid to read aloud in class. But slowly and gradually, our teacher began to assign us group work and role-playing exercises, making it less difficult. I also began watching YouTube videos on grammar. Today, I am more confident, but I still feel a little nervous when giving presentations.*

Students lost English proficiency after the COVID-19 pandemic due to limited communication during lockdown, as indicated by Gharti (2023). However, it was regained through group work, role-plays, as well as technology, such as YouTube (Ghimire et al., 2022). Furthermore, she found some positive refinement in reading, but the opposite condition in writing and speaking skills. Sita's experience illustrates the profound impact of socio-economic as well as digital disparities on rural learners, particularly girls. Vygotsky's (1978) position argues that learning stimulates development, but only when tasks are connected to the Zone of Proximal Development, where the child cannot complete a task alone but can do it with guidance. Similarly, more psychological theories, such as the Technology Acceptance Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior, indicate that focusing on motivation and attitudes of students is crucial (van Dijk, 2006). She suggested that the government and schools should provide free internet data, print materials, and short recorded lessons to support students like her in the future.

Participants' narratives revealed that peer interaction and peer support have significant potential to enhance English learning; however, they also present several challenges (Ajayi et al., 2024). While talking with Samhita about peer interaction and peer support, she argued:

> *I stayed connected with my peers through a WhatsApp group, where I shared answers and motivated one another. I joined a Facebook speaking group to practice English regularly as well. Although my interaction was sometimes limited, I still took part in basic group chats and discussed lessons with a friend over weekly calls. Peer learning became my substitute for classroom interaction, and I noticed that those of us with better digital access could engage more actively.*

The learning experience suggests that peer learning via WhatsApp and Facebook, as well as access, is linked to a particular methodological point of view, which involves investigating social and information (in)equality. This approach worked well in maintaining motivation and language practice during the COVID-19 Pandemic (van Dijk, 2006). Both of these online social media sites served as substitutes for classroom interaction; however, restricted digital access affected the degree of participation, as evidenced by Joshi et al. (2023) in their study on the utilization of peer support and the challenges of digital inequality in foreign language learning.

When asked about more intentional post-pandemic, Raj explained,

> *Post-pandemic, learning English became more intentional for me. Lockdown caused me to get out of touch with the language and speak Nepali only at home. But when I returned to college, I was so far behind. Our teacher introduced interactive methods, showing us how to devise our own stories in English and read them aloud in class. That motivated me to work harder. I also started reading English storybooks and keeping a daily diary. After COVID, I am better equipped to study and teach English more effectively in the future.*

The pandemic became more meaningful; he acknowledged his privileged status and noticed how many of his rural-area peers were not even able to take online classes. He admired the initiative of his teacher in using quizzes and Google Forms to get feedback as well as maintain the students' interest. He was encouraged to learn more since he aspired to apply for a scholarship (Angwaomaodoko, 2024).

Overall, Raj believed that both online and offline classrooms had their merits, but that he preferred face-to-face classes for tasks like writing. He suggested increasing teacher training, providing more speaking practice, and offering offline content for underprivileged students to read. He added more information about motivation and independent strategies. He stated:

> *I was kept motivated by maintaining a diary, listening to BBC podcasts, and joining online clubs. Support from my mother and teacher, as well as dreams of a scholarship and professional success, drove me, although the absence of feedback sometimes reduced my motivation.*

The participant's motivation was inspired by family support and personal goals, in line with Sharma and Neupane (2022). Conversely, the lack of feedback lowered student motivation, aligning with Poudel and Gnawali's (2021) findings about the role of teaching guidance during distance learning. Samhita responded to the query on the challenge as follows:

> *It is challenging to adapt to regular English classes after the COVID-19 pandemic. I had forgotten many grammar rules and many words from memory, as there was no practice whatsoever in online classes. There were connectivity problems with the internet in our*

> *college, and I would only receive PDF notes, which were inadequate. But our English teacher used to help us a lot and gave us extra speaking classes after class. I also went to a local English coaching center. Now I feel that I am slowly regaining my confidence, although essay writing in English remains challenging for me.*

The participant's inability to relearn vocabulary and grammar. Following COVID-19, there is an indication of learning loss due to brief interactions and compromised connectivity (Paudel, 2021). Teaching guidance and joining coaching classes helped restore confidence, in line with the conclusion of Sharma and Neupane (2022) on the necessity for individual guidance following the pandemic. After the dark experience of the pandemic, the participants felt that learning improved as they began to receive regular teacher support. Her English phobia has now worsened, and she spoke about the need for remedial support to build confidence back. Her recommendations included distributing tablets on a distribution basis, recording classes on video for offline viewing, and emphasizing access to digital infrastructure for marginalized students. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that true development happens when learning encourages understanding of deeper principles and is supported socially. She also made some recommendations about post-COVID, she disclosed:

> *I believe learning can be improved if I am provided with internet data, short audio lessons, and print worksheets. Teachers must be better trained, especially to provide us with more practice speaking and offer offline content to students like me who come from rural backgrounds. Tablet distribution and class recording for offline viewing would actually be helpful. Offline and online modes, combined with free data and personalized support, would enhance learning efficiency. I actually need access, interactive support, and offline capabilities, as not everyone has good connectivity.*

The participant's suggestions highlight the strong need for accessible digital access and blended learning approaches in post-pandemic teaching and learning. The need for offline content, teacher capacity building, and technical support resonates with broader patterns in Nepalese contexts. As a result, students may have learned isolated skills but not developed intellectually, confirming the concerns raised by Vygotsky (1978). According to Paudel (2021), infrastructure deficiencies and digital inequality in rural contexts limited learner participation in online education during the pandemic. Moreover, Subedi and Subedi (2020) emphasize the necessity for teacher preparedness and the integration of both offline and online to cater to different learner needs. The participant's emphasis on recorded classes, hard copies, and individual support aligns with Gupta and Awasthi (2025), who argue that inclusive strategies are necessary to prevent additional learning disparities during the post-COVID recovery period.

Dhiraj, another participant, noted that despite challenges, opportunities depend on the person's willingness. He further explained:

> *After the COVID-19 pandemic, I realized how much I had missed during lockdown. Before the pandemic, I was quite confident in reading and writing English, but speaking was always my weak point. Online classes didn't help in that way. After college reopened following the COVID-19 pandemic, I became very self-conscious because I couldn't express myself fluently in class discussions. Our English teacher also asked us to practice speaking in pairs and telling stories in English, which proved beneficial. But I still believe that I have lost two precious years when I could have practiced speaking and*

listening properly. Even now, I am exercising on mobile apps like Hello English to compensate for the shortfall. I feel that I am still lagging behind.

The difficulty of participants in speaking skills following COVID is consistent, as they had no interaction and instant feedback from online classes. The participant's process of building confidence through pair work and narration in this study is congruent with Ghimire et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of communication activities in healing. Mobile app practice refers to individual practice, according to Dulal (2024), who views technology as a learning gap-filler.

Besides, the participant's difficulty with oral skills post-COVID aligns with research, which indicates that they lacked interaction and instant feedback from online classes. The participant's experience of confidence development through pair work and narration in this study aligns with Ghimire et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of communication tasks in recovery. Mobile app practice demonstrates independent learning, consistent with Dulal (2024), who views technology as a supplement for learning.

Inadequate access to the internet and devices hampers learning, in line with Ghimire et al. (2022), who highlight the digital rural-urban divide. Blended learning helps. However, educators' training in digital technology is essential. Peer and family emotional scaffolding also enhances motivation and resilience (Angwaomaodoko, 2024). Thus, access to equal facilities, trained teachers, and psychosocial support is what guarantees effective learning in rural areas. Thus, Vygotsky's ZPD directly supports my argument that students require interactive, supportive learning environments to thrive. The absence of these during COVID-19 exacerbated the educational inequality between those with access to and support, and those without.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic severely restricted students' access to their zone of proximal development, resulting in halted or slowed learning. In the absence of teacher guidance, peer collaboration, and interactive pedagogy, students remained confined to their past developmental achievements without progressing toward new cognitive milestones (Vygotsky, 1978). The transition to online and hybrid English learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic introduced tremendous challenges to rural students. The limited utilization of digital technology, inconsistent internet connections, and a lack of interactive, real-time support hindered students' understanding, concentration, and engagement. Despite these issues, many students employed self-initiated strategies, such as utilizing mobile apps, online group membership, video conversational tasks, and other peer-to-peer interactions through imaginative activities, to improve their English language proficiency. The most significant consideration was the involvement of supportive teachers who adjusted their practice to include extra speaking periods and personalized guidance.

However, the digital divide remains a major barrier, highlighting the need for universal coverage of devices, data bundles, and offline learning materials. Similarly, widespread teacher training on digital pedagogy and emotional support platforms, such as peer mentoring and family engagement, is paramount in addressing both academic and psychosocial needs. Especially, a hybrid mode of learning that combines face-to-face communication with readily accessible digital materials and constant encouragement and support is a prerequisite for effective English language acquisition in post-pandemic contexts.

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