Learning English Language in Nepal in the Narrative of Kewat Learners

By Hiralal Kappar & Surendra Prasad Bhatta
hiralalkapar54@gmail.com and bhattsurendra44@gmail.com

Abstract

Learning a second language seems problematic especially for those who have to learn one additional language except their mother language as a bridge in order to reach over the target one. With this mindset, this paper was written with the purpose of exploring the problems of learning English language along the Kewat learners of English in general and their accent problems in particular. For this, the notion of narrative approach was employed for collecting the stories of four Kewat learners of English language from the Mahottari district as data. From the stories, three major themes viz; Learning Experience of Kewat and Accent problem in Learning English were generated under the lens of cognitive theory of language learning where Narrative Inquiry is taken as a methodological standpoint. Finally, the conclusion indicated that the learners of Kewat community have many difficulties in learning the English language especially the accent related difficulties in which they have been facing the problem of uttering the English sounds like; /l/, /r/, /tʃ/, and /ʃ/ because of their mother tongue interference based on Krashen theory of learning second language (1982).

Keywords: *Kewat learners, Learning Strategies, Learning difficulties, Accent problem, Narrative Inquiry.*

Introduction

This paper begins with my personal account as a member of the Kewat Community that sets a kind of lucid sense for a better understanding which also rationalises the call of my research. As a speaker of the Maithili language from the Kewat community, the cultural essence of the Kewats' culture cannot be overshadowed. It means, the cultural tone and perspective cannot be ignored while dealing with the issue. The Kewat learners of the English language have been facing tremendous hardship in learning English as a second language. As Kewats are the native speakers of Maithili, Bajjika, and Theth languages, they have to learn Nepali language to learn the English language which labels English as the third language though there is no such terminology in formal linguistics.

Nepal is a diverse country based on language, culture, ethnicity, geography, and many other typological divisions. It is believed that language teaching and learning depends on the

society in general where it takes place and an individual who takes part in particular. With the notion of critical applied linguistics in mind, I have witnessed the minority group of society still ignored in the context of Nepal. The ways the lower caste people learn and perceive their grassroots education seem to be different than the elite class people (Ellis, 1984). It means, the minority learners seem linguistically weaker than the so-called elite group of learners. In the context of Nepal, there is no strong linguistic policy until recent days. I believe, it is a reason that makes failing to provide the linguistic identity as well as the linguistic ideology at the same time. Awasthi (1st May 2020) stated in one of his webinars that the English language learners in the Terai region are facing strain problems in learning their second language as they have to learn Nepali language first on which they step up and climb the ladder of the language they are learning. In a situation like this, it will be biased linguistically if we do not provide them education in their mother tongue. So is the case with Kewats in learning English. They have been facing unprecedented challenges as they have to learn Nepali language first to learn the English language.

Who are Kewats? Views of a 92 years old Kewat

Having an hour-long talk with a very senior member of the Kewat community, I got emotionally fascinated by knowing the treasure of Kewats and their facts. He is Mr. Biltu Kapar, a 92-year-old member of the Kewat community. He said that he had never left his community. During the 92 years of his journey contributing to the community, he has experienced different generations of Kewats. He said, "So many lotuses of Kewat have bloomed and I have experienced them coming, blooming, and withering." About the same matter, he said, "Kewat does not have any special occupation that defines Kewats' regular and cast-based work." He further added, "Kewats have four similar categories in which they can marry each other." The cast-based division such as; Kurmi, Dhanuk, Kewat, and Amat are in the same as they can marry each other whereas Bin and Malaha are another category of Kewats who are defined as 'Majhi' (fisherman) in the report of Nepal government (constitution, 2011). The Kewats have different titles such as; Kapar in Mahottari district, Kapri in Dhanusha, Kamat in Shiraha, Mandal in Dhanusa, and Chaudhari in Bihar, India. There are about 5000 members in the Kewat community in the Mahottari district. The Kewats are also divided into two; one is the 'Kewat' who does not work as a personal home worker and another is the 'Khabash' who works as a personal worker at any rich person's house.

Defining someone seems challenging because the notion of defining is really subjective.

The same applies in the case of defining Kewats. There are two major existing rituals in Kewat communities and their origin has been defined on its basis. The most respected Hindu holy book the Chatto and Windus (1973) in the Hindus' epic Ramayana, defined that the Kewats are a particular community of Uttar Pradesh, India. It also stated that Kewats are those people whose major occupation is to catch fish and pull boats for their daily bread and butter. According to the Ramayan, there was a Kewat kingdom in Uttarpradesh of the southern part of India where they used to catch fish and work as boatmen. Catching fish and pulling and pushing boats were the major sources of their bread and butter. It is also mentioned that catching fish and pulling boats are the major occupation that Kewat's community was assigned.

On the other hand, the actual Kewats' community of Nepal has somehow different picture than the pictures of Kewats in India. Here in the context of Nepal, Kewats are those groups of people who have their own identity and live in their own cultural pattern. According to the constitution of Nepal (2011), Kewats are a different social group than fisher and boat puller, who neither fall in the Janjati nor Dalit category. As the constitution of Nepal (2011) reported, Kewats are Hindu Nepalese residents, who are residing in different parts of Nepal but are the local residents of Mahoattari, Dhanusha, and Shiraha particularly.

In the constitution of Nepal, the linguistics right is not mentioned explicitly. The interim constitution of Nepal (2007 B.S.) provided the provisions for languages: all the languages which are being spoken are taken as the mother tongue. The Nepali language is stated as the national language and all the languages spoken in Nepal are the nation's languages (the Government of Nepal, 2072). Each community residing in Nepal shall have the right to preserve and promote its language, script, culture, cultural civility, and heritage. It means Nepalese citizens are not linguistically secure. As a student of language and linguistics, talking and advocating about learning language difficulties is my duty and responsibility.

According to the information mentioned in CBS-Nepal (2011), there are altogether 126 different casts and ethnic groups of people constantly living in Nepal. Among them, Kewat is an ethnic group of people with 1,52,779 numbers living diffusely almost all over the country. The CBS-Nepal (2011) screens Kewats as 0.5% of the total population in Nepal.

In this miscellaneous situation, the Kewat community is one of the diverse ethnic groups in Nepal which have their unique social norms and values. Kewats are believed to exist in Nepal as they have originated from the western part of India also called Uttarpradesh (Chatto & Windus, 1973). In reading some of the written documents have written on the Kewats' civilization, it is traced that Kewats have been interpreted into two different ways i.e. Indian and Nepalese perspectives as Kewats are only found in Nepal and India where there are altogether 126 castes and ethnic groups reported in Nepal where Kewat comes under OBC (Other Backward Class) in the context of India and Nepal (Census of Nepal, 2011). Kewats are basically Maithili speakers along with their distinct cultural and ritual

stabilities. They seem to be a marginalized group of people whose intellectual identity seems to be very poor as they are not much aware of their prospects.

According to the Government of Nepal (2011), Kewats are a minority group of people. The minority people have multiple problems in learning the English language (Brun & Rourke, 2019). Stating my experience of learning English as a member of the Kewat community, I have faced the laughter of humiliation on my accent from my teachers, friends, and students too while speaking the English language. The Kewat learners of English have many problems in learning English as a second language. Among them, their way of speaking English (accent) is counted as the most problematic and inferential case for them in learning English as the speakers of the Maithili language. In this case, if their experience was not explored, suggestions and corrections for other learners would not be made. In this regard, Karasak (2012) stated that the issue of foreign accent is one of the most noticeable marks of second and foreign language learners.

As clear pronunciation seems crucial to be communicated, the accent-related issues of non-native speakers are noticed and given much attention. With this support, Munro et al. (2006) state that the major reason for giving much attention to the accent of the second language speakers is the fact that there is a growing awareness among L2 researchers, teachers, and teacher trainers of the key role of pronunciation in communication. Because of the over-attention on the accent of the Kewat learners of English, they feel frustrated and de-motivated in learning it. Which results in their learning not being as good as it should be. Therefore, their journey of learning seems problematic. This research aims to explore the major difficulties of the Kewat learners of the English language in general and the accent problem of English in particular. For this purpose, the paper tried to answer the question, 'How do the adult learners of the Kewat community explain the difficulties of accent in learning the English language in their school days?'

The Minority Learners of English Language

The attraction towards learning the English language has been on the top for almost every learner in general and the minority learners in particular. Researchers have shown that minority learners encounter more linguistic difficulty compared to elite learners. Supporting the line, Elis (1994) has highlighted that the majority group of learners are found linguistically richer than minority. The minority learners of the English language are those who have very less numbers of any group such as; Chaudhari, Mushahar, Majhi, Thami, and many others. They are believed to have different problems in learning the English language.

According to Chaudhari (2016), the Tharu learners of the English language have been facing problems in uttering sounds of English as they have their own accent. He further concluded that the Tharu learners don't have enough exposure to English and as a result

they are not able to get their accent in the English language. Similarly, Thami (2019) highlighted that the Thami as a minority group of learners have diverse problems in getting problems in general and English medium education in particular. She specially highlighted their cultural and religious aspect as the most influencing factors are the aspect of their learning. The Thami learners are not fully supported by their cultural and ritual norms and values. As a result, they are deprived of the main stream of education.

Factors Influencing Accent

Factors influencing the degree of foreign learning difficulties in general and accent difficulty, in particular, seem natural. Many research studies attempted to understand the factors that affect the foreign accent of the speakers. In which, most studies concluded that accent is a product of language community, linguistic exposure, and organs of speech (Orelus, 2020). A great amount of previous research has concentrated on immigrant speakers' accent-related issues and how they are perceived by the society in which they live. Researchers like Flege et al (1995, as cited in Esteki & Rezazadeh, 2009) summarised the main factors influencing the foreign accent of speakers are the age of L2 learning, gender of the speaker, continued L1 use, length and type of instruction, length of residence, language learning aptitude and motivation towards the target language. Since this paper focuses on the English as a foreign language accent problem of non-native speakers, only the factors related to the settings in which English is learned and taught as a foreign language are touched.

Research Methodology
Research Design

I took the qualitative approach to deal with the ontological backup that the Kewat English learners have a unique problem than other minorities. Holding the figure of qualitative research design, the notion of interpretive paradigm has been employed while exploring the stories of three Kewat who accomplished the journey of learning English as their target language (Creswell, 2014).

Narrative Inquiry

Every narrative has the power to embrace the feeling, emotion, and experience of an individual's life. Through stories people share their hidden, soundless, countless small experiences of their life as it directly touches human emotion (Gary, 2020). Based on the literature on narrative research, it is a recounting of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events by a narrator, this method has widely been preferred in social science research. Saldana (2015) defines "narrative as a story account of events, a symbolic representation of knowledge and experiences which documents in written, visual, or oral form of participant's action and emotions, yet does so in such way as to grab the reader's

and listener's attention and engagement with the tale" (p.170). Here, narrative inquiry allowed me to narrate the lived experiences of the Kewat learners of English. In it, the experiences of the difficulties are faced by the Kewat English learners in learning English as a third language.

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through "collaboration between researcher and participants over time, in a place or series of places, and social interaction with settings" (Davies, 2000, p. 20). I collaborated with four participants from Mahottari district to explore their voices. Here, I narrated the stories of Kewat English learners with their learning difficulties in mind. Therefore, this method seems beneficial to be chosen to explore their attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives towards the learning difficulties that they have been facing in learning English as native speakers of Maithili.

The present research provided me with the rich framework through which this paper explored the ways my participants' experienced the world (classroom teaching) through their stories (Willis, 2007). The stories of my participants helped me capture personal and human dimensions of experience over time and take account of the relationship between individual experiences of my participants and their cultural contexts (Clandinin & Connely 2000). I believe that stories are always important as means of communicating lived experiences and creative interpretations (Richardson, 1999). Using narrative inquiry as a research methodology, this paper has tried to answer research questions, meet the objectives and explore the particular learning difficulties of the Kewat English language learners.

Data Analysis Approach

As narrative approach allowed me to trod on the route of collecting stories of my participants, I used narrative analysis drawing from Johnson's (2014) work in sociolinguistics to interpret and analyze the narrations of my participants. While there, it guided me to understand the social, emotional as well as psychological contexts of stories shared by my participants. Indeed, such analysis helped capture participants' various experiences with language and accent discrimination as well as their views on it. Their narratives were transcribed, codified, and while there I began the data analysis process by focusing on identifying specific themes emerging from participants' experience (Merriam & Merian, 2009).

Participant Selection Process

For my research I visited three different Municipalities in Mahottari district. My research sites as Kewats are said to be the permanent inhabitants of the locality. Three adults of the Kewat ethnic group were purposefully selected and called for interviews, especially those

who completed their journey of learning. While there in data analysis, participants were pseudonymously mentioned as Mr. Kapar, Mr. Kapri, and Ms. Kamat.

Discussion and Results, and Conclusion

Every learner has a different story to share regarding their learning, especially language. In this section, the stories of the English learners of the Kewat community were discussed to find their problems of learning the English language. For it, three major themes were generated for interpreting the learning difficulties of English learners of the Kewat community. The difficulties are discussed below:

Learning Experience of Kewat

Learning difficulties are very common to every student or second language learner so is the case with the English learners of Kewat. While asking with my participants, they shared their learning difficulties. In sharing, Mr. Kapar narrated his difficulties;

> *When I was a student of nine, I was not even able to read English text properly. As my sound was not as clear as it should be. I believe it was the main reason for my failure at speaking and reading as it never became my first choice. When I used to read, my friends used to laugh at me as I had got a different accent. It was because of my first language interference. Language learning seemed difficult for me at that time.*

The story shared by Mr. Kapar reveals that he had an accent problem when he was at school. The accent was the major learning difficulty for him. Ellis (2005) stated that the target language learners of any language may face difficulties like accent and structure whose language is not similar to the target language. Similarly, the next participant Mr. Kapari shared his difficulties in learning English;

> *Learning English always remains difficult for me as I got scared of taking and doing English work. My teacher often used to ask questions without teaching lessons. With a lack of comprehensive input, I used to talk in English, not my piece of cake.*

Mr. Kapari highlighted that he was anxious about English learning as his teacher used to ask questions without giving comprehensive input on the chapter. In this line, Krashen (1992) stated that if a learner has anxiety it means low motivation, the filter will be high and learning will be less. In the same topic, Ms. Kamat opines that socio-cultural problems also have greater roles in learning a target language. Her socio-linguistic arena did not offer her enough exposure in English therefore; she could not achieve a good command of English competence as it should be to be as a good language speaker.

Accent Problem in Learning English

The issue of accents has also taken up the interest of various branches of linguistics, such as phonetic, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, second language acquisition, and language teaching. Karakas (2012) defines accent as "a way of saying words that shows what country, region or social class someone comes from" (p. 7). The accent problem seems common to the English learners of the Kewat community as English is not their mother language. They shared some common problems related to accents in learning English. Mr. Kapar says;

> *My sound in English was not as clear as it should be. My accent of mid-Maithili has a greater influence on English pronunciation in general and /l/ sound in particular. Most of the Maithili speakers in the Mahottari district especially in Balwa municipality have the problem of uttering the sound /l/ as they pronounce it as /r/.*

From Mr. Kapar's story, I believe that they have a problem with the accent of uttering /l/ sound like a /r/ sound that creates difficulties in speaking English. Mr. Kapari shared his accent miss-mass in learning the English language. He says,

> *I was not able to pronounce the English words 'accept, access, assess, and excuse' as I had the problem of pronouncing /s/ & /ʃ/ sounds. I always got confused and got difficulties in uttering long /ʃ/ and short /S/ sounds.*

From the difficulties shared by Mr. Kapari reveal that he might have encountered the problem of uttering sound /ʃ/ as there is only one /s/ sound in his mother tongue and that directly influences his second language accent. The Contrastive Analysis theory believes that as similar the target language is to the first language as easier the learning the target language will be (Fried, ... In the context of Mr. Kapari, the notion of CA applies as his target language is different than his 1st language. In the English language, there are three different realisations of the letter /s/ whereas there is only one realisation of the letter /s/ in his mother tongue. Therefore, he might have struggled uttering the /ʃ/ sound in English. This line is also supported by finding of a paper by Nunan (1994).

Conclusion

This article documented various ways in which accent related problems occurred while speaking and learning English by the Kewat English learners. It highlighted what and why such problems appear with them only. From the long discussion, this paper has concluded that English learners of the Kewat community have a lot of difficulties in learning the English language in general and accent difficulties in particular. The learning difficulties they shared are; Kewats have their accent that influences learning English, they feel

anxious from English as their teachers teach English, and cultural misunderstanding that negatively influences learning English. While interoperating the stories of the participants, I came to conclude that the English learners of the Kewat community have difficulties in pronouncing English sounds; /s/, /ʃ/, /r/, /l/, and /tʃ/ while speaking English. It shows that the Kewat learners of English have accent problems as they cannot utter certain words in English because of their first language interference. The sounds /ʃ/, & /l/ are not functionally used in their mother language. Similarly, this paper has also concluded that the main factors influencing the foreign accent of speakers are the age of L2 learning, gender of the speaker, continued L1 use, length, and type of instruction, length of residence, language learning aptitude, and motivation towards the target language.

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Contributors' Details:

Hiralal Kapar Mahottari is a lecturer of English, has earned Master's degree and been pursuing Mphil in ELE, School of Education, KU. Currently, Mr. Kapar is a reviewer at Mahidol University, Thailand, and a language editor at Kathmandu University's WCC department. His areas of interest include multilingual context, language and politics, minority languages, and learners' psychology.

Surendra Prasad Bhatt, Dadeldhura is a research assistant at Kathmandu University. His areas of interest include teacher wellbeing, school culture and professional development. Besides, Executive member of the Geolinguistic Society of Nepal, Mr. Bhatt teaches at Charles Darwin Academy.