
English Majors: Declining, Shrinking or just Shifting at Higher Education in Nepal

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Abstract

The decline of English majors in universities around the world today reflects broader shifts in educational priorities and cultural values. The higher education in Nepal also mirrors the same. This paper examines whether English Major is less coherent as a subject and discipline and scholarly pursuit and explores the factors contributing to the gradual erosion of English programs within both educational institutions and humanities Faculty. Adopting semi-structured interview with some English teachers and Professors at home and abroad as FGD, this study explores the situation of less enrollment in Humanities at plus two levels, misplaced priorities, economic pressures, global exposure and networking opportunities, the emphasis on other disciplines like Science, Engineering, Technology and business fields, and cultural changes in engagement with literature, while considering the implications of English Majors for academia, professional sectors, and communities. This research explores why fewer English Majors in both global and local contexts and highlights the need for interdisciplinary strategies, revising the existing policies and pedagogical strategies, instrumental motivation on both teachers and learners, eco-pedagogy and the revitalization and preservation of the Humanities to maintain cultural and intellectual diversity.

Keywords: English majors, humanities, eco-pedagogy, interdisciplinary, cultural shift, diversity, revitalize

Introduction

The status of English in Nepal has changed in the last seven decades. Adopted first as a foreign language, English in recent years has become an indispensable part of life for the Nepalese students and people as well. It is presently used as an additional language, second language and even primary language in many socio-educational domains. No doubt, there is an increasing craze for English to teach, learn and use it as *lingua franca* or link language and a passport to go abroad for jobs and further studies. It has become a necessity now. Both English language and literature are borderless and globalized means of communication.

However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable decline in enrollment in English Majors across universities worldwide. This trend reflects a larger shift away from the Humanities and towards more economically driven fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and business studies. English as a field of study, traditionally central to the humanities, is now facing an existential crisis, with repercussions not only in educational institutions but also in society and communities at large. The global decline of English majors raises important questions about the future of humanities education and its cultural implications. The English Humanities have seen a decrease in graduates by as much as 25% in the last decade in both global and local trends. Nepalese higher education scenario is also not far from the bitter reality. Tribhuvan University, the oldest and biggest university of Nepal is also struggling hard to sustain its many Departments particularly in Humanities. Some Departments in Humanities are on the verge of being shut down in the dearth of students posing a moral question to the teachers. Those were the golden years about thirty years back when a large number of students at Intermediate (Certificate), Bachelor and Master levels would opt Major English and there would be more than two sections with students interchangeably taking the classes and even visiting libraries and borrowing

books of their choice. Opting major English was a prestige and a status marker after Science and Management streams. Now, the scenario has just reversed over the years. Not students but teachers wait for the students to turn up in the Humanities English and its class. There is dramatically a decline in enrollment and community response to it; there is increase in drop out in the middle and hence decrease in pass out rate of students opting Major English.

Literature Review

The study of English as a major has historically been a cornerstone of liberal arts education, offering students pathways to careers in education, communication, creative industries, and more. However, recent scholarship highlights a trend of declining enrollments in English programs, both locally and globally. According to Smith (2020), enrollment in humanities disciplines has decreased by nearly 30% in many Western universities over the past decade. Similarly, global studies by Zhang and Li (2022) indicate that students in emerging economies are gravitating toward STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields, which promise greater economic returns.

Several key factors have been identified in the literature as contributing to this shift. Economic considerations play a significant role, with parents and students prioritizing fields perceived as offering higher employment prospects (Jones, 2019). Socio-cultural factors also contribute, as narratives around the impracticality of liberal arts degrees gain traction. Additionally, systemic changes in education policy, such as reduced funding for humanities departments, exacerbate the issue (Taylor, 2021).

Culturally, the digital revolution has shifted the skills employers demand, with an emphasis on technical proficiency over critical thinking and communication, skills

traditionally cultivated in English programs (Anderson & Kim, 2020). However, some scholars argue that this decline is not absolute but indicative of a shift. Studies like those by Perez and Martin (2023) suggest that English majors are being redefined, incorporating interdisciplinary approaches and adapting to the changing landscape of digital media, global communication, and cultural studies.

Methods and Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to analyze the factors contributing to the decline or shift in English majors at both local and global levels. The study integrated quantitative data collection with qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Respondents

The study involved 25 respondents, including current and former English majors, faculty members, students and academic administrators. The respondents were categorized into the following profiles:

1. **Current Students:** 10 participants, aged 18-25, enrolled in English programs at local universities.
2. **Alumni:** 5 participants who graduated from English programs within the past 5 years.
3. **Faculty:** 5 participants, including tenured professors and adjunct instructors in English departments.
4. **Administrators:** 5 participants involved in curriculum design and enrollment management.

Data Collection

1. **Surveys:** A structured questionnaire was distributed to students and alumni to gather data on motivations, perceptions of career prospects, and challenges faced during their studies.
2. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty and administrators to gain deeper insights into institutional factors affecting English enrollments.
3. **Document Analysis:** Enrollment statistics, funding allocations, and curriculum changes were analyzed to identify trends and policy impacts.

Data Analysis Quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify patterns and correlations. Qualitative data from interviews and document analysis were coded thematically to explore underlying narratives and contextual factors.

Ethical Considerations Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. The study adhered to ethical research guidelines to maintain transparency and integrity in data collection and analysis.

By triangulating data from diverse sources, this methodology aimed to provide a robust understanding of the factors driving the decline or evolution of English majors in contemporary education.

Analysis of the Factors Contributing to the Decline of English Majors

The researcher adopted three dynamics and perspectives through random sampling and semi-structured interview - English status at Elementary level and Secondary level,

English status at Bachelors in Education Faculty and English status at Humanities in University campuses. Mrs. Rai teaching English at both Elementary and Secondary levels of both Private and Secondary schools for more than 15 years responded that there are scarcity of students enrolling Humanities at plus two that has badly affected at the enrollment at Bachelor level. She had also a bitter experience that there is no any kind of orientation and motivation strategies regarding English Majors at both classroom and communities (parents and guardians) at school levels. She also raised the factors like subject choice dilemma, lack of learning and earning policy of local and federal governments and youth drain to Gulf and other countries with dilemma after completing and without completing plus twos. Mr. Gurung, former teacher in Nepal, now living for more than six years in UK experienced that Nepalese students were less creative and more technology -based like AI, lecture and *Old is Gold* bazaar notes-dependent and also money-oriented rather than career-oriented and inclined to reading culture. So was the reflection of Mr. Pokhrel, another High school teacher of Ilam. Dr. Poudel, English Professor teaching Education Department of Tribhuvan University for more than thirty years wrote to the researcher "To my research finding, English alone can't give you anything, unlike in the past. So, what can a person/scholar highly learned in English do to oneself or society, at present? Moreover, English is now so common that people have been able to exist through English even without being English majors. In this context, what has come to be a reality is that one needs to be tolerably skilled in communication through English as a supplement. That is, to exist well in this neo-liberal era, one needs to possess content/technical knowledge + skill, where English functions as a brush-up. An engineer with good English, for instance, is more likely to get better opportunities than the one with similar proficiency/expertise in engineering but having no/poor English-base. To conclude, the role of English in higher education now may be as "English for all" rather than "entire English for a few". Universities now

need to shape their curricula in line of professional Englishes (English for teachers/ doctors/ engineers/ tourist guides/ business people, etc.)

Mr. Nepal, Associate Professor of English Education opined that there were contradictions regarding the perceptions of students, parents and teachers towards Major English. Parents and students sought quick and immediate benefits and many of them did not want to pursue teaching as a career. Teaching was still teacher- centered and not learner- centered and curriculum and syllabi were still content and theory - laden rather than life skills and career- guided. He claimed that the decline was not that apparent in Education Faculty. Mr. Baral, Associate Professor of English doing PhD from a University in the US opined that despite the fact of ten percent to five percent of decline between 2002 and 2020, Liberal Arts (Humanities) was more opted in Europe and America by teachers, students and communities alike for creative and critical thinking skills, rhetoric and writing, journalism, research activities translation studies, refinement of language skills, multilingualism, intercultural and multicultural contexts and knowledge production and reconstruction in different academic and professional lives. But he was sad that in Nepalese Education system and curriculum designing, there was still the classical trend of introducing canonical texts and grand narratives; it was late to introduce inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary texts covering both global local contents. Prof. Dr. Subedi, a retired teacher of Tribhuvan university noted that the craze for opting English majors had been declining but still Humanities English would be giving the vitality of theorizing both global and local texts through the western lens and apply to our contexts or ecology. In that sense, Humanities would never die, he responded. Another Professor of English Humanities Dr. Sapkota reflected that they learnt English language through literature as they had limited exposure to English language. He said it was the Ends of hunting a job of teaching at school or college. But now, for many students, English was not a bugbear; it was just the means of

communication and passport to going abroad for jobs and further studies. In the same line spoke Mr. Niraula, Lecturer of a University campus of Nepal. From such semi-structured interviews, it was reflected that there were some major factors evidenced to the global decline of English Majors in both Education and Humanities.

Changes in High School Preparation: There is less inclination and motivation in classroom and communities towards Humanities subjects behind skipping college-level English and other general education courses, reducing exposure to these fields early in their academic journey.

Economic Pressures and Employment Opportunities

One of the most significant factors contributing to the decline of English majors is the perception that humanities degrees offer fewer direct employment opportunities compared to degrees in other fields (Shepherd). Many undergraduates and graduate students are increasingly focused on the immediate returns and income from investment. English and other humanities majors are often viewed as impractical when compared to degrees that lead to more specific career paths, such as engineering or business administration (Grose). Many governments and institutions are also investing heavily in STEM education, further skewing public perception and diminishing the value placed on humanities programs (Parker). These economic factors have significantly influenced the choices students make regarding their fields of study, leading to reduced enrollment in English programs.

Cultural Shifts and Changing Engagement with Literature

The ways in which individuals engage with literature and language have shifted dramatically in the digital age. With the rise of social media, streaming services, and online content, traditional forms of literary consumption, such as reading novels and poetry, have seen a decline (Carr). This cultural shift has contributed to a decrease in

interest in English literature as a subject of study, as students are more drawn to fields that align with modern communication methods.

Impact on Education and Humanities Faculties

The decline of English majors has had a profound impact on Humanities Faculties in educational institutions. As enrollment numbers drop, many universities are downsizing or even cutting English programs altogether (White & Brown). This erosion has a ripple effect across academia, as fewer resources are dedicated to the study of language, literature, and critical thinking-- skills that are vital to a well-rounded education (Miller). This burden of skepticism is evident even in Nepalese context because of the fact that less students enroll in Humanities at plus two and it is a four-year Bachelor Degree now and it is perceived as a long time by the society.

Consequences for Communities and Society

The decline of English programs also has implications beyond academia. Communities rely on the contributions of humanities graduates to fields such as journalism, publishing, education, and public service. These graduates bring critical thinking, empathy, and the ability to communicate complex ideas—skills that are essential for a healthy, informed society (Smith). The decline of these programs may result in a narrowing of cultural discourse, as fewer voices contribute to debates on literature, history, and social justice.

Globalization and Language Alternatives: There's a perception that English can be learned practically through media, professional environments, or short-term courses rather than an academic degree. Fluency in English remains valuable, but fewer students see an English major as the only way to achieve language proficiency or career advancement. While the decline of English majors is evident in many Western countries, this trend is also apparent on a global scale. In developing countries, where English is often taught as a second language, there is increasing pressure to focus on

fields that offer economic growth and development, particularly in technology and business (Khan). As a result, English literature and humanities programs in these regions face similar challenges, with students opting for degrees that promise higher economic returns.

Thus, this research article investigates the multiple factors contributing to the erosion of English majors within education and humanities faculties globally as well as locally. It explores economic factors, cultural shifts in how people engage with literature, and the evolving job market, all of which have contributed to this decline.

Repositioning Approach: Revitalizing Humanities Enrollment as English Majors Rule!

To address the decline of English majors, some institutions are exploring interdisciplinary and innovative approaches that combine humanities education with practical, career-oriented fields (Williams & Patel). For example, programs that integrate English studies with digital media, communication, or business skills offer students a more flexible and marketable education. These approaches can help restore interest in the humanities by demonstrating their relevance to modern professional environments. The afore-mentioned interviewees also reflected that there should be instrumental motivation by communities and teachers with quality in teaching and learning and classroom strategies. The concerned authorities should think about revising the existing curriculum, focus on learner autonomy and outcome-based approach with the introduction of eco-pedagogy that refers to need-based and demand-based ecology and pedagogy in terms of curriculum and classroom strategies adaptable to local realities.

Conclusion

It is obvious that Literature and Linguistics are not the comfort zones among students today as they calculate the subjects suffering from no market value syndrome. There is

a growing shift in student preferences toward career-specific majors like Engineering, Business, IT and Health Sciences, which are perceived as offering better job prospects and higher starting salaries. There is a growing tendency of seeking direct job-placement opportunities among career-ready graduates. The gradual erosion of English majors in education and humanities faculties globally is a multifaceted issue driven by economic pressures, cultural shifts, and changing educational priorities. This decline has significant implications for both academia and society, as it threatens the development of critical thinking, communication, and cultural literacy. To mitigate these effects, it is essential to adopt interdisciplinary approaches and advocate for the continued importance of humanities education. English studies, like other humanities disciplines, must adapt to the realities of the 21st century while preserving their foundational role in fostering intellectual diversity and cultural engagement. The researcher advocates for Entrepreneurship University to tailor education and society. For this, perhaps there should be an initiation for reshaping academic priorities linking Humanities to career paths, community partnerships and entrepreneurship in diverse workplaces, promoting Humanities as crucial to Soft Skills (critical thinking, empathy, communication, interpersonal relationship, leadership etc.) and adaptability to the current job markets through learning and earning approach. English Majors are never the roads less travelled by and obsolete. English Major as our humanities degree can be a perfect springboard into a successful career. The Paradise has not lost; it can be regained and kept alive by restructuring English as a discipline by developing a wide range of transferable skills and areas for its readers. English Majors are never the roads less travelled by and obsolete.

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