Decolonization of English language assessment for equitable learning: Teachers' agency perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the agency of English language teachers in decolonizing assessment practices within their respective school contexts. Employing a phenomenological approach, this study draws on data collected through in-depth interviews with six secondary-level English language teachers from six purposively selected public schools in the Kathmandu Valley. The findings reveal that divergent forms of classroom instruction, normative assessment practices perpetuate epistemic injustice. English language teachers find themselves caught between top-down policies and bottom-up practices, despite their awareness and willingness to transition language assessment from conventional monolingual to plurilingual processes. This constraint hinders their ability to contextualize assessment according to learners' diversities and needs. The situation underscores the persistence of colonial-sounding practices, such as normative standards in assessment, necessitating teachers' full autonomy in assessment design and implementation to advance decolonization efforts in assessment and pedagogy. These findings significantly affect future policy initiatives in English language teaching in Nepal, particularly concerning the assessment integrated with pedagogical practices.

Keywords: English language assessment, decolonization, equity, epistemic injustice

INTRODUCTION

Assessment and teaching are integral parts of education systems, requiring one complementing the other. The teaching and learning of English effectively has

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long been a reform agenda. Teachers' understanding of the know-how of assessment is essential to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of teaching. Although the teaching of English has drawn significant attention, assessment of students learning has not been equally prioritized. Recent studies have highlighted that if teachers can adopt contextualized strategies considering learners' language, traditions, and abilities, then practice will largely create equitable assessment enabled by due consideration given to learners' linguistic, social and educational contexts (Poudel & Costley, 2023). The issue of whether the assessment practices have truly measured students' knowledge and skills has further become critical due to many public schools' unplanned shift to English medium instruction that aims to promote a 'one-language' medium of instruction and assessment in the same language. Recent study findings reported by Choi and Poudel (2024) have documented how the monolingual ideology, i.e., teaching in the 'English-only' medium and 'English-must' medium, is likely to disadvantage students who have language backgrounds other than Nepali and English. While teaching and learning in English (alternatively the adoption of English medium instruction (EMI) in schools) has been widely criticized as being increasingly hegemonic (Adhikari & Poudel, 2023) and suggested systematic approaches in developing multilingual pedagogies, how students in the multilingual pedagogical processes can be assessed multilingually has not been theorized as expected. Despite the fact that Nepal government developed well-intended policies for embracing multilingualism in all forms of education, the practice seems fragile and unplanned. There have been numerous studies that have documented how the teaching of English takes place and is to take place depending on varied contexts of schooling. In the postcolonial and non-colonial contexts (e.g., Nepal), English language teaching (ELT) and assessment continue to maintain the legacy of the colonial practice and promote the cultural subjectivities of the ideologies of native speakers (Holliday, 2006). Contrary to the global discourses on world Englishes, native speakerism still remains a pervasive ideology forcing English language teachers promote homogenous ideals and methodologies in their practice. This trend also echos the findings of Kiczkowiak and Lowe (2024) who claim that native-speakerism is largely shaping the selection of plenary speakers in conferences in non-native English-speaking contexts. Such ideology does not only cause complex challenges for classroom teachers but also disadvantage the students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Globally, millions of students learn English as a non-native language and not having their local specificities in teaching and learning practices has far-reaching consequences for students' learning. A simple argument is that how a language is taught is to align with how the language is assessed. As the assessment practices have been much more ritualized in most cases and continuing to promote the legacy of more colonized-sounding assessment practices reflecting the ideals of normative systems of assessment, rethinking how they are perceived and conducted deserves

immediate attention. The current paper situates the discourse on the assessment practices within an EFL context of Nepal, drawing on the data from school education, and explores whether and how assessment efforts of teachers exhibit decolonial practice.

Theoretical Underpinning

This paper draws on the premises of the recently emphasized "decolonial turn," which has been a buzzword in all forms of research, including the TESOL industry (Maldonado-Torres & Cavooris, 2017). This turn has provided researchers and students with an understanding of the need for a transformative shift in terms of how the epistemologies and methodologies of local teaching and learning contexts are represented and incorporated in teaching and assessment practices. While English language teaching has globally been practiced from a Eurocentric monoglossic perspective and is largely guided by the ideas of native-speakerism, recent scholarship has criticized this from linguistic social justice and educational equity perspectives, especially raising voices from children's side (e.g., Poudel & Choi, 2021; Poudel et al., 2022). It is, therefore, in this paper, to be understood that the decolonial turn is not merely a criticism of colonialism but rather an argument that positions indigenous as well as local specificities at the forefront of policy making and policy execution. When it comes to language teaching, the decolonial turn highlights the relevance of our long-standing understanding of English as no longer a separate and identifiable language (Canagarajah, 2024). In the changed contexts of global human mobility, globalization, and the advancement of technology and its adoption in pedagogies, the practices of teaching English as "labeled" British and American in the English language curricula in multicultural and multiethnic EFL contexts do not do justice to the students and their identities. This paper, therefore, adopts the decolonial perspective in appealing to redefine the assessment of English language competence and appeals to a more local, contextualized assessment that remains an integral part of ELT pedagogy, drawing on the case of multilingual context of Nepal where integration of languages and recognition of learners' linguistic resources need is crucial.

Although decoloniality was typically applicable to the country contexts of the global south (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), the colonial construct that aims to establish a global monoculture continues to be a part of ELT pedagogy, and the case of Nepal's schools is a vivid example. Expansion and embeddedness of the monoglots ideology in the educational system are one such instance in which the dominant languages such as Nepali and English were largely adopted in schooling, undermining the potential of the long-standing ethnic/indigenous languages (Poudel et al., 2022) as well as the sociolinguistic contexts that have a high level of language contacts and intergenerational shifts in language use (Gautam, 2021; Gautam & Poudel, 2022). The current English teaching curricula as well as the

teaching and learning practices also do not recognize the processes that can potentially utilize learners' linguistic and cultural "semiotic resources." Therefore, the decolonial framework adopted in this study does not refer to the historical force of colonization in the political sense but rather indicates the symbolic domination of the dominant languages and ideologies associated with them in educational systems, which further marginalize the previously marginalized languages. This theoretical perspective aims to situate ELT and assessment within the cultural, social, and linguistic boundaries of the respective schooling contexts.

Review of Literature

The review of the literature in this paper has been organized into two overarching themes. The first one is about the association between decolonization and ELT and the second is about decolonization of assessment from a social justice perspective.

Decolonization and English Language Teaching

Assessment has consistently been one of the most prominent areas in instructional dialogues for educational reforms. Functioning as both a motivator and assessor of learning for each student, assessment holds significant importance in the student experience. Assessment practices that put learners at the center stage are critical for achieving the aims, goals, and objectives intended in any curriculum. Therefore, assessment, whether internal or external, should be aligned with curriculum and pedagogy for improvement. The main target of any assessment practices should be scaffolding learners for improved learning by providing them with sufficient space for the utilization of their self-identities and abilities, both linguistic and content.

Educators should be able to prove that the assessment practices they uphold are fair and can engage all students equally. Tests cannot use language that is offensive to people from different races and genders (Kunnan, 2018). As far as ELT is concerned, it has principally been enacted through a false assumption that teaching English in English provides students with learning benefits. In changed contexts, scholars have gathered research evidence that learning in a language familiar to students will have extensive cognitive benefits (Poudel & Costley, 2023). Acknowledgment of this type of shift in understanding is what I refer to as 'decolonial thinking' in this paper. This perspective rejects conventional teaching and learning practices that are distant from children's real-life experiences and those that perpetuate the traditional hierarchy of what makes 'good' or 'proper' English proficiency and what does not. The decolonial perspective not only counters traditional standard language normative systems but also raises issues relating to students' procedural disadvantaging if they are taught and assessed through the so-called 'standard methodologies' (Poudel et al., 2022). For instance, when a multilingual student is expected (or forced) to be assessed in an English-only

medium while attending ELT-related assessment events, this not only disadvantages the student but also creates a methodological error in assessment. This practice is exclusively grounded in the colonial understanding of language assessment, and the decolonial turn (discussed in the theoretical underpinning above) provides a justifiable ground to restrict such monoglossic assessment processes.

We should understand, or try to understand, that not taking action against monoglossic practices and ideologies is accepting imperialist force of English teaching and assessment, and its impact on students' learning. Such practices not only create learning problems but also generate stigmatized ideologies concerning children's homes or ethnic/indigenous languages (Motha, 2014; Rajendram, 2022). While language is one of the major tools for the continuity of colonization, English language teaching and assessment systems have to be rethought from a decolonial perspective. Hence, the decolonization literature aims to position pedagogy within the spatial specificities, addressing learners' needs who come from the communities that the education institutions serve (also see, Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Decolonising Assessment for Educational Justice in ELT

Another important concern is the way assessments relate to educational justice matters. Separating assessment as a separate process from how the subject matter has been taught is something that does not provide justice to learners. Any attempt to isolate language from the social and material entanglement through the education system devalues 'learner justice,' an essential component of language teaching and assessment. Whenever we have to identify what the learners have learned, we need to adopt assessment as one of the core areas to make sure that the educational objectives have been met. However, as of now, the standard language ideologies that define certain monolingual processes of assessing learners have been in practice. This practice is less likely to respond to learners' diverse learning needs because if learners are given a chance to express themselves in any defined language or languages that they have knowledge and skills in, either in one language or in multiple languages, then they will benefit more than asking them to be assessed in a defined school language.

One of the less explored issues within assessment literature is about how efficiently the assessment practices adopted in the school institutions have represented learners' knowledge and skills. Studies have shown that ensuring equitable assessment has been challenging for countries that have pluralistic student characteristics. A study conducted by OECD (2013) claimed that the implementation challenges occurring in evaluation and assessment are due to poor policy designs, lack of prediction of the potential consequences (intended/unintended), lack of evaluation culture, and deficient use of evaluation results. This study also suggested to the member countries that evaluation and assessment arrangements are to be

embedded into the education systems aiming at quality, equity, and efficiency of school education (OECD, 2013). Hence, this paper interrogates the practices that promote the European ideology of intellectual and linguistic superiority, raising concerns regarding the possibilities for decolonization of English language education in general and decolonization of the assessment practices in particular, aiming to question the conventional practices of English teaching and assessments that do not incorporate the learners' indigenous epistemologies.

In this regard, this paper has been positioned within the global literature that emphasizes and advocates repositioning the indigenous methodologies in ELT thereby echoing the very premises of 'World Englishes' (Kachru, 1997). The recognition of the world English phenomenon and its appreciation globally is one such trend that delimited the previous understanding of the legitimacy of Standard English. Jenkins' (2015) ideas of shared norms of multinational speakers of English, and the diminishing value of native-speakerism are the instances illustrating the need for recognition of varieties of English in teaching and learning globally. However, in many contexts of pedagogy and assessment, learners' social, cultural, and linguistic contexts have been unrepresented in the national curricula. Given the context that 'English' standards are now relative to time and space (Canagarajah, 2024), it is important to design more culturally and contextually responsive as well as appropriate assessment mechanisms. This paper therefore theoretically positions within the realm of contextualizing assessment policies and practices in multilingual contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted phenomenology (Moran, 2002) as a methodological design that enabled the author to explore the ELT assessment-related experiences of the selected participants, especially the assessment processes that take place in school-level ELT curriculum implementation. To explore the diverse experiences of the teachers working in secondary school contexts, semi-structured interviews were conducted (Flick, 2018). This allowed the author to explore their experiences, feelings, and perceptions about assessment policies and practices.

Participants and Data

This study involved six secondary-level English teachers with more than 10 years of experience in school education. The six teachers were from six purposely selected schools in the Kathmandu Valley. They were all secondary-level teachers officially recruited by the Teacher Service Commission in Nepal. All teachers had master-level qualifications, and two of them were undergoing their Master of Philosophy program. Some teachers were also involved in teaching part-time at the college level, given the qualifications that allow them to teach at the bachelor level. All the teachers, as they said, had teaching experience from the basic level (grades 1-

8) and secondary level (grades 9-12) in public schools. Before joining the public school system, these teachers had worked at private schools as well. In this case, the selected participants had extensive experience in teaching and assessment in both private schools (those that make English-only medium as the primary medium) and public schools (that have long been implementing English and Nepali as the medium of instruction). This study, therefore, aimed at exploring the contextualized and enriched experiences of those teachers in assessment practices in English language instruction. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility in eliciting enriched datasets (Cohen et al., 2017). Considering the availability of the selected teachers, two of them were met in their respective working contexts, while others were interviewed online. The face-to-face interviews took approximately half an hour, whereas the virtual interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes. Consents from individual teachers were obtained before the interviews. Relevant extracts were noted while making a thematic analysis of the data. The findings have been reported thematically and supported by empirical qualitative data quotes extracted from the interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study broadly explores the assessment practices employed in English Language Teaching by ELT teachers and their efforts to decolonize these practices within their respective contexts. The data provided sufficient examples that showcase teachers' active stance in developing assessment techniques in ELT. Given the scope of this paper, I have presented findings that utilize a portion of the dataset. Additionally, significant gaps were identified, demonstrating the persistence of colonial practices in ELT assessments in the selected school contexts. In this section of the paper, the findings are reported under four interrelated themes.

Normative Assessment as an Epistemic Injustice

The data in this study revealed that teachers and school institutions continue to promote normative standards in assessment practices, unlike their classroom instructional practices. This also revealed that there was a difference between how the children were taught and how they were assessed, especially in their summative assessment processes. One teacher mentioned;

> …I teach by using my own styles in my classrooms. Sometimes I translate into children's native languages and sometimes I allow them to shift between their languages while also teaching English. However, when it comes to assessment I focus on 'English-only' norm expecting students to use only English while responding to the questions I ask. (T1)

The views of this teacher reflect the general picture of the instructional practices adopted in the school. It not only provides sufficient ground to claim that there is an uncritical practice of monolingual assessment in bi/multilingual education contexts such as Nepal, but this is also very common in several countries in the global south, raising epistemic injustice (Milligan, 2020). While global policy initiatives have

centrally positioned the right-based issues and approaches, the practice in the schooling system, especially in assessment, raises concerns regarding justice matters for students whose home languages are different from those taught in schools. Tikly (2016) made a great argument that the school institutions' attempts to homogenize educational practices rather than creating diversity by "addressing the complex linguistic needs and identities of diverse groups in multilingual, postcolonial settings" (p. 412) are forms of epistemic injustice. In the data extract above, it seems that the teacher partially addresses students' linguistic needs while teaching; however, his exclusive focus on 'English-only' and expecting the student to make standard English pronunciation raises crucial concerns in education justice. The findings reported here have also been consistently raised by several other studies globally. Hence, devising methodologies for assessing students and addressing their learning needs is an urgent requirement, especially in countries with multilingual social realities. Empirical studies have proved that learning in the most familiar language benefits learners' cognitive ability. If that is the case to be accepted, how the centralized and largely normative systems that are far and wide, detached from learners' contexts of education, capture their learning specificities, is a pertinent concern for educators.

Acknowledging Teacher Agency in Assessment

In Nepal, two specific directions for assessment are observed. One pertains to indigenizing assessment, while the other involves adopting national standards of assessment mechanisms. The argument supporting the latter is based on the premise that central standardization would elevate students' performance standards and yield assessment results that largely cultivate similar foundational knowledge and skills. Between the two, the first approach, which relies more on a bottom-up process, is deemed necessary to establish a system that acknowledges teachers' individualized agency and autonomy in designing more indigenized and contextualized pedagogy and assessment.

In Nepal, education and assessment policies are predominantly top-down, with central agencies such as the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) and the Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) functioning as the regulatory units under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MOEST) to plan, design, and regulate curricular policies, including assessment mechanisms for school education. While Nepal is a country with a plural identity, encompassing more than 124 languages and cultures of over 125 caste/ethnic populations, curricular decisions made at the center, largely unaware of specific cultural traditions and learners' knowledge bases, do not or cannot guarantee the measurement of such students' micro-level epistemologies (Poudel & Costley, 2023).

In this regard, there are issues concerning both centralizing assessment and decentralizing assessment traditions by incorporating socially and culturally

practiced information into the education system. While the former is an instance of colonial practice (i.e., a practice that aims at homogenizing education in contexts where diversity is a situated practice), the latter is more of an indigenizing approach to education and assessment. These two trends remain constantly in tension, as the former argues based on the logic of standardization of the education system, while the latter argues with the logic of providing a voice to the voiceless. Teachers' opinions also reflect such tension experienced by them. One teacher said;

> If I am given total freedom on what to assess and how to assess, I would be happy to design my own classroom-based assessment techniques considering students' language abilities, language needs and content needs. However, as there is a provision of high-stake examination at the end of grade 10 and grade 12 in Nepal, and the questions will be set in the center, I do not have any alternative than to follow what the assessment standards specified in the center. Sometimes I feel like I have pressure to follow the central system while also realizing the need to design classroom or school-based assessment practices. (T2)

Empowering teacher agency and autonomy in teaching and assessment will be one of the viable decolonial efforts in EFL contexts. Teachers' choice of assessment practices eventually influences the way knowledge is created, circulated, measured, and interpreted. Following centralized norms in teaching and assessment in pluralistic contexts is a problem that shows epistemic injustice. Such injustice has also been reported in established educational contexts as well. For instance, in Scandinavian countries, instances of teachers not being able to address the cases of immigrant students in terms of their native languages, cultures, customs, and histories have led to their values being undervalued in educational systems (Wee, et al., 2023).

The teacher argues that high-stakes exams in Nepal have a backwash effect on assessment practices, promoting the 'central' and 'standard' hegemony. Such practices lead to unfair assessment, not recognizing that the students are the legitimate knowers in the education system. All this signals that assessment debates and practices remain within the center-periphery tensions. If teaching and assessment are to be fair and justice-based, they should be designed in such a way that they are built on culturally grounded experiences and rooted in students' current and future pathways.

Teacher Capacity Building for Equitable Learning and Equitable Assessment

A recent study in Nepal reported that teachers are not well-equipped to deal with the inclusive and equitable learning needs of children from diverse language and cultural backgrounds (Borg & Poudel, 2024). This situation has important implications for teaching, learning, and assessment in Nepal. In the current study, all the teachers unequivocally mentioned that assessment must be equitable, and teacher capacity is essential. The teachers were curious about how to make teaching and learning more equitable than before. They expressed their concerns that they

were not adequately taught in pre-service teacher education about the methodologies for establishing equitable learning and assessment mechanisms in the classroom. One teacher said;

> When I began to teach, I realized the classroom diversity, and the needs for supporting students on an individual basis. Some students were so quick and some were so slow, some were proficient in English and some others were weak, some had learning materials and some did not, some spoke Nepali fluently and some had hard time understanding and speaking Nepali. It was so tough for me in the early years because I did not learn anything about how to manage such classes to create equal learning opportunities for all teachers. I wish our colleges would teach this as well, in the bachelor degree. (T3)

This teacher illustrated a representative case of the English teaching scenario in Nepal's public schools. While diversity is the lifeline of Nepali society, developing teachers' capacity to handle diversity and utilize students' linguistic and cultural resources or the funds of knowledge would largely contribute to enhanced quality learning. The teacher softly mentioned the need for teacher education reforms to create equity in learning. Another teacher raised her concern regarding limited capacity development initiatives so that she could not develop her agency to counter or modify her conventional assessment strategies. She said;

> I need specialized support for developing my capacity in embracing the diversity of my classroom to support learners' meaningful engagement in learning. I have got very limited chances to develop my knowledge and skills in using classroom resources and contextualizing teaching of English. I know that if a teacher is skilled in creating a better learning and assessment environment that will contribute to quality learning.(T4)

The ideas reported by Teacher 4 were repeatedly found among other teachers. They all emphasized teachers' professional capacity enhancement as a foundational work needed to enable them to enact equitable learning and equitable assessment. If teachers are aware of and skilled in it, then they can challenge the perpetuation of coloniality (i.e., the colonial practices) and bring students' epistemic concerns into the instructional practice and curricular activities. Although the global literature unanimously accepts that teaching and assessment are to be diversified in the contexts of individual learners, the assessments in schools that produce the tools centrally to measure students' learning will not provide a good example of social justice, or an equitable learning condition

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study concluded that teachers are engaged in and interested in making decolonial efforts in both teaching and assessment. However, certain structural and institutional factors constrain them from enacting their autonomy to address students' learning needs and contextualize their teaching and assessment. The structural factors consist of policy concerns formed at the central level, while the institutional ones are school-specific established practices. Although teachers wish

to assess students according to their capacity, linguistic backgrounds, and characteristics, they cannot do so because ideological stands such as 'assess English in English' and 'assessment of English means assessment of Western cultural values' influence the institutions' policy decisions and actions. Teachers also expressed tensions between top-down policies and bottom-up policies, as assessment matters intersect with several administrative as well as pedagogical factors. The teachers are bound to follow centralized assessment policies and are aware of the epistemic injustice caused by their inability to incorporate contents and methodologies associated with local culture and traditions. Schools and teachers not being able to ensure justice in the classroom depend not only on teachers' actions but are equally shaped by broader ideologies such as teaching English in English and assessing English proficiency in standard English. These findings were complemented by a review of previous literature, indicating that schools in the global south are largely affected by monolingual ideologies which disadvantage students from minority language backgrounds. In these cases, schools sometimes perpetuate injustice as institutions. To counter this, teachers and school leaders must be critical of their practices and the institutional policies that guide and regulate their actions. When it comes to assessment, the fundamental issue is gauging the standards of learning based on their context.

These findings imply a need to construct a curriculum that incorporates students' lived local experiences, cultural specificities, and funds of knowledge in their respective communities. The context of learning and assessment equally deserves consideration, especially in contexts of education that are plural in several ways, i.e., linguistically and culturally. In this context, educators should shift their thinking away from singular methods as solutions to the diversification of classroom methodologies to reduce inequitable opportunities. It is the fundamental step for creating place-based pedagogy. Inclusivity, equity, and diversity should be established as principles for any decolonial practice.

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