A Critical Analysis of English Language Teaching Situation in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Critical pedagogy (CP) is an educational movement that primarily aims to support the students in developing a consciousness of freedom so that they can connect the knowledge to power for social reformation. The supporters of CP argue that language teachers should emphasise developing the social skills of the learners along with language skills. Studies show that many English language teachers may have inadequate knowledge and skills about CP and the spirit of CP may not be followed while designing curriculum and writing textbooks. The purpose of the study was to examine the use of CP in English Language Teaching (ELT) focusing on classroom practices, curriculum designing and textbook writing at the secondary level. For this, I used a qualitative research design in which data were collected from six English teachers through in-depth interviews from three schools. I investigated that while designing curriculum, selecting textbooks, and making ELT policy, CP has not been practically implemented. Language policy, curriculum and textbooks are designed by a specific group and imposed on the teachers and learners. There has been a political influence in ELT policy as well. However, some teachers were found positive to CP and implemented it in the classroom, but they demanded special training.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, English language teaching, marginalisation, transformation, oppression

INTRODUCTION

English is taught and learned as a foreign language in many developing and developed countries including Nepal. English was first introduced in the Nepalese education system in 1854 because of the political interest of the Rana rulers (Sharma, 2015). Later on, the *National Education System Plan 1971* made a provision of teaching English as a compulsory subject from Grade Four, and the Ministry of Education and Sports decided to implement English as a compulsory subject from Grade One in 2003. Earlier, English was introduced in higher education after the establishment of Tri-Chandra College, the first college of Nepal, in 1918 (Awasthi, 2003). Now, English is taught and learned as a foreign language from the first grade to the bachelor level as a compulsory subject in Nepal. Moreover, schools including the government-funded schools have shifted their medium of instruction to English Medium Instruction (EMI) thinking that English medium education is quality education.

English occupies a dominant space in various sectors including education, media, business, information communication technology, and tourism. After the restoration of liberal democracy in 1990, the neoliberal ideology became more dominant in Nepal which gave importance to English language teaching highlighting the global scope of English. Neoliberal

ideology emphasises the demand of market and people believed that English language can have the power to win the global competition and grab every opportunity (Price, 2014). Similarly, the privatisation policy in education and the presence of international donor agencies through different international non-government organisations have played a crucial role in promoting the use of English in Nepal (Phyak, 2011). Likewise, emphasising the role of the English language in Nepal, different education plans and policies such as the *National Curriculum Framework 2007, School Sector Reform Plan 2009-2015*, and *Medium of Instruction Roadmap 2014* allowed English as a medium of instruction in school level curriculum (Lee & Sha, 2018) which encouraged many schools including the community schools to shift into English medium instruction (EMI) and English language teaching in Nepal.

Different researchers have critically analysed the rapid growth of ELT and EMI in developing countries like Nepal. For example, scholars like Phyak (2013) and Sharma (2015) examined that the English language has reproduced linguistic inequalities. Similarly, Devkota (2018), Giri (2010) and Sah and Li (2018) investigated that ELT including EMI has reproduced socioeconomic inequalities. As Freire (1997) viewed that education should develop critical consciousness on students about social issues in terms of sociopolitical background, gender, race, caste, religion and language, the aim of language teaching like ELT is not only to develop citizens who are competent in language skills, but also promote social skills to the learners. Based on this theoretical perspective (critical pedagogy), I have analysedELT focusing on curriculum designing, textbooks, and classroom practices in Nepal. The purposes of the study were to examine how English language teachers use CP in their classrooms, and how far CP has been employed while designing English curriculum and textbooks in Nepal. This paper has explored how teachers, curriculum designers and textbook writers have addressed the issues like gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and can draw the attention of the stakeholders for the effective implementation of CP in English Language Teaching in the context of Nepal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section deals with the theoretical review and some thematic reviews related to ELT in a national and international context from the lens of critical pedagogy, the major theory which has been applied in this paper.

Critical pedagogy (CP) is the most heard educational philosophy which came into existence with the effort and pedagogic practice of Antonio Gramsci year? along with the works of prominent thinkers from the Frankfurt School, but in reality, it became wholly recognized in the seminal writings of Paulo Freire, especially with the work of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Shor, 2012). Freire, a Brazilian educationist, developed critical pedagogy for an adult literacy programme in Brazil focusing on those who were economically disadvantaged. Freire believed that "Education and knowledge could only have power when they help learners liberate themselves from oppressive conditions" (Norland & Pruett-Said, 2006, p.60). Freire's book turns the ideas of critical theory into critical pedagogy by claiming that teachers and students are the

major agents who are actively involved in the process of knowledge construction (Abrahams, 2005). According to Aliakbari and Faraji (2011), critical theory is the starting point for CP which empowers the oppressed people and supports their social transformation, and Freire used the principles of critical theory developed by the Frankfurt school as the main source of CP. The goal of critical theory is emancipation from oppression through an arising of the critical consciousness based on conscientisation (Kincheloe, 2008). Earlier, Beck (2005)argued that CP is a philosophy that "applies the tenets of critical social theory to the educational arena and takes on the task of examining how schools reproduce inequality and injustice" (392). He further asserted that students learn by analysing the multiple texts critically and examine the injustices around their society.

Critical pedagogy is an educational movement that primarily aims to support the students in developing a consciousness of freedom so that they can connect the knowledge to power for social reformation (Giroux, 1983). The major goals of CP as Gor (2005) put are raising awareness to the people and rejecting any kind of discrimination and violation against them. Similar to critical theory, Freire's CP attempts to emancipate oppressed or marginalised people by challenging any kind of domination, subordination, and oppression. For this, the role of students is crucial for social transformation because through emancipatory education students develop a critical consciousness that helps to improve their living conditions and encourages them to make their society equitable. Vandrick (1994) stated that the goal of CP is to emancipate and educate all people irrespective of their class, race, gender, and so on. In the same line, Gadotti (1994) claimed that CP is the major interest of Freire which aims to reform the structure of an oppressive society. In this regard, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013) state "critical pedagogy is an approach to teaching that aims to create a more egalitarian society by raising awareness of social injustice as a necessary part of the curriculum" (168). For Ellis (2003) a CP is a particular approach to language teaching which uncovers the underlying sociopolitical messages and encourages the students to think about social injustices so that they can improve their world.

Regarding CP in the education process, Freire (1970) distinguished the banking model of education from problem-posing education. He further explained that in the traditional education system, teachers deposit knowledge in students like depositing money in a bank, and it shows the supremacy of teachers where teachers are considered as the pillars of knowledge whereas students are the passive receivers of knowledge. Instead, he proposed a problem-posing education as an alternative approach that can lead the students to critical consciousness. Problem posing pedagogy as suggested by Freire (1970)enables students to develop their knowledge themselves by taking part in series of dialogue and discussions on different situations. Moreover, learners follow five steps of problem posing as describing the content of the discussion, defining the problem, personalizing the problem, discussing the problem, and discussing the alternatives of the problems (Joldersma, 1999). To Freire (1970), both teachers and students collaborate as the subject in this process where the teacher reveals the reality and creates the knowledge of the

world. Students as autonomous learners develop critical power and they "come to see the world not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 1970, p. 71). Similarly, (Giroux, 1998) suggested that education should make the citizens think critically, and develop democratic values and norms in every society. In a general sense, CP raises consciousness in students, prepares them ready to engage in a larger struggle, develops a good understanding of their experiences, and empowers them to challenge the oppressive social condition and finally change their world.

The scholars like Giroux, McLaren, McLaren, and Peter (1989) argued that education systems are political. Furthermore; McLaren (1989) asserted that the main focus of CP is the centrality of politics and power which influences our education system. Similarly, Joldersma (1999) argued that good teaching can transfer the political system for justice. Similarly, Keesing-Styles (2003) asserted that CP is concerned with social justice and develops such practices which can transform the oppressive institutions through educational practices. For Freire (1970), education is an aspect that maintains the relation between critique and domination and rejects views of the ruling groups who claim that schools provide knowledge in an objective way and without any bias. Likewise, (Giroux, 1997) suggested making everyday experiences problematic and critical by exposing the hidden political assumptions. Giroux (1997) further asserted for the higher educational institutions to engage in political education by "teaching students to take the risk, challenge those with power, honour critical traditions, and be reflective about how authority is used in the classroom" (p.265). Regarding the context of English as a second language (ESL), Norton and Toohey (2004) viewed that language learning and teaching are political processes. So, the centre of the curriculum should be the social and political analysis of life where politics influences the decision about curriculum, textbooks, language used, and the people hired to regulate the education systems (Degener, 2001). The political ideology and power of a group of people can influence the curriculum and textbooks.

Finally, unlike traditional classes, the role of teachers in critical pedagogy is the agent of social transformation where teachers and students exchange their ideas and teach and learn each other. In this regard, Freire (1997) opined that the relationship between teachers and students is fluid, so the learning goes both ways where the role of teachers and learners is interchanged. Freire (1997) further stated that the classes do not reflect banking sensibility, rather make the learners co-constructor of knowledge who have active participation in analysing social issues and raise voices on them. Similarly, Akbari (2008) defined critical pedagogy as "connection word to the world", and to establish the connection to the marginalised learners learn to challenge the world problems critically.

Critical pedagogy in ELT is a new approach in language teaching which connects the classroom contexts to the broader society and aims at social transformation by developing critical awareness through education. Here, I have reviewed some previous studies in ELT concerning CP.

Morgan (2004) found that students developed double consciousness while teaching grammar critically employing some burning social issues in Quebec English as a second language classroom, and the learners participate in co-constructing knowledge through the process of negotiation. Similarly, Shin and Crookes (2005) explored that students developed their competency in critical dialogue after implementing CP in the Korean EFL classroom. He further reported that students felt comfortable participating in the dialogue between student-student and student-teacher when they were engaged in group work dealing with local sociopolitical issues. However, Akbari (2008) investigated that most ELT textbooks exclude the political, socio-cultural behaviour, or belief systems of the marginalised groups because they conflict with those of the mainstream groups, and consequently the marginalised groups are denied their rights and opportunities. Furthermore, Akbari (2008) reported that the English curriculums and textbooks are designed by a specific group of people or organizations who are in power and they are unaware of the local sociopolitical issues of the marginalized groups. Thus, Noroozisiam and Soozandehfar (2011) suggested that the dominant issues should not be put in a side in the language classroom; rather the marginalised issues should be addressed associating with the lesson where the learners openly express their views against the social issues like inequalities, dominance and injustice.

Noroozisiam and Soozandehfar (2011) revealed that most English language teachers impose the theories of language teaching according to the syllabus. However, they argued that language teachers should go beyond the limitation of the boundary of syllabus and textbooks, and they should bring the social issues and develop critical consciousness to the learners to think critically over these issues and raise their voice critically. In a different context, Malik and Mohamed (2014) explored that the ideology 'English as a cultural capital' has reproduced socio-economic inequalities in a non-native society where the opportunity of learning English medium education is associated with the economic status of the parents. However, Joseph Jeyaraj (2016) argued that critical pedagogy in ELT supports students in becoming critics as well as the people having more conscious of society. They further reported that English language teachers have accepted critical pedagogy as a new discourse in education and linguistic space that borrows the ideas from sociology and politics and presents a new way of thinking in the field of language teaching and language development. Likewise, Yusuf identified four aspects of critical pedagogy like transformative teachers, critical voice of students, a new form of knowledge, and ethical consideration. Moreover, Thongrin (2018) argued that materials for ELT should be developed grounded in critical pedagogy which incorporates intercultural communication and moral education with a set of guidelines for designing instructional objectives, teaching materials, lesson activities and assessment tools. Such materials aim to develop culturally sensitive language learners, competent communicators, and critical and ethical global citizens.

METHODOLOGY

I employed a phenomenological qualitative design (Cohen et al., 2007) to explore the lived experiences of English language teachers of using CP in ELT classrooms. Six secondary English teachers of Lamjung district were my participants. I explored their experiences through

in-depth interviews and class observation. Their interviews reflected their understanding and perceptions about CP and their class observation explored the practices of CP in the context of the Nepali ELT classroom. After transcribing and coding the data, I developed some themes to explore the participants' practices of CP. I used pseudo names of the participants and their schools while analysing the data to maintain anonymity of the participants' invlovled in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews of the participants involved in the study and their class observation, I analysed how the ELT teachers used CP and their experiences of teaching English through the CP perspective. The following themes reflect their experiences and practices of using CP in their ELT classrooms. Analysis of English Language Teaching (ELT)

After reviewing different literatures related to ELT from CP perspectives in different contexts, I decided to investigate the ELT situation of the schools of Nepal from the same lens. Besides document analysis like ELT curriculum and textbooks, I took an in-depth interview with six English teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience. I also observed some ELT classes in three schools of BesishaharMunicipality of Lamjung district. Based on these tools, I have presented the findings in the following themes.

Analysis of English Curriculum and Textbooks

CP states that there is no set curriculum and no one methodology can work for all students because the curriculum should be designed based on the needs and interests of students. However, in Nepal, the English curriculum is developed by the curriculum development centre with the help of some specific experts who may not know the local reality and sociopolitical issues of the marginalised groups. Similarly, the same curriculum and textbooks are used for the students across the country which may be an injustice. For example:

> *I think the English curriculum and textbooks prescribed by the Curriculum Development Centre do not match to all the students across the country. For example, students from expensive private schools and rural community schools cannot compete in the same course. It is injustice. We do not know when the curriculum changes. The teachers like me are never consulted while designing curriculum and writing textbooks. We can share our experiences to make them effective (Avi, Annapurna School).*

Avi's comment indicated that the common English curriculum and textbooks may not be appropriate for the students of elite private schools of the urban areas and the rural students who have limited resources in schools. The curriculum designed from a top-bottom approach may not be applicable in reality. The experiences of teachers can play an important role while designing curriculum and writing textbooks. It shows a gap between curriculum designers and

implementers. This is supported by Apple (2004) who stated that curriculum design and imposition of textbooks are most often authoritative and are determined by the politics, or religion, or ethnicity, and a large group, especially the parents, is always alienated in the selection of texts and educational decision-making process because a specific group of people constructs texts, there is no role of parents, students, teachers, and many stakeholders associated to education while designing English curriculum and textbooks. The participants involved in the interviews reported that the latest textbooks have incorporated some social, ecological, and human issues in the secondary level English textbooks. For example:

> *Yes, the latest English textbooks of grades nine and ten contain several topics related to social issues, environmental conversation, and human rights. For example, the textbook includes the poem 'The Chimney Boy' which is about child labour. Similarly, a debate on a single language or multiple languages develops students' logical and critical capacity to express their views on language issues, and a biography 'Yogamaya' gives information about gender violence and women's rights (Binita, Bandana School).*

> *The texts develop not only learners' language skills, but also critical power to analyse the issues linking their local context. But the majority of the teachers are not familiar with critical pedagogy and are not trained to teach English associating with critical pedagogy. Had we got special training on it, we would have been able to develop the critical capacity of our students (Cristi, Karuna School).*

Binita and Cristi expressed their satisfaction with the textbooks that covered social, cultural and ecological issues which are very important for the students of the 21st century. However, Cristi said that many teachers were unfamiliar with critical pedagogy and demanded special training to train them how to use CP in English classrooms. The responses of both teachers revealed that although the course has covered some critical issues to make the students aware of them, teachers had little knowledge and skills to engage students in those issues. The lack of teachers' training and orientation may be responsible for their inability to cope with the given issues.

Regarding the relevancy of the texts from the cultural point of view, the participants expressed that they found an influence of Christianity in secondary level texts books. For example:

> *For about 20 years, the same textbooks are recommended for grades 11 and 12, and they are written by British writers following the English culture. Despite my long teaching experience, I feel difficulty understanding some texts which are deeply rooted in Christianity and English culture. Some examples and images used in the textbooks are intolerable in our culture. So, I do not deal with them in the classroom (Daya, Dipjyoti School).*

Daya's comments indicate that the English textbooks may be irrelevant to the Nepali learners as they are not written in the Nepali context where several texts are extracted from the target culture. He gave an example of the English textbooks of grades 11 and 12 which were written by British writers, and they are purely based on the typical English culture and way of life. The students and teachers who are unfamiliar with English culture may feel difficult to understand the text. This is in line with Alegria (2014) who argued that to make the students able to succeed academically and in life; the curriculum on their studies should be relevant to their personal lives, academic needs, and an awareness of their surrounding community. However, the students who have access to television, the internet and different social media and who are educated by the native speakers may understand the contexts and background of the text, but those who do not have such access become victims of those texts. Moreover, it may create inequality that may be connected to their economy, geography and social background. Most of the teachers who are trained traditionally may not be able to deal with these texts in their local context. Similar to this, Kalsoom et al. (2020) concluded that the reason behind the teachers' failure to implement CP in ELT classrooms could be the large class size, lack of adequate resources and trained teachers, impractical and irrelevant curriculum, and lack of student interest and motivation.

The Focus of English Syllabus

The study participants viewed that they followed the curriculum that focused on language skills and language aspects rather than various social issues. For example:

> *Since the focus of the school-level English syllabus is to develop the communicative skills of the learners, so the emphasis is given to language skills and aspects than social issues. In the examination, emphasis is given to how well students have developed language skills and our teaching is guided by examination (Fulman, Fulbari School).*

Fulman's response reveals that teachers emphasise language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, and language aspects including vocabulary, grammar, and language function. The English syllabus of the secondary level aims to develop the communicative competence of the learners with a focus on language skills and aspects. There may be little space for developing critical awareness of students in the syllabus. It means the present English syllabus ignores developing the social skills of the learners, so the majority of the teachers do not encourage the students to interact in the social issues which are essential for critical awareness. Therefore, the present English syllabus has not addressed the concept of CP. As Widodo, Perfecto, Van Canh, and Buripakdi (2018) stated that foreign language teaching should not only focus on developing the communicative competence of the learners, but also make them aware of their transformative role in the socio-cultural and political realities of the world. This is supported by Crookes (2012) who proposed feminist pedagogy to describe feminist classroom participation practices to ensure girls' equal opportunities in classroom activities to minimize gender-based discrimination in the classroom.

ELT Classroom Practice

Although the study participants reported that the secondary level English curriculum has not addressed the issue of CP properly, I observed that most English language teachers were transformative. Students learned English through songs and games, and group work was effective as all the students actively participated in the given task. The teachers were ready to support the students throughout the lesson period. Similarly, students were encouraged to express a critical voice on social issues. During English classes at schools, there was a dialogue session in which every student got a chance to get involved in sharing their opinions and the teachers always encouraged the students to speak more in the class. It not only develops the speaking skills of the learners but also made them critical to the given issues. For example:

> I usually link the lesson with social problems like child labour, girl trafficking, gender violence, untouchability in which the students critically expressed their views which promote their critical consciousness. I just give them some examples and encourage finding similar issues in their locality. For example, while teaching 'The Chimney Boys' which is about child labour, I ask them to find examples of child labour in their communities. They come with different issues like the issue of children working at hotels and restaurants or means of transportation who do not get wages. I let them express their views orally first and in written form, which also develops their language skills. I do not find it even if they speak in their first language (Jitman, Janasewa School).

Jitman, who had worked in an NGO and was involved in various training related to social issues such as gender violence, child labour, racial or ethnic discrimination, and human rights before he joined the school, was aware of CP and tried to associate it with his lesson by encouraging students to express their views on different issues. I observed that some teachers who were participated in training conducted by the local NGOs had understandings of CP and found them motivating their students by following the child-centered method. This shows that training can empower teachers to bring CP and encourage their students to express their voices critically instead of giving their lecturers. Thus, teachers' training on CP can enable teachers to teach language skills along with learners' critical thinking skills effectively. This is in line with Crookes (2017) who found that Korean teachers brought changes through a democratic critique of society using CP in the language classroom after they were involved in CP training. However, Gustine (2018) argued that despite their long experiences of teaching English in different schools, some teachers showed a lack of knowledge on using CP as a methodological approach to teaching English.

As the teacher reported above, teachers should not be confined only within the textbook; rather they come out of the box and bring different issues in the classroom which develop new forms of knowledge. The first language is an identity of every individual, so it is undesirable and impossible to prevent the use of the learners' first language in the classroom from a critical

perspective. The learners can express their voices effectively in their language which can empower them and their voices are recognized and respected. Kachru (1992) viewed that the focus of ELT in most of the situations is on applied linguistics that includes the theoretical knowledge about the levels of language like phonology, syntax and lexicon. But the goal of language teaching including foreign/second language teaching is not only to make the learners competent in the language, what I agree that a language is a powerful tool for social transformation. My observation reflected that most of the ELT classes lack creativity, so to fill up this gap, the teachers need to connect the class to their community which activates their minds to solve the social problems they face and work for social transformation. However, those who received some level of training tried to implement CP in their classroom practices.

Finally, the neoliberal ideology of the English language in Nepal encourages many schools to emphasize ELT and EMI. Schools with sound English-speaking environments attract many children every year, and many private schools have used this policy to increase the enrollment rate in their schools for economic profit. This fact has created the situation that the private schools are for the children from the rich family and the public schools are from the poor family, which has reproduced inequality based on economic class and the major cause of this division is the quality of English language teaching.

On the other hand, my observation reflects that in the name of developing English language skills, some teachers in private and community schools impose only the English language and make the students use only the English language. In some cases, they punish the students because they use their first language in the ELT classroom. This situation may discourage the students, especially those who are shy and weak in English, to take part in classroom interaction. It cannot create a democratic environment in the classroom, rather creates distance between the teachers and students and makes the teachers superior and authoritative. Furthermore, this situation cannot treat teachers and students as co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

According to CP, the main goal of education is to develop critical consciousness on learners about social issues and empower them with the skill to raise their voices critically for freedom and against any kind of domination, exploitation, and discrimination in terms of socio-political background, gender, race, caste, religion and language. So, the aim of language teaching like ELT is not only to develop citizens who are competent in language skills but also to promote social skills so that they can be active agents for social transformation. In the context of Nepal, CP in education has not occupied a special position, and many teachers including the English teachers are not familiar with CP. I found that the perspective of CP has not been practically implemented while designing curriculum, selecting textbooks, and making ELT policy. Language policy, curriculum and textbooks are designed by a specific group and imposed on the teachers and learners. There has been a political influence in ELT policy as well. However, some

teachers who were involved in training related to CP had some level of understanding of CP and practiced CP in their ELT classroom activities. Thus, considerations should be given while designing curriculum and writing textbooks to incorporate CP in ELT and teachers' training can have the power to implement the pedagogy in real practice.

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