Cross-Cultural Context in ELT in Nepal

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Abstract

This study explored the teachers' practices of English Language Teaching (ELT) in cross-cultural context. Two teachers teaching English at secondary level schools located at Kapilvastu Municipality, Kapilvastu District were interviewed through zoom meeting to excavate the findings. While teaching in the multi-cultural classroom, teacher participants experienced communication misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the meaning due to the cultural differences of the students. Teachers were in need of the trainings for developing their professionalism in teaching effectively to multicultural students and in multicultural classrooms. However, they were not being facilitated with any kind of multi-cultural students teaching trainings so that they could make their teaching more effective to the students from diverse cultural backgrounds and linguistic differences. The study revealed that teachers had to teach in diverse cultural classes, shared learning of culture was practised using contextualization method and linguistics chaos was dug out in meaning construction. English language teaching and learning were influenced by mother tongues, cultural differences and cultural domination.

Keywords: Cross-cultural context, multi-cultural learning, communication, misunderstanding, linguistic chaos

Introduction

My experience of teaching English in multicultural classrooms in a college in Butwal for more than a decade shaped my mind to think about this study. In my class, students are from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and I often see their English language learning being affected by their mother tongues and cultural backgrounds. In one context, one of my students Santosh Poudel (pseudo name) asked me to clarify the word 'dialect'. Then I happened to give an example of a Nepali word *bhuja* to show how this word is an example of a dialect. One of the students Ashok Shakya (pseudo name) understood the meaning of the word *'Bhuja'* as 'rice'. But another student named Himesh Tharu perceived the meaning of this word as dried food stuff made from rice and used as snacks. I immediately thought this different interpretation of the meaning of the same word was because Ashok Shakya and Himesh Tharu were from different ethnic community and diverse cultural backgrounds. Aryal et al. (2016) state, "Geographically, Nepal is a small country with myriad cultures and
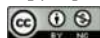
linguistic diversity" (p. 141). Therefore, there are many cultural contexts which affect learning English in the context of Nepal and this paper intends to explore these contexts.

Communication is the exchange of information, ideas and facts between the sender and the receiver. As Hartley et al. (2014) state, "Cross-cultural communication is the communication that takes place between the people of diverse cultural backgrounds" (p. 47). Cross-cultural communication is a field of study that looks at how people of different cultural backgrounds communicate, in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavor to communicate across cultures. In this regard, Lesikar et al.(2013) define, "Cross-cultural communication as the understanding of cultural differences and overcoming language problems"(p. 554). It is necessary to incorporate and develop aspects of cross-cultural awareness as a part ofthe course curriculum to immerse students in effective intercultural communicative competence as communication that lacks appropriate cultural content often results in an odd or humorous situation leading to misunderstanding and miscommunication (Davitishvili, 2017). Thus, it is necessary to discuss the effects of cross-cultural context in effective teaching and learning of English language.

An English language teacher teaching English as an additional language can help students understand socially appropriate communication, for example, "Hey you, come here" may be a linguistically correct, but it is not a culturally appropriate way for a student to address a teacher (Davitishvili, 2017). Cross-cultural communication continually involves misunderstanding caused by misperception, misinterpretation, and misevaluation. When the sender of a message comes from one culture and the receiver from another, the chances of misperception becomes high. In this context, let us see an example. A British boss asked a newly appointed young American employee whether he liked to take lunch at 11:00 am every day. He happily replied "Yeah that would be great!" However, the employer surprised when the employee used the word *yeah* for yes. The boss thought the employee was ill-mannered and disrespectful to him. So, he responded, "With that kind of attitude, you may as well forget about lunch!" (Rani, 2013, p. 32). The employee was confused thinking what wrong had gone. Rani (2013) further clarifies the above example as "In the process of encoding agreement (the meaning) into *yeah* (a word symbol) and decoding the *yeah* spoken by a new employee to the boss (a word, behavior, and context symbol), the boss received an entirely different message than the employee had meant to send (p.33)". Unfortunately, in this case neither the sender nor the receiver was fully aware of what had gone wrong and why. This example shows that the same remarks or utterances can be perceived differently or wrongly in cross-cultural communication context. Thus, behind this phenomenon of discourse, it is essential to address culture and cultural differences in between the cultures of the target language and that of the learners.

The way we communicate is deeply influenced by the culture in which we are raised. Interaction of culture and communication is deeply rooted so that separating the two from each other is not virtually possible (Bovee et al., 2019). Culture influences everything about communication including language, non-verbal signals and word meaning. When there are cultural differences the meaning of non-verbal communication is understood or decoded differently. Although, intercultural communication requires the efforts of specialists in linguistics, psychology and cultural anthropology, teaching intercultural communication in academic institutions is limited mostly to contrastive insights into communication between

representatives of two linguo-cultures rather than focusing on cross-cultural study in ELT. Kulinich et al. (2019) concluded their finding as "our research revealed that forming intercultural competence can be achieved when students are genuinely interested in life, habits, communicative behavior of other ethnic cultures" (p.405). In this context, it is important to understand the culture in terms of high-context and low-context culture, i.e. understanding cultural differences of the learners are imperative in ELT classroom.

Ethnocentrism and stereotyping are the major challenges in practicing communication effectively in cross-cultural communication situation. Ethnocentrism is understood as thetendency to judge other groups according to the standards, behaviors, and customs of one's own group. Stereotype is the rigid mind set of an individual and is the over generalization of the idea to which an individual thinks correct, but in fact it is away from the actual reality or truth (Bovee et al., 2019). Therefore, a significant discussion to overcome the problems in cross-cultural communication is quite necessary.

Language development cannot be viewed only from the perspective of evaluating language skills. This equally applies to the understanding of culture, cultural codes, verbal, non-verbal communication and in some cases, adoption of behavioral patterns. Today's conditions created for the mass formation of multicultural language learning environment have come to replace the mono-cultural language learning environment. In this point, Davidovitch and Khyzhniak (2018) concluded, "Empirical research shows that two types of mobility are widespread, with typical high demands for the study of an international communication language (English) and local culture" (p.13) in the context of cross-cultural communication situation.

Globalization brought about more awareness of the values of indigenous cultures and mother tongues. Meanwhile, it has also brought about the challenges such as the place of English. With the advent of globalization, English language continues to grow as a second or third language in many parts of the world. Singh et al. (2012) put, "The increasing use of English as a second or third language is making changes in language education in the countries with linguistic minorities and indigenous communities" (p. 351). Cultural performance is inseparable from cultural competence and both are linked to the use of language in discourse. In the context of Nepal, Subedi (2010) states, "Multicultural issue in the present context is a global issue of socialization. It has not yet been materialized into the education system in Nepal" (p. 17). Cross-cultural communication can become cross-cultural miscommunication when there is lack of cultural understandings between the teachers and the students. In this context, Jhabarmal (2014) states, "The cultural difference lowers the precision level of conveying a message" (p. 215). As a result, shared learning has been ineffective. In many times and in many situations, students fail to understand the real meaning in ELT classroom. But teaching intercultural communication in academic institutions is limited mostly to contrastive insights into communication between representatives of two linguo-cultures rather than focusing on cross-cultural study in ELT. Aliakbari (2003) states"In cases of native/non-native communication, insistence on culture-specific points on either side may lead to a communication breakdown"(p. 4). Hence, communication and shared learning have been ineffective in many contexts in multi-cultural English classes.

Literature review shows that the issuesand problems related to cross-cultural communication have been discussed more in cultural context; however, they are less explored in the context of ELT classrooms in Nepal.

Methods and Procedures

This study has been carried out using the qualitative research method. I selected two teachers as the research participants who have been teaching English at secondary level for more than 10 years in the schools located in Kapilvastu Municipality, Kapilvastu District, Lumbini Province, Nepal. I replaced their original names with the pseudo names to safeguard their privacy. They were Pradeep Subedi and Hemant Jaiswal (pseudo names). Pradeep teaches at Kapilvastu Madhyamik Vidhyaya, Kapilvastu Municipality, and Hemant Jaiswal teaches at Ratna Rajya Madhyamik Vidhyalaya, Kapilvastu Municipality. I interviewed them thrice through zoom meeting to collect the data using open ended interview. The medium of interview was Nepali language. I took consent from the research participants to record the interview.Then I transcribed the recorded interviews in English language. Then, I analyzed and interpreted databased on the inductive analysis and holistic thinking and have also used various literature to derive the themes and insights. The ontological assumption of this research is that nature of reality is socially constructed, multiple, holistic and contextual (Darbyet al. 2019, p. 8). I delved into the participants' experiences of teaching in cross-cultural context at secondary level English class.

Results and Discussion

Manifestation of Cultural Differences

There were Awadi, Yadav, Chaudhary, Tharu, Muslim, Danuwar, Aeir, Brahaman, Chhetri and Magar students in the classrooms. Although they lived in the same community, they had their own communities based on their ethnicities as well. They had different languages, costumes and religions and cultures.The same cultural differences were found in the classrooms. Awadi, Yadav, Chaudhary, Tharu, Muslim, Danuwar and Aeir are particularly from Terai community. Whereas, Brahaman, Chhetri and Magar people migrated there and have been living as the permanent settlers. They have their own communities, for instance Muslim people have Muslim community; Tharu people have Tharu community; Awadhi people have Awadhi Community; Brahamin people have Brahmin community and so on. These people mainly follow Hindu and Muslim religions. They speak different languages. Their mother tongues are also different. For example, Awadi people speak the Awadi language. Tharu people speak the Tharu language. Muslims speak Urdu as their mother tongues. Brhamins and Chhetri speak Nepali as their mother tongue and Magar people speak the Magar language.As students in the classroom were from these communities, cultural differences could be noticed easily in the class room. These studentsunderstood the meaning of the same words differently.

One of the participants Pradeep shared his experience of teaching the meaning of the word 'mother' and how students understood differently. For example, Tharu students understood as *Daai*; Awadhi speakers as *Maai*; Muslim students as *Amma*. He remarked, "When someone says *Daai* it is very strange for the people who do not live in Terai or for the people who migrated to Terai from hilly region" as Brahamin and Chhetri people say *Aamaa* for 'mother' and *Daai* for elder brother. Pradeep said, "We teach the students who are from

different castes, sects, religions and cultures keeping in the same class room".In the same tone, another participant, Hemant Jaiwal said, "Occasionally, misinterpretation or misunderstanding occurs when I teach in the class room. For example; when I tell the meaning of the word 'father', it is called *Buwa* in Nepali language whereas Awadi speakers understand as *Fupu* (father's sister) because in Awadhi the word *Buwa* is used for *Fupu*. Likewise, the word *Dai* meanselder brother for Nepali speaker whereas for Awadhi speakers it is used for 'grandmother' and in Tharu languge the word *Dai* means 'mother'.

I found that their classrooms were multicultural. The multicultural students had multiple languages to understand the meaning of the words and utterances. They shared their culture through such linguistics differences. Possibly, they learnt each other's culture through such exchange of meaning. So, when dealing with multicultural education, it is necessary to describe variations within the national culture because multicultural education emphasizes equal opportunities for the students who are from different groups in terms of communities, cultures and religions within the national culture (Banks, 2014). I discovered teachers tried their best to respect all the languages and cultures in their classes.

Shared Learning of Culture

Shared learning is very important. No shared learning or interactive learning is a problem. If students interact in their common language connecting to their cultures, learning will be more effective. Amineh and Asl (2015) writes, "Vygotsky (1978) states that cognitive growth occurs first on a social level, and then it can occur within the individual" (p. 13). I discovered that students shared their cultures in English language classroom. Some of the chapters to teach in the class room were related to languages, religions and cultures of the people. While teaching these chapters, teacher allowed using their languages also to create cross-cultural context in the class. Students from diverse community and cultures were given the chance to use their language. Moreover, contextualization in learning was also used in the class room. For example, Hemant Jaiswal shared his experience as:

My class is a multicultural class room. When I interact with the students, for example; Muslim child, I tell him to deliver speech or write essay on his/her festival 'Bakar Id'. And I tell other students also do the same for example; Awadi students deliver speech or write an essay on 'ChhatParv" and Brahmin and Chhetri students on 'Dashainor Nagapanchami".

And then they share about their culture and festivals being celebrated by their community as per their religion. In this way, Hemant brought the social context and social interaction by facilitating to share the students cultures with each other. Vygotsky's social constructivism believes in that knowledge is at first constructed in a social context and then it is internalized by the learners through the interaction and sharing their experience. Social constructivism emphasizes on the importance of the learners' social interaction and I came to know that both Pradeep and Hemanta facilitated for this (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Students interacted with each other by sharing their cultural aspects. When they interacted with each other sharing each other's cultural information, they also felt the ownership of learning environment. Similarly, another participant, Subedi asked them to use their mother tongue for the English word "brother" or for the English expression "I go to home". Pradeep said, "In such situation, I provide them the time to share their languages, customs, traditions, religions and cultures in the class during my teaching". Thus I found that teachers used Banks' contribution approach

to multi-cultural education as this approach allows to add the stories, festivals, cultures of ethnic people and minority communities in the curriculum and teaching pedagogies (Alismail, 2016). Likewise, Hemant said, "I help the students sharing the good things practiced or prevailing in Hindu religion, Muslim Religion, Bauddha religion, etc. I also facilitate for their linguistic differences". I found that students shared their cultures each other in the cross-cultural situation when teachers applied contextualization method to facilitate their learning effectively targeting the students from diverse cultures. Students involved in the interactions and discussion about their cultures in English language class. Vygotsky's idea of constructivism views that the mind of the students cannot be separated from the social cultural group and their knowledge is influenced by history and culture in which they grow up resulting to generate personal understanding (Liu & Matthews, 2005). Different ethnic groups have their own unique cultures and values. Cultures are the identity of the people. So, each culture should be valued in the classroom and it is possible by interaction and sharing each other's culture among the students being teacher as the facilitator (Banks, 2014). It is always good part in the side of the English language teachers when they are familiar with the learners' cultures and they facilitate the learners to share each other'scultures in the classrooms.

Linguistics Chaos in Meaning Construction

There was communication misunderstanding between the teachers and the students. In other words, the intended meaning the teacher shared was different from the meaning the students actually understood.In cross-cultural communication context, meaning making process is greatly affected due to students' knowledge about their cultural aspects. Constructivism believes in that meaning construction is affected by the prior knowledge of the students and effective learning is also affected by this. Constructivism focuses on the role of language in effective learning and considers language as a tool in students' meaning-making process (Jones &Brader-Araje, 2002). Pradeep admitted that hismother tongue was Nepali and very often he used itin the classroom also to clarify or give the meaning of the English words and utterances. However, some students from Awadhi community, Muslim community and Tharu community were not able to understand Nepali language in full extent. As a result, there could be noticed communication miss fire. Pradeep told that in one occasion he used his mother tongue and told *Daai* for the elder brother but one Tharu student understood as mother as in Tharu language the word *Daai* means "mother".

This situation was found in the classroom of Hemant also. Hemant shared his similar experience of teaching English in his multi-cultural class room as "For example; when I tell the meaning of the word 'father' in Nepali, it is called *'Buwa'*, Awadi speakers understand as *'Fupu'* because in Awadhi the word *'Buwa'* is used for *'Fupu'*. So, I need to use my mother tongue Awadhi in my classroom"Such misunderstandings also occurred in using honorary words in the Tharu students. Pradeep shared his experience as "I particularly experience the problems in using the honorary words due to the cause of the mother tongue and cultures. For example; the students who speak Tharu language, they say *Ta* to their father and mother also. They do not use respectful words when they use their mother tongue". Communication is the sharing or exchange of the ideas and the language is the medium of communication. Constructivism believes that language plays an important role in the mental development of the learners and there always lies two levels of meaning of the words in the language use. In one level it refers to the objective reality and in another level it refers to the relationship of the

word with other words and in this situation there occurs the effect of their cultures and the cultural understanding of the others in inferring the meaning in the communication process. And if the language use is not handled properly, communication misunderstanding or linguistic chaos can be encountered (Liu & Matthews, 2005). The teacher attempted to avoid such misunderstanding sometimes by using or letting to use mother tongues of the students and sometimes using non-verbal communication. Pradeep said, "I do not use non-verbal communication very often. Sometimes it is used to make the students understand, for example; gesture is used to make the students understand the concept of the words like 'happy or sad'. Thus the speakers and the listeners are required to contribute to overcome misunderstandings by sharing each other's cultures and by cooperating with each other (Aliakbari, 2003). Otherwise, meaning of the utterances are decoded wrongly and it makes learning process ineffective.

Teacher's Practices in the Classroom

I came to know that students were from different cultural back grounds, but their number was different in different cultural groups. In Pradeep's class, majority of the students were from Awadhi community where as the students from Muslim and Brahimin communities were in the minority. Cultural domination and cultural shock prevailed in the classroom particularly in the absence of the teachers as some of the students complained the teacher about cultural domination from the majority group over the minority group. Pradeep was very careful to avoid such situation in the class. It is very crucial to create situation in which students feel free without feeling any hesitation and domination to raise their own questions and be clear in the each other's assumptions regarding social context like their mother tongue, religion and culture. So, a constructivist teacher should foster to create such situations in their class rooms so that the existing assumptions of traditional teaching and learning can be improved and replaced (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Pradeep brought social interaction in the class for fostering the learning of the students. He valued all the cultures equally during his teaching in the classroom. He was conscious to avoid ethnocentrism and stereotype in his class. For this he used to give the task to each student related to his/her culture. In other words, students were given certain activities in the classroom in which they could discuss and write about their culture. Pradeep was very careful while using the words and giving examples in the class during his teaching in such a way that it did not hurt the students of diverse cultural background or made them feel cultural domination. As a result, all the students felt that Pradeep had honored to all the cultures and valued to all the students equally. Pradeep said:

> I try to include all the cultures when I make students do certain activities or give as homework. For example; I tell Tharu students to discuss about *Badki Aaitabar* in group and give them the task of writing an essay on *Badki Aaitabar*. This is a festival of Tharu people. And those students who belong to Muslim culture, I tell them to discuss about *Id* and write an essay on *Id*. It is a festival of Muslims. There are also the students who speak Awadi. I tell them to discuss about *Chhat* and write an essay. There are the students particularly who migrated to Terai from Hilly region and I tell them to discuss about *Dashain* or *Tihar* or *Teej* and write an essay.

In such situation English language teachers should consider cultural aspects carefully in the educational process as learners are also aware of cultural differences and their heritages, and

they have also been supportive of cultural diversity. Teachers who teach English language as an additional language need to help their learners shape students' mindset being protective of their native culture. In other words, English language teacher is required to be culture preserver. They should be able to make thebalance in teaching and being sensitive towards the aspects of the native cultures of the students when dealing with English language (Astanina & Ekterinburg, 2020). Hemant shared as "Once, one student named Inam felt cultural shock. I called him and encouraged. I also called the student who misbehaved him based on culture. I suggested not show any behavior influenced by his religion and culture that are harmful for others".

However, it was difficult for the teacher to teach the same content to all the students from diverse cross-cultural context. Although teachers were not very familiar about the pedagogies to facilitate in the cross-cultural context ELT class, teachers attempted to provide equal learning opportunities to their students. Ozturgut (2011) concludes, "After we make the necessary changes in the policies, we need to have leaders with strong inter-cultural communication skills in order to communicate the vision of a multicultural education" (p. 5). They taught the students considering from the perspective of their culture rather than from his cultural perspective to avoid the ethnocentrism as Pradeep said, "I do not ask to a single student. For example, being Awadi students in majority, I do not ask to them only. I also ask to Muslim students, they become happy when I do so". I also found that that the mother tongue of the majority students of the same culture dominated the mother tongues of the students who were from the minority cultural groups.I also found that teacher's mother tongue was Nepali and teachers used their mother tongues while teaching English. As a result, Nepali language also dominated the other language. I also found the cultural domination in the class.

Conclusion

Communication misunderstanding prevailed in the classroom due to different mother tongues and cultural backgrounds of the students. In the classes of both Pradeep and Hemant,the majority of the students were from Madheshi community particularly from Awadhi community and the minority students were from Muslim and Brahamin communities. Teachers used contextualized method to encompass or practice the cultural sharing in their classes and students also shared their cultures with each other in English language class room.Linguistics chaos and communication misunderstanding could easily be noticed among the students. English languageteaching and learning were influenced by the mother tongues and cultures. English language dominated to the mother tongues of the students. Similarly, Awadhi language dominated the other students' mother tongues. Teachers and students had the difficulties in teaching and learning English in cross-cultural context. Teachers did not get the opportunities for trainings about the methods and pedagogies to use in the multicultural classroom. So, multi-cultural training was inevitable for the teachers to make them skilled at teaching English to thestudents in cross-cultural context classroom effectively. In the context of ELT in Nepal, large classroom size, low quality teaching environment, inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained teachers, lack of sufficient research, and updated and clear policy are the main issues in many schools excluding only a few schools. This study helps to change ELT teachers' perception on teaching to multi-cultural students and encourages them to teach in cross-cultural communication context creating socially and culturally responsive participatory classrooms in the context of Nepal.

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