

Teachers' and Students' Perception on Teaching and Learning Speaking Skills

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Abstract

This paper explored teachers' and students' perceptions on their teaching and learning English-speaking skills in a community school. It explored their perceptions based on in-depth interviews with six teachers and fifteen students from community schools in Nuwakot, Dhading, and Kathmandu districts. The discussion was limited to teaching techniques, methods, students' participation, and teachers' facilitation during teaching. The study made the findings that students are not provided with appropriate time and attention in teaching and learning speaking skills. Students preferred adequate time in daily teaching-learning for speaking skills, which was lacking in practice. Furthermore, the student participants suggested to include sufficient speaking activities and exercises in the textbook. The study also found that weak students who showed comparatively less participation in speaking activities were to be encouraged for their proactive involvement in learning process.

Keywords: *communication abilities, encouragement for low proficiency, equal opportunity, inhibition*

Introduction

With my long teaching experience in community schools, I have found that the communicative skills or speaking proficiency levels of community school students are very low. Speaking skills allow us to communicate effectively. The Oxford dictionary defines speaking as "talking to somebody about something; having a conversation with somebody." Very few students can have two-way communication with correct responses. Almost one-fourth of the students do not communicate. Either in the community schools of Kathmandu or Nuwakot, the problem is the same. Therefore, my concern here is why the students have not been able to speak what they are supposed to speak. The students discuss and give a response in Nepali in an English class. They cannot respond, not even in simple language. These things always hit my mind. These issues always make me think of why my students have poor competency in English speaking skills.

For the overall language development of a child, all four language skills—listening,

speaking, reading, and writing—are equally important. But, in the context of Nepal, only reading and writing skills are emphasised in the classroom. The remaining two skills; listening and speaking, are neglected. Indeed, speaking skill, one of the primary language skills, should be equally emphasised. This works as a bridge to connect with the people of the world. “In international relations, English-speaking ability is very important to be able to participate in a wider world of work. The speaking skills are measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language” (David, 2001, p. 89). Even the English curriculum developed by the Curriculum Development Center has not focused more on listening and speaking skills. In this study, I want to explore how teachers and students perceive these skills and how the teachers are using these skills. I also want to explore if they think this skill to be important. I have had teaching experience in community schools for around 12 years. I have a bitter experience of it. My personal experiences made me think of the following questions: How can the students develop their speaking fluency? Is there any lack in the curriculum, textbooks, or on the teachers' side? What do students say about it? What do the teachers say about it? These questions always haunted me and I thought of carrying out a small research project in this area. I believe that my findings would be beneficial for the course/curriculum/syllabus designers, textbook writers, teachers, students, and those who would like to carry out research in this area.

The curriculum developed by CDC for different levels does not seem to have given expected priority to speaking and listening skills. Though English has a prestigious role in Nepal, it is a foreign language for Nepali students. The proficiency level of students at community schools in Nepal is very low, which could be due to less exposure to speaking skills. Some students cannot even utter simple sentences in English, even though they have reached high school. I think this is the problem for most of the students in community schools in Nepal. Thus, I have chosen this topic of perception of teachers and students for their teaching and learning of English-speaking skills thinking that I would be able to explore how the students were learning speaking skills in the classroom and if they were satisfied with their teachers' teaching style. I also wanted to explore the views of the teachers on if they were satisfied.

This study focused on exploring the perceptions of the teachers and the students about their teaching and learning of English-speaking skills. I carried out this study based on the following research questions: How do teachers and students of community schools perceive their teaching and learning of English-speaking skills?

Methodology

This study is a qualitative study that employed a narrative approach in generating and interpreting the data. The participants in the study were six Secondary Level English

teachers and fifteen students from three government schools in Kathmandu, Dhading, and Nuwakot districts in Nepal. The participating teachers were purposively selected. The age range of the teachers was 25 to 58 years old, with 5 to 28 years of teaching experience. They had also taken different types of teacher training courses. The teachers were teaching in four to six classes of twenty to fifty students every day.

Table 1 details of participants in terms of class, experience, and qualification

Teacher Participants		Teaching Experience	Qualification
Participant one		28 years	MA, M.ED
Participant two		15 years	MA, M.ED
Participant three		10 years	MA, M.ED
Participant four		5 years	M.ED
Participant five		12 years	M.ED
Participant six		16 years	M.Ed.
Student	Participants	Class	No. of students
		9	7
		10	8

Research Tools

A narrative research design, I believe, would be a good research design to accomplish my research. The choice of design depends on the nature of the problems posed by the research aims (Walliman, 2011). Narrative research is increasingly used in studies of educational practice and experience, chiefly because teachers, like all other human beings, are storytellers who individually and socially lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

I used interview in the study. I interviewed the participants face to-face, by telephone, and through Zoom Meeting. The participants could use either English or Nepali during the interviews, as they wished.

Data Collection Procedures

After getting oral consent from the teachers and the students to participate in the study, they were asked to fill up the questionnaires privately. The teachers and students were purposely selected for the interview. They were told that they could use either English or Nepali or mix both languages during the interviews. I started interview by mixing both languages to make them feel comfortable using the language of their choice. However, almost all the teachers

preferred English to Nepali during the interviews. Following Cavendish (2011), all the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using a clean transcript, removing the pauses, unnecessary parts, and fillers that were found in their speech.

Findings and Discussions

The results and discussions are entirely based on the collected data from the participants' perceptions. Following this, I came up with the themes; no focus on speaking skills in the curriculum and a lack of language aspects and vocabulary among students.

No Focus on Speaking Skills by the Curriculum

The present curriculum has not sufficiently focused on speaking skills. Out of 100 marks, only 15 marks have been allocated for speaking skills. The teachers, therefore, focused more on reading and writing skills. They said that students' ability would be judged by the marks they obtained. As a result, they just concentrated on their reading and writing skills. The teacher participants claimed:

Speaking skills carry only 15 marks. If it has not been made so strict by the National Examination Board or it is not assessed in the SEE exam formally, why teach this skill just to waste time. (Teacher participant 'A')

I rarely do speaking activities because it is difficult to complete the course in time and the questions are not asked from this section. The school will provide the marks and therefore no priority is given to this skill. (Teacher Participant 'B')

The provision of doing practical exams has been avoided by the government, so we don't focus much on this section. There should be provisions to be assessed externally and there should be plenty of speaking activities in the textbook. (Teacher Participant 'C')

All of the teacher participants mentioned above agreed that they did not emphasise speaking skill as there is no provision for external examination for this section. The provision was to be assessed by the schools, but it was not found to be so. The teachers just provided the marks as per their wish. The allocated marks for this skill are small. The listening and speaking elements of the SLC English examination also need to be controlled externally to motivate both the teachers and students to focus on these skills (Dawadi, 2016). It seemed from the perception of teachers that the curriculum should focus on this skill. The marks should be allocated proportionally.

Students' Lack of Language Aspects, Vocabulary and Ample Opportunities

This part discusses students' perceptions. The students perceived that they lacked different aspects of language. There were not many activities for speaking skills in the classroom. They needed to know different grammatical skills, vocabulary, pronunciation, or linguistic competence. The views of the students are as follows:

Our teacher doesn't engage us in speaking activities. How can we speak fluently? We should get a chance to speak in class. (Student 'A')

There is rare speaking activity. The teacher gives us a rare opportunity to weak students to speak. We should also be given an equal chance. And we do not know how to make sentences because we do not have good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. (Student 'B')

Enough time should be given to us to enhance our speaking skills. Different topics should be given to enhance our speaking skills. (Student 'C')

We do not know how to make the structure. If we say something, we may make a mistake. We do not like speaking in English. (Student 'D')

We do not know the grammar and vocabulary to speak English. (Student 'E')

We do not know how to pronounce the words. We also have problems with grammar and vocabulary, and there are not enough activities for practice. (Student 'F')

The study found that some reforms were needed in the way the teachers were practising speaking skills. Plenty of ideas were obtained to reform the ways of teaching speaking skills and to modify the curriculum. Speaking text is given in every chapter, but fewer activities are given. If some more exercises were given, the students would learn more. Only one speaking activity has been included for the practice in grades 9 and 10 compulsory English textbooks.

The results showed that speaking skills were neglected by teachers, policymakers, and other stakeholders. Most of the teachers said that they rarely engaged the students in speaking skills. Speaking practice was often skipped. The teachers have mixed views regarding the activities designed in the Secondary Level English curriculum. One participant said that he would run an English class using the Grammar Translation Method, using both Nepali and English. He sometimes would use role-playing depending on the topic and context. He further said that the teacher should be more resourceful in creating situations to engage the students. This skill should be formally assessed in the exam. If so,

the teachers will focus on it. The assessment system has "enormous power to exert how learning takes place" (Khaniya, 2005, p.50).

Another teacher had more or less similar views. He said that he rarely took a speaking class as he focused more on reading and writing skills. He said that whenever he conducted speaking practice, only about 25% of students actively participated in the class. He said that no questions would be asked in the exam and it would be the waste time conducting speaking classes and doing activities like dialogues, role plays, speech competitions, debate competitions, etc.

Regarding students' perceptions, they felt that the teachers did not do speaking activities in the class. Speaking activities were rarely conducted in the class. They opined that the weak students in the class should be encouraged. They should be called in front of the class so that they could gradually develop their speaking skills. Likewise, in an assembly, different topics could be given and the students could be called to say something on the topic. Similarly, they believed that speaking should be given as much importance as reading and writing skills. The teachers should be given training in pronunciation. The syllabus should focus on the skills of speaking and pronunciation (Hussain, 2018).

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of teachers and students about their teaching and learning of English-speaking skills. The study shows that there is not much focus on speaking skills given by the curriculum. Among four skills, only 15% of the marks are found to be allocated to speaking and there is no provision for testing this skill externally. As a result, the teachers did not give sufficient time for practice. Plenty of speaking activities should be included in the textbook. Similarly, the students lacked knowledge of different grammatical aspects; grammar, vocabulary, communicative functions, and pronunciation. The students had problems with different grammatical item and they lacked knowledge of pronunciation skills, which disabled them from talking in English. Based on the above-mentioned findings, there are a few recommendations:

- There should be provision for fostering this speaking skill externally.
- The marks allocated for all the skills are not proportionate, so there should be an equal allocation of marks.
- The teacher should give enough time for the practice of speaking activities. Weak and shy students should be encouraged to speak.

This study will certainly be helpful for the ELT teachers, test holders, curriculum designers,

and textbook writers to develop speaking skills in community schools in Nepal.

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