

Sociopolitical Dimensions of English in Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal is an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) country where teaching and learning of English was disallowed under the Ranas for political reason while English took root in the rest of South Asia under the British colonial dispensation for over two centuries. English was adopted as a useful tool to enhance Nepal's standing and to strengthen its relations with the outside world after the Ranas were removed from power in 1951. This research paper dwells on how choosing English for use in a nation for education, business and foreign relations constitutes a political act and how Nepal's political history guided the resistance to use English in the nation and how the changed political scenario pushed the country to adopt teaching and learning of English in a big way. Political thinking even determines how the choice of English is described at the official level to camouflage it as a purely nationalistic invention dubbing it as one of the U.N. languages which Nepal as a member must master to play its role in the world body. This research paper seeks to highlight the context of EFL in Nepal in the past fifty years, describes the modes of teaching and learning of English in the country and tries to demonstrate that English in Nepal does not fall under the institutionalized variety of English such as Indian or South Asian English.

Keywords: EFL-- English as a Foreign Language; ESL-- English as second language; language as colonial imposition; language choice; English in Nepal; South Asian English; Nepalese variety of English.

Introduction

In the areas of language education, English language teaching for a wide-ranging activity has emerged as one of the fastest growing disciplines in the last fifty years. In this process, Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) or as a Foreign Language (TEFL) has aroused complex social, cultural and linguistic issues in many non-English speaking countries. In recent decades, ESL/EFL has become a lively issue of debate from China to Nigeria and from Fiji to Sri Lanka and Nepal. The sociopolitical dimensions of TESL/TEFL have truly acquired a global proportion: on the one hand,

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the English language is being promoted for worldwide use by native English speaking countries like Britain and the United States; on the other hand, various non-English speaking countries are contributing to the growth of English teaching and learning in individual countries (Whelpton, 2005; Bowers, 1986; Greenbaum, 1985).

A large number of ex-colonial countries like India, Nigeria and Malaysia have retained English as a second or official language, while most other countries have adopted English as a foreign language (Kachru, 1988). The designation of English as a second or foreign language in each of these countries is the result of complex social and political factors specific to that country. No two countries have exactly the same considerations or needs for TESL/TEFL (Strevens, 1987). But English teaching and learning are taking place on an unprecedented scale as result of the effect of diverse social, cultural, political and economic factors.

Nepal is one of the EFL countries in Asia that introduced teaching of English fairly recently on a significant scale and where English is used only for limited purposes compared to its immediate neighbors in South Asia. English was not imposed on Nepal by an outside power; English was resisted for reasons of political independence to avoid British colonial control, and after the British left the South Asian region in 1947, English was adopted as a tool for buttressing Nepal's international standing.

EFL in Nepal is an interesting subject of study for a number of reasons: Nepal is the only South Asian country in which English has never been an official language; Nepal resisted the use of English for education or other purposes despite the powerful presence of British colonial rule at its doorstep in India for over two centuries; Nepal chose to introduce English for education and limited business and foreign diplomatic relations after the British withdrew from the Indian sub-continent. English teaching was introduced as political counter measure to balance Nepal's international relations vis-à-vis its giant neighbors --China and India and to expedite modernization of the country in the post-colonial era.

This research paper has three objectives: (a) to highlight the context of EFL in Nepal by discussing the teaching and use of English in the last 50 years; (b) to describe the teaching of English in Nepal in both public and private institutions; and (c) to demonstrate that EFL in Nepal does not fall under the institutionalized variety of

English as in various ESL countries such as Indian English because the history and the scope of English use in Nepal is far too limited to warrant such a characterization.

Review of the Literature

A vast body of literature on the status of English as *the* world or international language has come into existence over the years as the worldwide use of English has increased on an unprecedented scale. The earliest proponent of English as an international language was Quirk (1968, 1985). In recent years, Greenbaum (1985), Judd (1978, 1983), Kachru (1983, 1986, 1988) and Strevens (1987), among others have made significant contributions to the understanding of the emerging role of English as the international *lingua franca* in modern times.

Kachru has written extensively on the theme of institutionalized and non-native varieties of English as well as on South Asian or Indian English. However, Kachru is not alone in exploring the subject of non-native and South Asian varieties of English. Shapiro and Schiffman (1983) also have conducted significant studies of language scene in South Asia.

The references for social, political and educational conditions of Nepal in general and English teaching in particular are derived from, among others, Joshi and Rose (1966), Shaha (1975), a Nepalese Government document National Education System Plan (1971), a special issue on Nepal of the Indian journal *Seminar* (1982) and Whelpton (2005).

Language Scene in Nepal

Nepal is a multilingual nation with more than 120 mutually unintelligible languages (Troyer, 1974) spoken in a geographical area smaller than Indian state of Kerala. But unlike the situation in India or Pakistan, there are no dominant regional language groups in Nepal that feel threatened by the adoption of an outside language for education, business or international communication. The constitution of Nepal has declared Nepali in the Devanagari script as the official language, and Nepali has been a link language among the diverse linguistic groups across the country.

About 55 percent of all Nepalese speak Nepali as their first language, and some 85 percent of the total population can speak it as the first or acquired language. Most

other native languages of Nepal have speakers numbering a few thousands to a few millions concentrated in specific pocket areas. Quite a few languages of Nepal have no written tradition, or they have been put to writing system only in recent years. English neither challenges the status of Nepali nor threatens replacing some other languages of the country. On the contrary, English is looked upon as the window to view the larger world (Whelpton, 2005).

Nepal under the Rana rule had adopted the isolationist policy until the end of the Second World War. Contact with the outside world was limited to strictly official business, and no Westerners were allowed to enter or work in Nepal. The Ranas regarded Western ideas and education as a direct threat to their hold on power. The teaching of English was particularly discouraged since English was equated with modernization and political freedom. The long independence movement in neighboring India launched by the English educated Indians convinced the Nepalese autocratic rulers that introducing English and Western education would encourage people to rise up in rebellion.

The Rana rulers adopted a double edged approach to English: they remained very friendly to the British colonial government in India, but at home they treated English education as a threat to national independence. Once the British withdrew from the Indian sub-continent the threat of British absorption of Nepal into its empire receded for good, and the Ranas were removed from power in 1951. For Nepal, the modern era in education had finally dawned.

Joshi and Rose (1966) have observed that “even in Kathmandu, exposure to the modern world is a recent phenomenon. The first high school and hospital were established only in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The first college was opened in 1918 and the first university in 1959” (p. 18). Indeed, when Nepal first started English schools for the public in the 1950s, other South Asian countries had at least one hundred years of exposure to the English language in various forms. English had long since become the official language in the whole of British India, and affected the everyday life of people whether they lived in cities or in the countryside (Kachru, 1983).

Although English language newspapers, magazines and book have been published in neighboring countries on a fairly large scale from the middle of the nineteenth century,

Nepal restricted not only the teaching of English but also the import of educational materials in foreign languages. The first English language newspapers appeared in the mid-1960s and their role remains very limited. As Verma (1988) has noted:

The English language press in Nepal faces a number of problems. A tiny minority in the country reads English papers. There is an acute shortage of people who can write for the English press. The infant and child mortality rate of English language papers is very high. Many magazines could not survive the permanent drought of the materials (p.61).

Thus although English is no longer proscribed officially, its spread is limited due to the lack of defined fields for its use in Nepal.

Political Factors

E. L. Jodd (1978, 1983) asserts that the program of TESOL—teaching English to speakers of other languages—is a political act on the part of policymakers, teachers and communities. This reasoning perfectly reflects the conditions facilitating the spread of English teaching in Nepal. During the heyday of the British rule in India, Nepalese rulers restricted the spread of English teaching, ostensibly to keep Nepal free from British domination. In reality, the Rana rulers perceived English education as a serious threat to their power since English was equated with modernity, democracy and civil liberties. The Nepalese ruler did not wish to follow the British example of educating their subjects only to be challenged by them for democracy and self-rule (Kumar, 1967).

In other South Asian countries, English was imposed by British colonial power in the early 18th century; in Nepal, however, the introduction of English marked the fall of an autocratic regime which ironically had been helped by the British to retain its hold to power. Since the political revolution of 1951, English has been expanding gradually in Nepal although its use is largely confined to education, tourism, information technology as backbone of global communication and burgeoning foreign trade and economic relations.

Nepal's official attitude toward English is still ambiguous. The government's educational policy document the National Educational System Plan (NESP, 1971-1976), mandates that one of the U.N. languages (a euphemism for English) be taught as a compulsory subject in schools even though English has been a universal school

subject since the 1950s. Nepal's 2000 plus high/higher secondary schools conduct a minimum of six classes every week from Grades 4 to 12. Beginning around 2015, even lower grade schools in far flung areas have begun teaching school subjects other than English in English medium to improve the overall quality of school education. Clearly, the government does not like to be seen as promoting Western values by prescribing English; thus the cover of a U.N. language.

The use of English is more visible in higher education. The universities require English, along with Nepali, as compulsory subjects and English remains the medium of instruction in science, medicine and technical subjects. The plan to switch over to Nepali as the exclusive medium of higher education in the humanities and social sciences by 1980 had to be abandoned for lack of adequate learning materials in Nepali (Bhatta, 1987).

The use of English for wider social/professional purposes has been rather limited in Nepal since "there were no professional groups such as chambers of commerce, trade unions or landlord associations" until the 1950s (Joshi and Rose, p. 494). The frail English language media that exists in Nepal cater largely the needs of a small expatriate community. The nascent group of Nepalese professionals do not publish much in English since there is no sizeable readership in English. No two Nepalese will be compelled to communicate in English as Nepali is the widely shared medium in the country.

Shaha (1975) sums up the language scenario in Nepal in this way:

English can under the present circumstances at best serve only as the second language in Nepal Nepali, the *lingua franca* of the Kingdom, is the mother tongue of about 52 percent of the total population and is widely understood throughout the country. The business of the state and law courts has been entirely conducted in Nepali for a period of more than two centuries. Compared to other developing countries, Nepal is fortunate in having a language which is capable of being developed as a suitable medium national communication (p.9).

For most Nepalese, then, English is a school subject, useful for higher learning or for employment in the booming tourism and IT market or for work with foreign

corporate houses. English has a clear market value, but it is limited in its use in *intra-national* activities.

Greenbaum's (1985) characterization of English as the language of modern professions and wider international contacts sums up the primary function of English in Nepal also:

English is the primary language for access to Western science and technology, for international commerce and tourism, or international economic or military aid. It is a major language of diplomacy and international conferences. In much of the world, a knowledge of English is required for many of the best jobs (p. 2).

The discussion so far has shown that Nepalese learn English as a school subject and as a tool for communicating with foreign speakers. Unlike in India and Sri Lanka, English is not indispensable for intra-national communication in Nepal; indeed, English is not very useful for everyday communication among the Nepalese of various regions. Similarly, official communication in English is confined to diplomatic notes of the foreign ministry in Kathmandu. The rest of South Asia consumes a large volume of indigenously produced English language information materials. This use of English is also negligible in Nepal.

Social Factors

For about ten years, beginning with the NESP in 1971, the Nepalese government sought to enforce a uniform curriculum, including English language instruction, with a view toward exercising stronger control over the contents of education and more particularly to prevent English-medium schools from inculcating what were perceived as alien values and cultures. A new set of syllabuses and curricula was prepared by Nepalese experts "to produce citizens who, with full faith in the country and crown, will conduct themselves in accordance with the panchayat system" (NESP, p. v). The high school English was designed to enable students to speak about everyday situations in Nepal and Nepalese development problems. More important, the government nationalized all schools to bring them under its close supervision.

However, the new situational/structural approach to English teaching did not take roots after a decade of half-hearted approach. Lack of trained teachers and resources complicated the reforms initiated under the NESP. Parents and the public at large started complaining about the gradual decline in English proficiency of high school graduates. Before long, the pressure built to the point that the school and overall educational system was denationalized.

English teaching in Nepal has entered a new stage of expansion since 1980. Strict government control and supervision regarding the opening of new schools have been done away with. Schools are given freedom to adopt English as a medium of instruction for all subjects and to supplement government-prescribed English texts with other study materials. Although the government educational policy does not require English at the primary school levels, parents even in rural areas are keen to have English taught to their children as early as possible. Thus even pre-school pupils are exposed to the English alphabet and nursery rhymes. Many private schools have enforced 'English speaking zone' rule in the school premises to strengthen English speaking habit and English use of the students. English is stressed along with science and mathematics as a solid preparation for a career, and not least, for opportunities of higher education in English speaking countries.

Occasionally, parents complain about the lack of English proficiency of their children, but no question is raised about the value of teaching English. English is deemed not only useful for the job market; it is also valued as a prestige language. English conversation societies and private English classes have emerged in many urban centers—another social indication of the expanding ESOL activity in Nepal.

The use of English for general educational purposes, in fact, mitigates the perception that Nepali is being forced upon other language groups that do not use Nepali as their first language. English as an educational medium offers equal opportunities and challenges to all students by keeping them all in an equal footing. In this sense, English even functions as a cohesive device in the Nepalese setting.

Politically, the government has now reconciled itself to the harmonizing effect of English on the potentially restive urban youth. Adhikari (1982) has noted that the government's relative openness to English has "resulted in a swarm of English medium

schools in Kathmandu and other urban areas of the country Children are taught to utter a few English words which never fails to impress parents” (p. 36).

Besides gaining access to teaching jobs in new private English schools, many educated urban youths are engaged in improving their English in order to qualify for better paying jobs rather than becoming involved in political activities. The English speaking section thrives on government modernization programs and NGO/INGO projects that have proliferated across Nepal in recent decades. English is increasingly becoming the symbol of stability and social status, especially for the urban middle class and middle level entrepreneurs.

Teaching and Learning of English

English teaching in Nepal is carried out through various public and private institutions. The government-sponsored curricula designate that one of the U.N. languages be a required subject from the fourth grade to undergraduate levels. In practice, this means several years of English teaching both in public schools and colleges, regardless of the efficacy of the English teaching programs.

By the time students obtain the high school diploma, they will have attended a minimum of seven years of English classes, six hours a week throughout the school year. Those who go on to college will have another four years of English, which is intended to enable students to use English language materials in their studies. With the arrival of the Internet and widespread use of multimedia network there seems no limit for the growing use of English in every area of social, intellectual and professional life.

English teaching in the public institutions of Nepal, that is middle schools, high/higher secondary schools and colleges, is more extensive in nature, spread over several years, rather than intensive and focused on making learners use the language for definite purposes. The sheer number of learners involved makes the English teaching endeavor quite challenging. In recent years, the number of students taking the final school leaving examination, in which preparation for English is given special emphasis has gone up by well over 200, 000. Every year, some 50,000 students take up the undergraduate examination in which English is regarded by most students as the most daunting obstacle. Accordingly, educational institutions, parents and students themselves accord high priority to the learning and teaching of English.

As part of the government effort to help expand the teaching of English, Radio Nepal frequently broadcasts English conversation programs and teaching of school English contents. The BBC World Service radio and the British Council English teaching programs have assisted professional English teaching in Nepal over the years. In part as a response to deficiencies in the public school English teaching, a large number of private English teaching facilities have sprung up in major urban centers of Nepal. These private English teaching centers offer “specialized” English lessons; conversation classes, English for tourist guides, technical report writing for foreign aid project projects, business correspondence and public speaking. Some English language centers simply offer private cramming lessons to help learners pass the final school/college examinations. As elsewhere in the world, English teaching is becoming one of the ever expanding educational endeavors in Nepal.

Nepal is no exception among the EFL countries in expending a huge amount of its national resources to the teaching and learning of English. One estimate of the late 1970s suggests that almost 30 percent of the Nepalese national expenditure on education went to English teaching (Malla, 1977, p. 2). If anything, this expenditure has only gone up several folds over the last forty years to cover institutional structures, teaching personnel and learning resources. The cost involved in teaching English is openly accepted as a required investment for the modernization of the country through the spread of knowledge to harness science and technology. English is viewed not just another medium of communication but as the sole repository of knowledge that can one day be used to transform the development goals of the country.

Expanding Scope: Emerging Patterns?

The general use of English in Nepal, relatively speaking, is in an early stage of development. There is no discernible variety of English in use in Nepal because the extent of use both in time and space has been limited. Furthermore, there is no particular social or institutional activity other than education in which English is likely to become the sole means of communication. Schools and colleges have slowly begun publishing academic journals like *The Harvest* (January 2022) of the Universal College in English but their frequency and coverage remain rather limited. The small community of English users in Nepal tends to look to British

English as the model for both writing and speech, and particular efforts are made not to use Indian English vocabulary and idioms.

One important reason for avoiding Indian English in Nepal is that the Nepalese do not use English for *intra*-national communication and there is thus no identifiable native variety to look to as a model. English is perceived as a foreign language par excellence requiring special pragmatic features which are not found in Indian English. As in social, political and cultural fields, the Nepalese are consciously cultivating a separate slant in the use of English vis-à-vis their giant neighbor in the south. Joshi and Rose (1966) observe that “it would be inaccurate to conclude that Nepal is India writ small” (p. 13).

Second, official English syllabuses in Nepal carefully avoid English language materials written by Indian authors for reasons having to do with both content and language models. Indian textbook publishers vie with each other to bring out English text materials specifically designed for and approved by Nepalese authorities.

English in Nepal cannot be characterized under the label of South Asian English (SAE) variety because SAE, or Indian English, grew out of over two hundred years of British colonial rule in the Indian sub-continent. The English used in former British colonies has many features in common, particularly lexical items and certain idioms (see for example, Yule & Burnell, 1968). Kachru’s general assertion that the use of English in Nepal also shares “pan South Asian linguistic and cultural characteristics” (p. 9) does not accurately reflect the Nepalese situation. English in Nepal is still a new medium with restricted use, that has not acquired a form that can be characterized as particular variety or a sub-variety.

This view is consistent with Shapiro and Shiffman (1983), who conclude that “the subject of English in South Asia can by no means be considered a closed one” because “the language is used for a wide range of purposes and there is no reason to believe that the language has a single homogenous structure when used in the sub-continent for all of these purposes” (p. 222).

A Summing up

Nepal initiated the teaching and learning of English on a significant scale only after the political change in 1951. Unlike other countries of South Asia, English in Nepal is confined to clearly defined areas: education, tourism, diplomacy, foreign trade and increasingly on the Internet and social media platforms. English has never been a language of public administration or of the law courts in the country as it has been in India or Sri Lanka. The Nepalese public, by contrast, has little occasion for the wider use of English for social or national political life.

There is virtually no *intra*-national use of English in Nepal. Although a large number of young people have received formal classroom instruction in English, their continued use of the language for meaningful interaction between fellow Nepalese has been very limited. English is a required subject in the schools and colleges and the tool for library references for those pursuing higher education and research. There is no test in or requirement of English for government and public sector job openings in the country. A miniscule English language media serves the small elite and expatriate community in Nepal.

In the future, however, the use of English is certain to grow in education—particularly in areas of science and technical studies—and in the Internet, social media and business. Even in business, Nepal's long isolation from the outside world and its landlocked status have discouraged foreign business interests to enter into Nepal in a big way. Nepal will have to train a large pool of English proficient secretaries, office assistants and clerks to attract functioning of multinational corporations. Needless to say, Nepal's stride in the global marketplace will have to roll on through the English wagon.

Socially, Nepalese are aware of benefits of mastering English as it bestows opportunities to rise in social, political and business positions at home abroad. English is gradually entering into Nepalese consciousness as a useful second language from a distant foreign medium. Notwithstanding this pronounced trend, there is little likelihood of English supplanting Nepali or other languages of Nepal as a medium of wider social or political communication.

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