

Exploring Public Secondary Students' Classroom Participation in Communicative Language Teaching in Gauriganga Nepal¹

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Abstract

This article explores the factors that affect classroom participation and effective strategies to increase the active involvement of public secondary students' in communicative language classrooms in Gauriganga Nepal. It aims to detect the techniques to increase the active involvement of the learners in classroom discussions. This research was conducted in Gauriganga Municipality, Kailali. I have used phenomenology as a research design within a qualitative framework. This approach stresses the existence of multiple realities, acknowledging that participation is complex, and affected by various factors such as cultural backgrounds, language skills, fear of criticism, lack of content and vocabulary knowledge, classroom size, teaching methods, and materials. Two English language teachers were selected through purposeful sampling. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with these teachers teaching at the secondary level. The results revealed that teachers used various strategies such as communicative language teaching, motivating students, and learner-centered techniques like role play, group work, simulations, games, and information communication technology which were crucial for engaging students in classroom activities. In short, developing self-confidence in the learners by creating a learner-friendly environment and respecting varied abilities became an effective strategy for engaging students in classroom activities.

Keywords: Active engagement, classroom activities, classroom participation, communicative skills, student motivation

¹ Cite this article as: Upadhyay, M. P. (2024). *Contemporary Research: An Interdisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 7 (2); DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/craiaj.v7i2.72162>

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Article history: Received on September 13, 2024; Accepted on Oct. 19, 2024; Published on Nov. 28, 2024
Peer reviewed under the authority of CRAIAJ, academic journal of Ghodaghodi Multiple Campus, Kailali, Nepal, with ISSN 2717-4611 (Print) and ISSN 2717-462X (Online).

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Introduction

This study delves into classroom participation practices, especially in communicative language classrooms, since it is crucial to create an environment where students feel confident, comfortable, and free to participate, discuss, and interact in classroom activities as English is a second or foreign language in the Nepalese context. Understanding students' classroom participation has been of immense interest to researchers because students learn language when they actively take part in classroom activities. Students' participation is a sign of good learning and effective teaching. Participation in the classroom is critical for developing the students' communicative competence since they are not passive recipients of information but active learners. Tatar (2005) claims that student active engagement in classroom discussions is crucial and significant for effective learning, and significantly contributes to educational success, and the future personal development of the students. Students' participation in the classroom and their academic achievements are closely interconnected. Class participation is one of the key aspects affecting student performance. Schools that promote a higher level of engagement tend to exhibit better learning outcomes (Ahlstrom, 2010). Crone (1997) argues that the more the students actively participate in the classroom discussion, the better critical thinkers they will be, and they are likely to be less passive. Fostering students' proficiency in English language requires constantly being exposed to sufficient and suitable English learning materials and activities. According to Davis (2009), when students are passionate and keen to participate in a classroom discussion through verbal engagement, it promotes a positive classroom environment. All community members contribute to generating opportunities for effective language learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

Overview of Gauriganga municipality

Gauriganga Municipality is situated in the Far Western Province of Nepal, especially in the middle of Kailali District. It was established in 2017 AD encompassing eleven wards and is famous for its cultural and linguistic diversity with natural beauty. It is surrounded by Ghodaghodi municipality in the east and Godawari in the west. Similarly, it has Chure and Mohanyal Rural Municipality in the north; Dhangadhi sub-metropolitan city, and Kailari Rural Municipality in the south. It is populated by various ethnic communities especially the Tharu, Rana, and Raji communities, contributing to a rich cultural tapestry and religious tolerance.

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English is an international language that is used as a second or foreign language in the context of Nepal. It is used all over the world in every sector. It is used in various fields including education, mass media, information, and communication, technology, business, tourism, science, and medicine in Nepal as well (Curriculum Development Center. 2021). Rather than focusing on the communicative competence of learners, the exam-oriented focus is only given in classroom activities. Dramatic activities, interaction, and role play are absent as Adhikari (2010) mentions, "Interactional techniques such as dramatic activities and role play were completely absent from their lesson"(p. 3). However, as a semi-urban area, the development process especially in education is in slow motion since there are numerous challenges such as traditional teaching methods, lack of training, overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, infrastructures, and digital devices. The majority of the students scored low grades in the English subject in previous results. The use of ICT, subject teacher training and innovative teaching methods are in urgent need to engage students in classroom activities.

Overview of communicative language teaching (CLT)

A communicative approach, which focuses on the idea that learners learn a language successfully through communicating real meaning, is a popular teaching approach and is also recognized as the principal language teaching method. It was developed in the late 1960s as a reaction against traditional teaching methods, especially situational language teaching. It is the approach that has prevailed in English Language Teaching since the 1960s and is still used today. Its scope was widened and extended in the mid-1970s. It was designed to develop communicative competence emphasizing real-life communication and interaction through meaningful tasks and authentic language use in the learners. American and British proponents advocate it as a method that stresses achieving communicative competence in language teaching by developing strategies to promote four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication (Richards & Rodgers 1986). "Communicative language teaching can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom" (Richards, 2006, p. 2).

Thus, this study analyzes the determinants of classroom participation and the factors affecting the participation of secondary-level students in English language classes in Nepal. In traditional teaching methods, students were considered an empty pot, and

teachers' role was to fill it with knowledge using the lecture methods without engaging them in teaching and learning. However, the constructivist approach emphasizes the active role of learners in which students can interact, and discuss with their peers to make the learning process more interesting and lively. Learners are not merely the receivers of knowledge but rather co-constructors. By involving them in interaction, discussion, and collaborative projects, learners become co-constructors of knowledge, promoting their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Piaget, 1976). Thus, I have tried to explore the essential measures that encourage students to engage in different events by cultivating communicative competence. Several studies have been conducted on secondary students' classroom participation in foreign contexts. However, very few researches have been conducted in the Nepalese context. The sociopolitical and cultural contexts differ from east to west and north to south within Nepal which affect the pedagogical process. Therefore, this investigation tries to discover the factors that affect learners' participation and the strategies to be carried out to increase their participation in English language classrooms as teaching and learning is a two-way communication process. If the learners get a chance to participate in interaction by creating a collaborative learning environment, they may perform better. Student-centered techniques will help enhance communicative skills through participation and interaction. In this sense, it will be helpful for other teachers, learners, and researchers in English language teaching and learning activities. Thus, I felt this issue should be researched in the Nepalese context. This study was designed to explore the following questions:

1. How does classroom participation take place in English language classrooms at the secondary level?
2. What are the factors that affect classroom participation based on secondary-level teachers' perspectives?
3. How can a teacher encourage students to participate in English language classroom?

Literature review

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development

Vygotsky (1978) stresses the critical role of social interaction which contributes to the learners' cognitive development. He places high emphasis on the importance of the cultural and historical context, surrounding the learning process. He emphasizes that effective learning happens through participation in social activities. The zone of proximal development (ZPD), can be viewed as the gap between what a learner can learn

autonomously without help and what they can do with the guidance and assistance of more capable peers. Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). It indicates that adult guidance or the support of more capable peers will be more supportive of the intellectual development of the learners. According to Vygotsky children follow adults' examples, later develop their skills, and can solve problems themselves without support. The ZPD is the gap between what a learner has already known (the actual level of development) and what they can achieve when provided with educational assistance by more capable peers or teachers.

Policy perspectives on classroom participation

There has been a great deal of research related to student participation in the English language classroom since it has become highly significant in fostering communicative competence in the learners and the strategies to encourage them to participate actively in the classroom for an effective teaching and learning process. According to Curriculum Development Center (2021), the Secondary Education Curriculum for classes 9-10 has allocated three marks for students' participation in internal examinations in the context of Nepal. It is mentioned in the curriculum that students "participate actively in routine and non-routine formal and informal discussion" (p.58). Through this literature review, I have attempted to explore how the student's participation develops communicative competence and makes them more engaged in the teaching and learning process for their better proficiency. Likewise, it also discovers the issues that influence students' participation and teachers' efforts to employ varied strategies to increase their active participation in the English language classroom.

Classroom participation is regarded as one of the key aspects of the pedagogical process in communicative language teaching. It facilitates learning and provides the maximum opportunity to get involved in the learning process. Thus, it is highly beneficial for teachers and students. Classroom participation can be defined in various ways. Classroom participation encompasses active learner responding, which offers opportunities for the students to reveal skills learned in the course and allows instructors to provide useful feedback (Heward, 1994, as cited in Cheatham, et al., 2017).

Student participation in the classroom can be well-defined in various ways, such as “the number of unsolicited responses volunteered” (Burchfield & Sappington, 1999, p. 290), the “extent of participation in class discussion” (Weaver & Qi, 2005, p. 581), and “any comments or questions that students offered or raised in class” (Fassinger, 2000, p. 39). They only emphasize numerical measurements of the participants but do not consider the quality of the responses given by students.

Learning becomes meaningful when students are provided opportunities to participate actively in the communicative classroom. Student engagement in classroom activities contributes significantly to language learning, especially in communicative language teaching (CLT) contexts, which stresses the dialogic and interactive nature of the classroom. English is regarded as an international language. It is taught as a second or foreign language from school to university in Nepal. It is very significant to understand the dynamics of classroom interaction. To enhance students’ English proficiency, the learners must be continuously exposed to suitable learning environments, materials, and activities. Some other strategies such as role plays, project presentations, and report presentations enhance communicative competence. When students enjoy their class activities, learning becomes more natural. Schnitzler et al. (2020) study reveals that student participation has a positive, encouraging, and motivating influence on academic achievement and cognitive and emotional engagement in learning activities. Student participation can also help students develop critical thinking skills, learn from their peers, and build teamwork and collaboration skills, the skills that are essential to contributing to society. In an ethnographic study, Morgenstern (1992) observed and interviewed four undergraduate students from a technological university. She found that despite various opportunities for engagement in activities, only a few students participated. Only certain students- four to six- were responsible for seventy to eighty percent of all classroom interaction throughout the fifteen-week semester. The results indicated that some students remained passive and silent and never uttered a single word in class for a semester. The data from the interviews advocated that the students had to follow certain rules during class interaction: (1) avoid asking trivial questions; (2) do not waste the teacher’s time; (3) try not to waste class time; and (4) try to find the answers independently before asking the teacher.

Classroom size also plays a significant role in students' participation and engagement. According to Yashima, et al. (2018), learners were more likely to be

involved in class activities when they practiced in small groups before discussing in large groups and when those discussions continued throughout the semester.

Benefits of participation

Facilitating communication between students and teachers through interactive discussion in the classroom motivates them. This engagement fosters a sense of satisfaction, ultimately leading to effective learning. Among the several benefits of students' participation in the teaching and learning process, one important benefit is that it allows students to generate multiple innovative ideas related to course content and enhance their learning experiences.

Classroom participation facilitates the students' learning in various dimensions. Furthermore, classroom participation assists the learners in attaining their preferred goals more effectively. The opportunities for the learners to participate in classroom activities promote exchanging ideas and experiences with their peers and teachers ultimately indicating the sign of active learning. Aydin's (2013) study has also highlighted that the correlational analysis exposed a positive connection between classroom participation and EFL students' self-confidence.

Determinants of classroom participation

As shown from various literature references, numerous determinants affect students' participation in communicative classrooms. Some of them can be discussed as follows: teacher's language of instruction plays a more substantial role in determining the level of classroom involvement of the learners. If students have trouble understanding and communicating with the language of instruction, they are unwilling to contribute to classroom discussion. Sometimes learners may have difficulty in active participation because of language problems. Classroom size is also another important determinant of students' participation. Self-confidence is another significant reason determining students' participation in classroom activities. According to Weaver & Qi (2005), confidence is an important feature that many students find challenging since it directly affects students' classroom participation. Similarly, teachers' teaching skills also play a crucial role in students' participation.

Classroom participation of the students can be increased by involving the learners in interaction, discussion, and communication, which can be either among the teacher and learners or among the learners in the class. Brown (2000) explains, "Interaction as the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people,

resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other” (p. 165). Liu (2001), mentions four forms of student participation in the classroom: full integration, involvement in the circumstances, marginal interaction, and silent observation. On the contrary, these modes of classroom involvement are not permanent forever and everywhere. In the context of education, Langer (2000) says that student participation is crucial for effective learning outcomes. There was a significant gap between how the student and teacher viewed the value of student involvement. The study suggests that teachers should explain the rationale behind student speech to bridge this gap. These literature reviews synthesize findings from various studies directly or indirectly related to secondary-level students’ participation in English language classrooms in Nepal. These literature reviews clearly show the importance of classroom participation for developing communicative competence. However, the research carried out in foreign context may not be applicable in the Nepalese socio-cultural contexts. Even within the country, socio-cultural variation is prevalent. In this way the gap was identified to conduct a research. These literature reviews synthesize findings from various studies directly or indirectly related to secondary-level students’ participation in English language classrooms in Nepal. The literature review clearly shows the importance of classroom participation for developing communicative-competence.

Research methodology

I have employed phenomenology as a research design under the qualitative research approach. Phenomenology is a research design following a qualitative approach in which the researchers explore individual lived experiences about a phenomenon as expressed by participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research was conducted from the perspective of the lived experiences of two English language teachers at the secondary level for more than five years. It was conducted within Gauriganga municipality, Kailali in the Far Western Province. I chose two secondary schools and two English language teachers teaching at the secondary level using the purposive sampling technique, as my research participants. The selection of the participants is completely based on the objectives, research questions, and methodology chosen. Before collecting data, I contacted the teachers and requested their consent. Then, I visited these schools and had an in-depth unstructured interview with the teachers individually for about ten to fifteen minutes. The interview was recorded, documented, and then transcribed in written form. I read the written form several times to generate themes. I have completely

maintained the privacy and secrecy of the recorded materials. To preserve the ethical aspects of the research, I have coded the two schools as Api, and Saipal Secondary schools, and similarly the two participants have been named as Lokraj and Tekraj respectively for confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, I also employed an in-depth unstructured interview with the participants. Various themes were constructed by synthesizing the literature review, the information, and the opinions provided by the participants.

Results and discussions

This section outlines the findings from the interviews with the two English language teachers regarding students' participation in English language classrooms. The result is presented and interpreted using three main themes from a qualitative study.

Teacher's perception of classroom participation

A teacher is the main agent to encourage and participate students in classroom activities for their better performance. The teacher's positive and supportive behavior and attitude always make the students more active in learning. Lokraj, one of the participants, states: *students' vocabulary and content knowledge affect students' participation. If they have no vocabulary and content knowledge how can they participate in classroom activities?* Regarding shy and introverted students, Lokraj expresses: *teachers have to encourage them to participate.* Teacher's encouragement and motivation scaffold the students by assisting them in their difficulties, discussion, interaction, and communication. It leads to active engagement. Similarly, Tekraj, another participant, states: *what I have to say during my teaching uhh...There is less participation of students in the classroom because there are many reasons behind it.* Regarding the classroom size, Tekraj also has the same belief as Lokraj. In Lokraj's view, *classroom size is very important when we are trying to teach students because students in a large class won't give any good results. It won't give any help to students as well as teachers.* He states: *teachers should have access to every student in the classroom. But our sitting management is a little bit older, not communication-friendly and not child-friendly.* Thus, the size of the classroom has a psychological impact on learners. Both of them, Lokraj and Tekraj, found that there is no gender variation in classroom participation since both genders participate equally. In some classes, boys are more active, whereas in others, girls are more active. Lokraj expresses: *actually, I have not found gender variation in classroom participation.* What he finds is that *in some classes, girls are more active whereas in others, boys are more active. In rural areas, the number of girls is higher.* In the same vein, Tekraj

expresses: *I haven't found so....oh...I think in my class, both boys and girls have played an equal role in their participation.* In other words, it was found that there is no gender variation in participation.

Factors affecting classroom participation

It has been found that many factors affect students' participation in the classroom. The classroom environment especially if it is more formal makes students learn less. In this regard, Lokraj believes *if the teacher becomes a little bit informal, then the students become open to talk freely.* Similarly, in the discussion about content and vocabulary knowledge, Tekraj states, *ah...it is the real problem.* Another factor that affects students' participation is related to the teaching method. In this regard, Lokraj expresses his opinion by saying: *we should decrease the lecture method. If the teacher increases the communicative method, it will certainly encourage them to participate.* Some of the other factors affecting classroom participation, as Lokraj mentions are: *fear of criticism, fear of losing face in the classroom, and fear of potential mistakes, which cause less participation in classroom activities.* The results of Hamouda (2013) point out that several learners were reluctant to take part in oral class and remained speechless. The numerous causes of this reluctance were such as low English proficiency, fear of speaking in front of teachers and making mistakes, shyness, and lack of confidence. In short, Lokraj also claims: *seating management, fear of students, and demotivation* are some of the other factors affecting classroom participation. Teacher's role is one of the important factors affecting classroom engagement. If the teachers play the role of authority, students may fear participating in the language classroom. On the whole, school as an institution influences students' participation. Among several factors, school policy, processes, culture, structures, and pedagogy are crucial which are influenced by adult beliefs and values regarding students' status, abilities, and the aim of schooling (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016; Mannion, 2010).

Ways of encouraging students' participation

A teacher can play a significant role in encouraging students to participate in classroom activities as a teacher plays a multifaceted role in the holistic development of a learner. The teacher's encouragement certainly motivates the learners. The practical utilization of information and communication technology and digital devices can be some other key tools to encourage and motivate students to be involved in classroom activities. According to Lokraj, activities like *language games, Power-Point slides, and other audiovisual materials* help with students' participation. Likewise, he also adds: *the more we increase the*

communicative method, and the less we use the lecture method can also enhance students' participation.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study is to explore secondary students' classroom management in communicative activities. It also identifies the reasons that affect their participation and detects the approaches to increase their interactive involvement in communicative activities. This study is supported by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which focuses on social interaction in learning. According to Vygotsky, learning takes place within a social and cultural context. The in-depth analysis discovered that there are various interrelated factors affecting classroom participation which are as follows:

According to the participants, student-related factors were lack of content and vocabulary knowledge, fear of criticism and losing face, self-anxiety, shyness, self-confidence, learner's reluctance, lack of practice, inactivity, and lack of proficiency. Thornbury (2005) reported that among the important factors impacting students' participation were shyness, lack of self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes. Similarly, regarding students' less participation, Lee (2014) identified that students were often reluctant to participate in discussions since students lacked content knowledge and motivation having limited proficiency in English.

Teacher-related factors were also found in the discussion. Teacher's discouragement, lack of motivation, rigid and too formal behavior, teacher-centered method, and authoritative role of the teacher hindered their participation. Similarly, in his study Liu (2001) directed that students' unwillingness to be involved in classroom activities can also be connected to their perceptions of their teachers' negative traits.

Some physical factors, such as classroom size, seating arrangement, lesson content, classroom environment, and teaching materials, were major affective factors in students' participation. Interacting effectively in small groups with peers helps to develop social skills (Drakeford, 2012). Overcrowded and communicative unfriendly classrooms hindered students from participating. Small group discussion was considered more effective and fruitful rather than making discussions in large groups for comprehensive understanding. Similarly, Nunn (1996) found a direct link between students' classroom participation and classroom size.

The result of this article can be supportive for English language learners, teachers, instructors, textbook writers, researchers, and even policymakers to enhance students' participation by creating a more active and dynamic classroom environment, which ultimately

fosters students' performance. This article is limited to classroom activities since it is confined to classroom discussions and pedagogical processes. However, I could not include students' connections in extracurricular activities (ECA). Further research can be conducted on students' involvement in ECA. Furthermore, research on the comparison between public and private school students' classroom participation in Nepal can also be investigated.

In short, the participants agreed that students' active participation in classroom activities is an essential aspect of learning since participation can increase engagement, improve memory, foster creativity, develop proficiency, make them more active and cooperative, deepen their understanding, and help them socialize.

Conclusion

This study examines the influencing factors for the learners' participation in communicative language teaching, especially learning English as a second or foreign language. More advanced and in-depth understanding is needed to discover the hindering factors of classroom participation from teachers' perspectives and to tackle the factors discouraging students from participating in the context of Nepal. It also seeks to promote a motivating, encouraging, communicative, student-centered, and non-threatening language learning environment where students can freely participate in their assigned tasks to develop their criticality, creativity, and language proficiency. The results of these studies indicate the unquestionable significance of classroom participation. It thoroughly explores the dynamics of classroom participation in English as a foreign language, highlighting the role of both teachers and students since it is multifaceted. Traditional teacher-centered approaches often do not encourage active learning, hindering students' engagement and participation. In short, the research data show that teachers' encouragement and motivation, use of a communicative language teaching approach, appropriate classroom size, use of ICT, teachers' role as a facilitator, building self-confidence, and avoiding fear and shyness can enhance students' participation. Moreover, role play, group work, pair work, simulation, and games are also considered effective in engaging students in different tasks.

Acknowledgments

The research has no conflict of interest. I want to express my sincere gratitude from the core of my heart to my respected teacher, Prof. Dr. Bal Mukunda Bhandari, for his invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, ongoing motivation, and support throughout the writing of this research work. I would also like to thank all the participants for their active involvement and support in providing the necessary information and data.

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