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Learning English in Multicultural Contexts: Experiences and Strategies of Secondary Level Students in Rural Nepal

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Abstract

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How an additional language can be learned effectively has become an issue of interest among scholars of second language acquisition research. This study intended to explore secondary-level students' experiences and strategies for learning English in multicultural contexts of classrooms and communities. This is a qualitative interpretive research based on a case study design, where five cases from different cultural groups were purposively selected from the students of Grade 11 studying at two different secondary schools in Kapilvastu. The information was collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observation, which was thematically analysed to report the findings. The study findings revealed that students generated self-learning strategies to fit their situations which tended to be influenced by their socio-cultural and economic realities. Based on the research findings, it is suggested for the adoption of culturally informed pedagogy to value students' socio-cultural realities including the local languages in practice which provide useful learning resources to enhance proficiency in English.

Keywords: Multicultural context, learning strategies, language ecology, self-learning, English learning.

Introduction

Researchers in the last few decades have shown growing interest to discover why some language learners become more successful than the other learners (Przybył & Pawlak, 2023) despite instruction being the same. In particular, an investigation of how learners in multicultural contexts experience learning English and what techniques effective learners employ for efficient learning (Graham, 1997) can be expected to improve classroom learning. As such, this paper intends to explore learners' experiences of English learning in a multicultural classroom context focusing on the strategy choice for learning various aspects and skills of the English language.

Although learning strategies and learning skills are often taken synonymously, a distinction is made between the two. Learning strategies are generally taken as higher order skills which tend to represent abstract mental processes learners execute to learn something, while learning skills are considered as concrete techniques executed by learners particularly to facilitate their learning, which constitutes a part of a broader language learning process (Graham, 1997). Learning strategies are the

consciously selected procedures undertaken by the learners in a specific learning context to achieve learning goals by being aware of needs, preferences, goals and problems (White, 2008). Learning strategies research and learning strategy instruction can be beneficial to develop a better understanding of how learning of language takes place in different contexts (White, 2008) including multicultural community contexts. Studies on learning strategies and experiences provide teachers with relevant knowledge on learners' preference for strategy use in language learning and help them design appropriate classroom activities to fit learners' characteristics (Przybył & Pawlak, 2023).

This research intended to investigate the experience and strategies of secondary students learning English as a foreign language in multicultural contexts of Nepal Tarai. As students' learning strategies could be socio-culturally situated, it has explored how secondary students in multicultural settings perceived English learning and practised through various activities to develop competency in using English. The study has the following research questions:

- 1 How is secondary students' experience of learning English in a multicultural community contexts?
- 2 What strategies do secondary students adopt to learn English as a foreign language in multicultural community contexts?

Linguistic Ecology and Language Learning Strategies

Learning experience and strategies of second language learners have tended to be influenced by the socio-linguistic contexts where a second language is used. Language learning can be influenced by multiple ecological factors including classroom contexts, socio-cultural belief systems, socio-linguistic realities, institutional decision making and policies (Gopalakrishnan, 2022). Presenting an ecological view of second language learning, Ushioda (2015) argued that learners tend to be in a dynamic interaction with their physical, social, psychological, linguistic and cultural contexts, where one influences the other constituting an ecosystem. Indicating problems in treating context and learners as distinct entities, he described the learner-context relationship as 'mutually constitutive and co-adaptive' thereby creating a wider learning situation incorporating physical, psychological and socio-cultural contexts.

While Ushioda used an ecological perspective to explain the interconnectedness between learner motivation and learner context, Oxford (2017) extended the concept to learning strategies as she believed that learners can utilise strategic tactics such as goals, motives and intentions, the basic characteristics of learners, to further enhance their learning through interaction in the context. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner (2005), Oxford (2017) explained a connection of learning strategies with learner-contexts, which include (i) the learners and their immediate physical and social contexts which include peer group, home, school and community, providing a resource for learning strategies (microsystems); (ii) the learners and parents, the learners and the school/teachers, the learners and the religious institution, the learners' families and teachers (mesosystem); (iii) the larger social systems such as politics, policies and decisions (exosystem); (iv) the broader culture and subcultures including shared beliefs systems and socio-psychological tendencies on religion, science, family, education and politics (macrosystem); and (v) time-based situations such as the times of war, pandemic, and natural disasters (chronosystem). Oxford (2017) described how these five broader systems, which formulate a learner-context ecosystem, influence the learning strategies of a learner. For example, the traits of peer group, family and school can influence learner motivation to use language learning strategies, and successful learning strategy use can generate further motivation. Even culture in the classroom and family, the parts of microsystems, can influence the use of learning strategies. The components of the mesosystem such as peers, the family, the community and the school can influence the learning strategy choice of

second language learners. For example, teaching techniques of religious institutions (temples, mosque) practising certain cultures are likely to influence the use of learning strategies by students. The components of the ecosystem including politics and policies can influence the learning strategy choice of L2 learners. For example, the use of a selected language as a medium of instruction or explanation can lead the learners to prefer a certain learning strategy. Macrosystems, which include broader cultures and sub-cultures shaping specific belief systems, tend to approve students' certain learning strategies over others thereby strengthening or weakening them. From the ecological perspective, Oxford (2017) argued that while cultural beliefs shape learning strategy choices by students, the practice of certain strategies over time can reshape cultural beliefs and ideologies. Chronosystem, which is operable at every system mentioned above can be influential in the selection of learning strategies. For example, during Covid-19 Pandemic, students in rural Nepal practiced learning English through radio, gathering at a *Chautaro* in small groups, Facebook Messenger and Zoom meeting thereby promoting a virtual learning culture. The influence of teaching-learning culture developed in the ancient education system can be observed even today. In Nepal's ancient education system, learners needed to read the selected texts such as Veda, Mimamsa, Sahitya, Jyotish and Byakaran repeatedly to learn by heart without necessarily comprehending meaning and teachers emphasised practice, rote learning and lecturing (Nepal National Educational Planning Commission, 1956). Repeated practice and rote learning strategies can be observed even in English classroom, where teachers encourage their students to recite texts for content learning.

Language Learner Language in Multicultural Context

Multilingual learners' strategic choice of language seems to vary in multicultural contexts when they try to learn certain language aspects or skills. In this regard, Cohen (2014) argues that educators need to value the role of learners' strategic use of their mother tongue which supports in learning a target language. His focus is that by investigating the learners' strategies of using multiple languages to learn English as a target language, a set of strategy preferences of learners can be discovered that can account for cognitive operations used for learning grammar, vocabulary and language skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. Moreover, as language and culture are closely connected, the linguistic background of the students appears to determine their ways of thinking and behaving in particular sociocultural settings (Grenfell & Harris, 2017). When the home language and the language of school and community differ, learners in multicultural contexts might learn to operate different learning strategies in their attempts to develop competency in an additional language.

Students' cultural background has tended to influence their choice of strategies to learn an additional language. For example, comparing Chinese and British cultural contexts of teaching and learning English, Gu (2010) identified that the sociocultural background of teachers and students along with ideological, emotional, economic and political factors influenced the teaching and learning of English and suggested the adoption of culturally sensitive contextual pedagogy for effective learning. Oxford (1996) reported that Japanese students preferred to work alone, use analytic strategies, search for minute details, and use reasoning to achieve accuracy instead of engaging in personal interactions. However, many Korean and Arabic students seemed to prefer memorization unlike Hispanics, the ethnic students from Mexico, Cuba and South or Central America, who prefer to use the strategies of inferring, predicting and collaborating with others. Reflecting on his experiences of learning English, Canagarajah (2015) argued that multilingual students are engaged in the translingual practice of shifting across languages, which is regarded as a socially situated process of meaning-making that involves contextual and ecological affordances. Student engagement and participation is also likely to

be affected by the culture where they have grown up. Therefore, it is reasonable to investigate how students from different cultural contexts experience and learn English as a foreign language.

Culture and Strategy Choice

In the context of Taiwan, (Huang, 2018) university students' primary goal tended to pass the examination and get a university degree, which motivated them to adopt the cognitive strategy of learning through repeated practice of learning material. This supported them to develop declarative knowledge through memorization of vocabulary, grammar and language content that supported them to develop test-taking skills and the use of self-learning strategies. Even the students intending to learn English for communication experienced difficulty in learning English due to the foreign language context that limited input of English depriving them of using strategies of interaction. An earlier study (Lee & Heinz, 2016) in South Korea revealed that self-regulated learning strategies tended to be more effective in learning English in EFL context and students preferred to use metacognitive strategies for monitoring progress and cognitive strategies such as analysing texts.

Investigating the relationship between language learning strategies and cultural-educational factors in Israel and Russia, Levine et al. (1996) reported different learning strategies used by participants from different cultural contexts where new immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Israel used the strategies such as rote learning of rules, sentences and grammar exercises to learn grammar and tended to learn vocabulary list by heart and preferred to be tested what they had memorised. However, old-timers, those living in Israel for longer than five years, preferred to use strategies such as paraphrasing and making sentences of their own using a new vocabulary to learn grammar, and strategies of seeking collocation and association to learn new vocabulary. Indeed, learners from different cultural contexts brought the ideologically influenced strategies of their home contexts to learn language in new contexts. Later, Jang and Jiménez (2011) claimed that learners' linguistic and cultural background led them to adopt specific strategies such as remaining silent in the classroom to resist teacher behaviour when they felt marginalised due to the distinct characteristics of their culture, language or ethnicity. However, Grenfell and Harris (2013) in Britain discovered that home culture influenced learners' learning strategy selection as they learned to use them from family members and suggested that schools should value the role of a second language in learning an additional language because bilinguals learning French were found more benefitted than monolinguals learning French. Moreover, instruction on language learning strategy was found effective as it supported minimising students' learning pressure. An earlier study by Wharton (2000) suggested that the bilingual experience of learners was more influential than gender or ethnicity in learning strategy use.

It is visible that students' learning goals, home culture and teacher instruction on learning strategy use directed students' choice of learning strategies. Moreover, students adopted the strategy of using local languages to minimise psychological pressure generated in course of learning English.

Experiences of Learning English in Multicultural Contexts

Learners in multicultural contexts experience various challenges in learning English. For example, Chouari (2016) reported how teachers' ethnic backgrounds produced specific teacher behaviour and produced ethnicity-generated student perception towards them with a consequential effect on learning achievement and motivation. He identified that multicultural classroom context created challenges for teachers concerning interaction, learning management, communication and assessment, and suggested the need to adopt culturally informed pedagogy that values linguistic and cultural diversities of students in multicultural classrooms. A Canadian study by Abu-Rabia (1995)

suggested that second language learners' cultural background influenced how they generated motivation towards learning English. For example, Arab background students found the Canadian social context supportive of learning English because the multicultural Canadian context was more democratic and open and valued other cultures where Arab background students could easily integrate into Canadian society. Similarly, an Israeli study (Bensoussan, 2015) found that students from a Hebrew background generated a higher level of motivation towards learning English compared to minority students because they regarded English to be powerful and useful for finding socio-economic opportunities. However, in the context of Australia, Sharifian (2014) suggested the need to adopt a critical perspective to value students' mother tongue while teaching English so that intercultural communicative competence can be developed while preserving linguistic diversity.

Learning English vocabulary and grammar has received higher value among learners of English as a second language. As reported by Graham (1997) many second language learners viewed accumulating sound knowledge of grammar and vocabulary would supporting language learning although some students could not concentrate on monotonous grammatical explanations and gave up learning them and blamed them for their self-discipline. They believed that self-learning and self-assessment strategies would support them to find their position in learning and generate self-motivation for learning. Second language learners are likely to experience various psychological pressures too. Szyszka (2017) identified that learners were apprehensive of the fear of miscommunication and mispronunciation, fear of being laughed at, and being unsuccessful in the examination, leading them to adopt a silencing strategy thereby limiting their communication opportunities.

The above literature indicated that multicultural classroom context created challenges for effective learning of English necessitating culturally-informed pedagogy to value socio-cultural diversities in the classroom. Literature also showed that students generate specific strategies such as using the locally available linguistic resources to promote self-learning.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research intended to explore secondary-level students' experiences of learning strategies use to learn English, particularly in the multicultural contexts of Nepal Tarai. Following Neuman (2006), I have explored the secondary-level students' experiences of learning English in the cultural complexities of their classrooms and communities, where they have already learned at least two languages except English. I have investigated the strategies utilised by students from different cultural groups to enhance their proficiency in English. Using a case study research design informed by Yin (2018), I have studied how multilingual learners tried to construct knowledge of English as a foreign language. I conducted data through semi-structured interviews in the Nepali language and observed classroom activities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). However, before conducting interviews, I familiarised myself with the participants having some informal talks and explaining the purpose of the study so that they could share their feelings without hesitation.

I purposively selected five participants from Grade 11 from two community schools in Kapilvastu district. These students belonged to five different cultural groups viz Indigenous Tharu, Majhi, Madheshi, Brahmin and Chhetri. Among them, three were the girls belonging to Tharu, Majhi and Madheshi communities and the other two were the boys from Brahmin and Chhetri communities. I obtained informed consent from the school authorities and English teachers for classroom observation and from the participants to take interviews. They were given pseudonyms to screen their original identities for ethical causes.

I used a six-step thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse the information generated through semi-structured interviews and classroom observation. The procedure included transcribing audio records and translating them into English, organising the information into initial codes through NVivo 11, minute examination and analysis of the initial codes to generate wider themes, refining the themes in the lines of research questions, critically examining the themes for their refinement, and constructing meaningful and logical stories to convey the findings.

Results and Discussion

The following section thematically presents the research findings about how learners from different cultural contexts experience and use strategies for learning English.

Strategies for Accessing Learning Resources

The participants in the interviews shared how they tried to access learning materials to enhance their learning of English. The interviews revealed that the participant students did not have equal access to learning resources, which created different learning situations. In particular, the Indigenous students experienced more challenges in accessing learning resources which tended to influence their learning achievement. For example:

I have got some grammar books at home. I use them. To prepare for exams and to learn I use YouTube also. The exam comes repeatedly in three to four months. I read and read, and things come to my memory. (Tikaram from Brahmin community)

I ask my friends or hit the search bar on Google. Mainly, I search on the google. (Sapana from the Indigenous Majhi community)

The remark from Tikaram, a learner from the Brahmin community, and Sapana from the minority Majhi community, indicate how learners utilise learning resources available through the internet to develop competency in English. The access to the online and offline materials retrievable through the internet seems to have worked as a capsule to minimise the learning stress of examination as learning material could be accessed and used at any time. This also indicated that the learners consulted the selected materials frequently which supported him to develop proficiency in English with improved confidence to face the examination. The strategy of accessing online materials through Google and YouTube can be related to the teacher-promoted culture (Oxford, 2017) of smartphone use to support English learning. However, Shanta, a student from the Indigenous Tharu community, shared why she was facing problems in learning English:

I don't know (English) Sir. I have no idea how I can improve my English. I don't know anything. I don't care much in my study. I have a brother. He could help me, but he's been abroad. I fail in English. I don't have a smartphone either. I watch television but don't watch much. (Shanta from the Indigenous Tharu community)

Shanta's remarks indicated the frustration of not being able to learn English effectively. In particular, Indigenous students could not access reading materials from the Internet because they could not afford the required expenses. Their inability to afford the internet and smartphone limited their possibility of exploring content, thereby restricting them to classroom exposure only. Moreover, the heavy workload exerted on Shanta in the family, which can be related to low educational sensitivity and economic compulsion, seems to have reduced her study hours with consequential havoc in

learning achievement. It indicates an English learning ecology in the Indigenous families with low socio-economic status, where Indigenous learners like Shanta with poor economic background and insufficient material support experience a cyclical process leading to poor learning. It is reflected that the sociocultural background of learners including economic, ideological and emotional factors can influence English learning, which calls for the need to adopt culturally sensitive contextual pedagogy to enhance English learning (Gu, 2010). Indeed, poor socio-economic condition seems to cause an increased workload on learners reducing their study hours, ultimately increasing anxiety and frustration for learning failure (Szyszka, 2017) resulting in reduced motivation and confidence to learn English.

Strategies for Comprehending Meaning

Participants in the interviews shared their experiences of learning English in classrooms situated in multicultural contexts. In particular, they emphasised the importance of comprehending the meaning of learning English. Most of the participants highlighted the central role of translation strategy to construct meaning expressed in English. They tended to translate words and expressions in English into Nepali, the most dominant language in school, which supported them to grasp the ideas from the text and generate a cognitive base for learning English (Huang, 2018). For example:

When I am reading a story, I try to understand it in Nepali and I don't forget. Instead of just memorizing, I can create and compose in English. What I understand in Nepali, lasts for a long into the memory. Summarising is also helpful. I think converting into Nepali is necessary. I can remember in Nepali and say or write in English in my way. (Tikaram from Brahmin community)

I find it difficult to understand the meaning of new words. Meaning is the main thing and if I don't know meaning I cannot learn anything. If I speak English, people will think that I'm proud and showy. Therefore, I try to learn at home. For example, I write meanings and write what I have searched in Google if some new thing comes up, that also I write. First, I listen on YouTube and then write the meanings. New things cannot be learned at once, so I try simply from the initial stage. (Sapana from the Indigenous Majhi community)

Despite belonging to different ethnicities, Tikaram from the Pahadi Brahmin community and Sapana from the Indigenous Majhi community shared a common language Nepali and studied in the same school. Their remarks indicate how important it is to comprehend the meaning of expressions they encounter in English. Although they used different strategies such as searching for meaning in Google and asking peers to sense the text in English, the tendency to translate the text into Nepali, particularly the bilingual experience (Wharton, 2000), has become phenomenal for them. However, they have tended to prioritise different strategies to learn vocabulary. For example, Tikaram from the Pahadi Brahmin community believed that meaning comprehension would support him to express creatively and relied much on his ability to understand the target text in his mother tongue. This reminded me of the findings of Grenfell and Harris (2013) which discovered that bilingual learners were more beneficial compared to monolingual learners learning French. However, Sapana from the Indigenous Majhi community, a minority group in Tarai, who was sitting alone on the first bench of her class during my observation trusted much on self-practice, particularly through writing to memorise the meaning of new vocabulary. This seems to be an examination-oriented cognitive strategy for

developing formal knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (Huang, 2018). However, Karan from the Chettri community used different strategies for comprehension and retention of vocabulary as he said:

I try to learn in different ways. For example, I connect to something in the real world. I translate and connect the word with Nepali meaning. I consider how I can learn it. I connect the new word with already learned ideas. That is how I can remember. When I memorise, I will forget one day, but if I connect to things I have learned already, I can remember for a long time. I ask my teacher. Or, I search on the internet on my mobile phone. Learning separately occurring new vocabulary is difficult. Therefore, I consult multiple sources such as Google, YouTube, and apps. When simple and understandable text is discovered, it will be easier to recall. Question answers will be easier if the text can be understood. New vocabulary makes text complex, so it is necessary to understand meaning. Therefore, I consult multiple sources and try to locate an option that suits my level.

The multilingual participants in the interviews reported how they could utilise their knowledge base of different languages and cultures to support English learning. The participants reported that the knowledge of different languages became more effective for meaning comprehension and retention although they tended to face difficulty in seeking connection across different languages. Pramila, ethnically Madheshi and linguistically Tharu as the first language, reported:

My language is Awadhi, but I speak Tharu because we live in Tharu village. I try to learn the meaning of words in Nepali. If I don't know I think for a while. I think in Tharu as well. I don't forget easily because I can think in three languages. I think in Nepali. I think the same thing in Tharu. Then, I try to link it to English, but it is difficult. This is good if I can do so. Otherwise, I give up.

The above remarks revealed how the learners used different strategies to comprehend the meaning of new vocabulary to support English learning. In particular, he used multiple strategies such as seeking scaffolding from the learned others, self-initiation like searching for meaning in the online resources, using the first language as a learning resource and reflecting on their learning. Indeed, the participants in the interviews emphasised the importance of vocabulary learning for learning English and appreciated the role of their first language for meaning comprehension and retention, with which they could construct the knowledge of the target language. It is also evident that multilingualism, a significant characteristic of a multicultural community, benefitted the learners to seek meaningful interconnection across languages (Canagarajah, 2015) strengthening multilingual competence in the learners. This finding corroborates with Grenfell and Harris (2017) who argued that the linguistic and cultural background of learners determined thinking patterns with a consequential influence on learning achievement. However, the inability to establish a connection of English vocabulary with their equivalent concept in the mother tongue tended to increase frustration and unwillingness to learn English.

Strategies to Cope with Learning Challenges

The participants in the interviews reported the problems experienced in learning English. The majority of learners seemed panicked because they could not get the expected scaffolded support from the other experienced language users in their contexts. The learners from the Tharu and Madhesi

backgrounds tended to experience the challenges of accessing required material support and family support, increasing their frustration for being unable to learn English as expected. For example:

I find it difficult to learn English compared to other subjects. I try to learn but there is no one to support me. Mother has managed English books for me. Sometimes, I learn English lessons from YouTube. But I don't know much. I have a problem in reading English. I don't study much at home either. I have to do a lot of work to support my family. I don't have to do much work in the morning and I do homework. In the evening I have to do household chores such as cooking, feeding, cleaning and so on. So, I don't have time to do homework. Sometimes, I do homework in the morning and go to school. I enjoy both reading (other subjects) and doing household work. My brother also suggests that I should learn English. But I have no interest in learning English. (Shanta from the Indigenous Tharu community)

Shanta's remarks provide an indication of the pressures she experienced in her attempts of learning English. Indeed, the learners from Indigenous backgrounds needed to support their families with daily household work which deprived them of the opportunities to practice at home leading them to take withdrawal strategies from learning English. Indigenous learners were compelled to distance themselves from learning English due to their socio-economic compulsions ultimately leading them to develop apathy towards learning English. This reminds me of Gopalakrishnan (2022) who indicated how multiple factors such as people's belief systems, economic realities and institutional decision-making of family and school can affect students' learning. Moreover, an unfavourable family environment has tended to be more responsible for generating severe frustration in the learners. For example:

This time I failed the English test. I felt too bad. I was a bit unwell too. I have made a routine. I reach home at 12: 30. I have lunch and take rest for a while. Then, I begin to study at about 1:30 pm and study for about 3 hours. Then, I have to prepare food and finish up kitchen work. Then, I study after 8 pm. I intend to study until midnight, but I cannot because I get so tired. I have to do household work alone. I've got a sister too. But she is learning Japanese and so doesn't help me. I have to do all the work. I get tired. I study for a while in the evening, but I feel sleepy. So, I cannot follow my routine. My mother has got a problem with backache. She cannot work. My father drinks alcohol and shouts. My exam is coming, and he shouts. I cannot study well because of the stress and noise. I don't have a favourable environment to study at home. I feel bad and don't feel like studying. The quarrel between my father and mother makes me cry. (Pramila from Madheshi community)

Pramila's remarks provide evidence of hurdles learners are likely to experience in families from poor and marginalised communities. In such family contexts, workload and uncooperative behaviour of parents have tended to create stressful circumstance for learning English thereby pushing them backward in terms of learning achievement too. This indicates that learners are likely to experience anxiety and pressure for fear of committing mistakes and failing examinations (Szyzka, 2017). Apart from the psychological problem created due to uncooperative family behaviour, some learners reported how they had to struggle alone for not receiving assistance from the learned other:

For me, the main problem is how I learn, and whom I ask. Here is no one speaking English in my community. I feel that I don't know much English. If someone with good English would help me when I ask, tell me in Nepali that this means this and support me, and tell me some new things, then my English would be better. (Sapana from the Indigenous Majhi community)

The above comments pictured out how learners from different cultural contexts experience socio-economic complexities influencing their learning of English. In particular, the students from Indigenous Tharu and Madheshi backgrounds had to experience the problems of accessing learning resources, time management and creating a conducive environment for learning English. Heavy work load, noisy and disturbing environment, and unavailability of scaffolded support from the others in the family or community further distressed the learners which created apathy in them towards learning English pushing them further backward. When learners' expectations of necessary family support for learning English are not met, they are likely to develop strategies of avoidance and distancing from the learning tasks (Graham, 1997) further weakening their learning achievement.

Collaboration and Self-learning Strategies in Multicultural Classroom

Most of the participants in the interviews emphasised the need for collaboration to enhance their learning of English in multicultural classroom contexts. However, they tended to adopt different strategies for collaboration in the classroom. Particularly, the learners belonging to Brahmin and Chhetri cultures seemed to be proactive as they displayed a strong culture of sharing and collaborating among peers (Oxford, 2017). During classroom observation, I saw their active participation in the activities and they often proactively answered teachers' questions and often responded to teacher talk to indicate that they were listening. This can be equated with the family and community culture in which they were grown up. Moreover, the teachers provided with more opportunities for the proactive learners to respond during their classes. Karan, a learner from the Chhetri community, and Tikaram from the Brahmin community explained how they collaborated to learn English as they said:

I am poor in English. So, I consult my friends. They are better in English. I discuss this with Gayatri and Bipin. I don't hesitate to consult my friends whether they are girls or boys. Even if they are girls, I go to their benches and discuss what I don't know. I learn English with them and I help them with Accounts. (Karan from the Chhetri community)

I share with my friends what I have learned. First, I learn myself and later I share with my peers, but I don't encourage them for discuss. (Tikaram from Brahmin community)

These comments provide an image of peer collaboration in a multicultural classroom although the learners from Chhetri and Brahmin communities were observed proactive to collaborate with peers and teachers, which supported them to improve their English. However, the peer collaboration tended to loosely concentrate within cultural boundaries of the learners. On the other hand, as observed in the classroom, the learners from Tharu and Majhi cultures tended to share less among their peers despite their claim for sharing in the interviews:

The one who sits with me, most of them are from the Tharu community to which I belong. Binita, Asha, Nisha all are Tharus. One Tamang is there. All of us are poor in English. We all don't know English. Asha knows some English. I don't

ask other friends. They do their homework. I get afraid of teachers. I can't ask questions in English. I get confused about what to ask and what not to ask as there so many things I don't know. (Shanta from the Tharu community)

My close friend was absent today. But she doesn't know much English. I ask knowledgeable friends and teachers to learn what I don't know. My friends are not good at English. So, I don't ask them much. Learning will be better if I talk and share with friends. I feel comfortable with friends to ask and learn from them rather than with teachers. I feel that talking and using practically will help improve my English. (Sapana from Majhi community)

Shanta's remarks indicated how Indigenous learners constructed ethnicity-based cultural groups in the classroom which shaped the modality of classroom interaction. Indigenous learners with low academic achievement tended to interact less in the classroom particularly due to fear of making errors and teacher authority. Although Sapana appreciated the role of peer collaboration in learning English, similar to Korean and Arabic students' habit of learning through practice (Oxford, 1996), classroom observation revealed her tendency to work alone to learn vocabulary and grammar through repeated practice, giving less preference for teacher collaboration. The learners from the Indigenous communities tended to construct collaborative teams from within their ethnic communities, which restricted them from the opportunities to interact with peers belonging to other cultures and ethnicities. Indigenous learners' tendency of limiting collaboration with the members of particular culture and avoiding interaction with teachers and learners from other cultural communities might have arisen due to their shared mother tongue and culture. These findings reminded me of Levine et al. (1996), who established the connection of learning strategies such as rote learning and seeking collaboration with learners' cultural traits. Moreover, the strategy of remaining silent and avoiding interaction with teachers and other knowledgeable friends can be equated with an outcome of learners' family and community culture (Jang & Jiménez, 2011), which would deprive them from receiving corrective feedback for further improvement. When the learners adopt an avoidance strategy, this is likely to reduce learning motivation and loosen their confidence to participate in classroom interaction with teachers and peers pushing them further backwards in learning English.

The participants in the interviews shared how they were engaged in self-learning activities to promote their learning of English. Particularly, the learners from Brahmin and Chhetri communities used the strategies of searching learning resources from the internet, using the learning material multiple times, establishing a connection with previously learned concepts and generating self-motivation for learning. For example:

Sometimes I listen to online materials multiple times. Looking at the shapes and letters of words also, I can establish concept in mind. To memorise words, I write as far as possible. Then I read them once or twice. I try to recite too. But it is likely to be forgotten soon. So, I frequently consult the reading material, and this helps me remember for a long. (Karan from the Chhetri community)

I enjoy learning grammar. Grammar is involved in our speech, but we don't notice. For example, when we say, "May I come in Sir", a modal verb is involved. When I reflect on my grammar lesson in class, I find grammar like tense and modal verbs used in my speech. I give much time to learn those grammatical aspects that are more useful in speech. I analyse what grammar has

been used in people's speech and give priority to learn that. More focused attention is needed to learn grammar. (Tikaram from Brahmin community)

While Karan adopted the strategy of consulting supplementary learning materials and using them frequently until meaning is conceptualised, presumably a value system developed with an influence of home culture (Grenfell & Harris, 2013), Tikaram developed self-awareness of seeking how grammar is actualised in the language of everyday communication. Through self-reflection, they seem to have learned to assess what strategy would become effective to learn an intended aspect of language. Indeed, self-reflection and assessment, which tended to be effective in learning a second language (Lee & Heinz, 2016) provided self-feedback which provided useful support to enhance English learning.

Conclusion and Implications

The research findings produced evidence to claim the influence of socio-cultural traits on learning English, particularly in multicultural classroom contexts of rural Nepal Tarai. The socioeconomic realities of students from Indigenous Tharu and Madheshi cultures experienced psychological pressures arising from their low performance in English, which seems to have resulted from heavy workload in the family, and low participation in classroom interaction resulted from the community of practice constructed around cultural affinity, which seems to have limited their opportunities to learn from the learners of other cultural groups. However, the learners from Brahmin and Chhetri cultural communities, the so-called mainstream cultures, depicted a proactive nature of being actively engaged in the classroom, being involved in wider communities of practice and accessing learning materials from versatile sources provided them with more opportunities to learn and practice English in the classroom. Such traits are supported to minimise their learning stress and the pressure of examination.

The findings also visualised that multicultural classroom contexts can have some positive effects in learning. For example, a multicultural context can provide learners with opportunities to learn from each other with a higher level of motivation, develop intercultural communicative competence and support the development of linguistic, cognitive and social skills. Indeed, learners with multilingual backgrounds could utilise the linguistic repertoire and cultural knowledge resource by shifting back and forth in the process of learning to conceptualise meaning to support retention and recalling. Multicultural contexts also provided the learners with the opportunities to share and learn from each other although learners' sharing culture could be roughly attributed to their cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the learners' strategies of peer collaboration, self-reflection and self-awareness, observed in the learners from mainstream cultural communities, provided them with more opportunities to practice and access learning resources from their language, which supported them to enhance their linguistic proficiency in English. Learners' avoidance strategy, mostly observed in the poor learners from Indigenous Tharu and Madheshi communities, is likely to reduce learning motivation and loosen their confidence to participate in classroom interaction with teachers and peers pushing them further backwards in learning English.

This research has identified how learners from different cultural groups practise strategies for language development in their contexts which influence their motivation for learning English. By understanding ecological factors influencing learning strategy use in multicultural contexts, perhaps we can develop culturally informed pedagogical practices to enhance English learning. As language learning can be influenced by ecological factors including classroom contexts, socio-cultural belief systems, socio-linguistic realities, institutional decision-making and policies (Gopalakrishnan, 2022),

in-depth exploration of learners' experiences of learning English and their choice of learning strategies in multicultural contexts can be useful to understand how English learning takes place in the sociocultural complexities of Nepali classroom and community contexts.

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