

# The Adverse Effect of Dehumanizing Practices on Student Engagement and Learning in English Language Teaching Classroom

*Raju Parajuli*

*rparajuli188@gmail.com*

*Teaching Assistant in English*

*Tribhuvan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal*

**Article History:** Received 25 March 2024; Reviewed 24 June 2024; Revised 28 August 2024; Accepted 25 September 2024

## Abstract

*Knowingly or unknowingly, forgetting our multilingual and multicultural scenario, teachers' behaviors may create social inequalities and injustices in the classroom; in the name of the dominant language of the school and power relation. Our classroom context is multilingual, multicultural and bilingual where students come from different economic and linguistic background. To some extent, our school system, including textbooks, instruction, curriculum, teaching practices seem to have influenced by the dominant 'English/Nepali only' approach. Furthermore, some teachers may not motivate minority students looking their low economic status, uncombed hair, roughly managed shirt-paint, unpolished shoes and low proficiency in English language. In this context, this paper aims to analyze the difficulties and struggle of demotivated (due to teachers' bias behaviors and friends' insult upon their appearance and language) Nepali language speaking children's experiences as they feel insulted in school environment. To fulfill this objective, I adopted narrative research design in line with the qualitative research method. Discussing on the basis of classroom observation and unstructured interviews with the student, this paper analyzes that how the learners are marginalized and forbidden equal access to participate in the mainstream of social and political life that enhances their better learning opportunity and participation in classroom and society to what Bourdieu's word symbolic violence with some examples of how such social inequalities and injustices are seen in school's teaching-learning practices. Specially, given the problematic nature of schooling for such learners in some of the schools in Nepal, this paper highlights the need for socially responsive school policies and critical pedagogy, aiming at challenging and changing certain practices having identified a problem; originally propounded by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator; understanding the difficulties of living in poverty, local context*

*entertaining the linguistic and cultural diversity of students. This study contributes to all the educational stakeholders to update and change themselves as human-friendly behaviours with the learners that can maintain social equalities and justice.*

**Key words:** critical pedagogy, critical language teacher education, English only approach, discouragement, social justice and equality

## **Introduction**

Nepal adopted the Education for All 2000 and Dakar Framework of Action (2000) (UNESCO, 2015). The Curriculum Development Center (CDC) of Nepal also prepared and implemented a National Curriculum Framework for School Education in Nepal 2007. Nepal is practicing republic system constitutionally but to some extent, our social relationships are determined in line with the power relation. Such hierarchies are performed through the deeply rooted power structure practiced in the society. Knowingly or unknowingly, these behaviours can be seen in social discourse and even classroom interaction. In the context of Nepalese classroom, sometime, some teachers may forget their position and accountability as a teacher to advocate social justice empowering learners and show their power hierarchy thinking that they are in high social ranking order than these of students. Our schools are mini-societies where learners learn different aspects of socialization (Dewey, 2017) . Teachers' way of speaking and their behaviours can have both positive and adverse impact in the lives of learners. We sometime feel ourselves superior and source of knowledge creating inequalities in the name of being teacher. We, teachers, may fail to produce human-friendly environment in the classroom. Having experienced more than 20 years of teaching career, I realized myself to change my behaviours in terms of power relation. As a researcher, I realized that I applied authoritative and logo centric tendency in the name of not doing homework and not saying greetings. I have ignored and punished some of the learners when I was a novice teacher. I still remember in the beginning days of my teaching career that some of such incidents that resulted in social inequalities and injustice considering myself as a high rank in power hierarchy. Drawing from my own experiences, sometime I could not develop equitable and democratic approach in the classroom believing in so-called power relation. I did not let them chance to clarify the reasons of being late in class, not doing homework or making noise and I adopted various forms of domination. What I can draw that empowering learner through critical consciousness and dedicating to modify conventional practices with critical pedagogy to support learners for social justice can have positive impact in education.

Our educational institutions may practice traditional power hierarchies that can repel the learners who live in poverty and are from minority ethnic group in school education. Such learners might be sidelined and discouraged, as a result they may not get access to social and material resources that help in their learning resulting in full involvement in classroom and communities (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). When power is exhibited in classroom in the name

of high class and dominant ethnic group, minority ethnic group lack their confidence to be enrolled in mainstream of educational, social and political life. Though some studies still identify the "problem" as learner failures, current research in the fields of education and language learning recognizes that there is a mismatch between educational systems and pedagogies and the learners that they serve. Some of these new theories like critical theory, the works of the Frankfurt School (Troudi, 2016) that reinterpret education and learning environment addressing the issue of social justice and equity. These theories provide new insights on the goals of education, the roles that teachers and students perform, and the processes that go into learning. Theorists and researchers have looked at how language forms and reproduces power dynamics in society. In this regard, Fairclough (1995) writes, "It is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learnt" (p. 219). Fairclough advocates for critical language awareness, to recognize ". . . nontransparent aspects of the social functioning of language" (p. 224). These theories support to raise voices against any insult, domination in the name of social hierarchy. Social hierarchy and power relation in connection with the classroom language might create inequalities and social injustice in classroom and outside the classroom.

In the context of Nepal, in some cases; minority ethnic group might have been dominated by dominant ethnic group in the name of their dominant language and culture thinking that minority's language is useless in labour market and their marginal status (P Phyak, 2013) . There are 142 ethnic groups/castes practicing 124 languages in Nepal (National Statistics Office, 2021). As census report of 2021 revealed that out of total population, there are Kshetri (16.45 %), Brahman-Pahad (11.29 %), Magar (6.9 %), Tharu (6.2 %), Tamang (5.62 %), Bishwakarma (5.04 %), Musalman (4.86 %) ..., Kumal (0.44 %) ..., Nurang with 36 persons. There are 18435 (0.06 %) people who speak Kumal language whereas 13084457 people (44.86 %) nearly half population of Nepal speak Nepali language. This data shows that heavy influence of one dominant language and culture in education can make indigenous languages disappear. In this regard, due to hefty influence of dominant language and culture Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) reveals that 90 percentage of minority indigenous languages may extinct. She further suggests that critical language teachers must be aware of issues surrounding linguistic killing and work to moderate this damage through finding educational alternatives that promote access to new languages, while maintaining and respecting heritage languages.

Despite Nepal's commitment to providing quality education in general by ensuring equity and access, there are so many issues of teaching and learning in Nepalese context. Some of these issues are related to 'critical agendas of change, improvement, and questioning of taken-for-granted definitions and practices' (Troudi, 2016, p. 89) and others are practical in nature. Some other issues might be related to classroom management, lack of trained teachers, lack of teaching aids and materials, lack of textbooks, lack of time for students, gender issues, and issues of contents and pedagogy, an inappropriate size of classes, not inclusive seating arrangement.

Classrooms in Nepal are multicultural and multilingual in general because students come to the school from different cultural and linguistic background. Multi-lingual and different ethnic groups have their own problems in a classroom context. The English curricula designed by experts and implemented by the government to all grades may not fit our culture. We teach foreign language. It seems like imposed materials upon the teachers and students ignoring context-specific materials (Kumaravadivelu, 1999). We feel that it is western textbooks and practices that we are teaching and learning without considering the needs of students' diversity and values of our society, and norms of the eastern culture. To some extent, we seem to accept the imposed theories and practices without considering the richness of social and cultural diversity, geopolitical complexity, and local knowledge system. The dominant monolingual and mono-cultural western education system are so prevalent that it has severely affected teaching and learning in our country (Phyak et al., 2022).

In this paper, I discuss that how power hierarchy can create social injustice and inequalities in the classroom. There are very few studies (Paudel, 2014; Sharma & Phyak, 2017) in this field in the context of Nepal as far I know. However, these researches have not genuinely focused on inequality and injustice in the name of power relation. Their discussion has not been more critical and relevant in the case of creating justice and voice against the inhuman behaviour that prevent them from enrolling in main stream of educational life in the name of power hierarchy. This issue is based on a general view of society and social realities as formed by the domination of powerful economic and political structure, social and educational organizations and conversational practices (Troudi, 2016). In this study, I put my effort on the role of language teacher to promote social justice and equality in the classroom through our human-friendly behaviours. This paper aims to critically analyze the teachers' behaviors in the classroom and outside the classroom towards minority students and economically less privileged students. I attempt to bring ground reality whether these behaviours and power hierarchy are creating social injustice and inequalities or not. Do school seem like the factories that produce injustice and inequalities as their product?

## **Methodology**

I adopted interpretivism as a philosophical guideline and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Cresswell, 2012) as a research design to discover in-depth teacher-student behaviour in terms of power-relation under the qualitative research, focusing on the meaning the participants make through their individual experiences. Information was collected through the unstructured interviews and class observation with observation check-list aimed at eliciting personal stories and experiences related to power relation. I purposefully selected one of the institutional schools due to time constraints, where some minority group's students and students from low economic status are studying; from Palpa District. Then I purposefully selected Sanam (his true name has been replaced to protect his anonymity) due to his unique experiences

transitioning from marginalized environment to mainstream of educational and social life. He was studying in grade 9 in one school of Palpa District that runs classes from Grade 1 to Grade 10. He was born in village setting in minority group's (his minority caste and school's name have not been disclosed on his request) family. Then he completed his basic level education from previous school and was brought and transferred to another school to continue his secondary level education. His parents' economic status was not so sound. He has been assisted in his education by one of my friends' father, as he was familiar with Sanam's family background.

One day, my friend came to my home and introduced Sanam. My Friend told me everything about Sanam and his family background. He further told me the reason of visiting my home that time accompanying with Sanam as he needed educational guideline and some reference books to support his secondary level education. My friend knew that my son was also continuing secondary level education. Fortunately, some of the books were useful for him as prescribed in his school and I provided these reference books happily. I called Sanam next day and provided a dozen of writing exercise copy. I suggested him to ask any help. Then we started meeting and talking about his study, teaching-learning experiences time and again as we had developed brotherhood relation. Sanam seemed very shy in the beginning. Slowly and gradually, we became nearer and started sharing our experiences with each other. My interest grew to learn more about his language learning struggle and learning environment in relation to teachers' and his classmates' behaviors on the ground of power relation. In this way, I attempted to carry out this research consulting Sanam who had more than 8 years of unique experiences as a minority groups' learner. So, I chose to listen to him about more than 8 years of teaching-learning practices in relation to power hierarchy as a minority group's learner in his own words.

I started listening his each and every concern related with the teaching-learning practices in terms of power relation. He was an average student studying in Grade 9 in one school of Palpa district. He usually used to come to my home to learn and ask, specially, English subject in his spare time. I started listening to Sanam's experiences as a learner of minority group in his own words. I listen to his concerns and helped him focusing on problem solving skills. And gradually I talked to him individually about his learning experiences in terms of power relation. I mostly talk to Sanam during the holiday time and Saturdays in a brotherhood environment.

I used Nepali language during my interview with Sanam, I tried my best to generate natural setting, so I did not use any recording device and I did not take field note. I diligently documented a detailed accounts of Sanam's experiences within 24 hours of hour interview including direct quotes and relevant anecdotes. In writing those accounts, I was aware of the possibility of understating or overstating his voice, So I attempted to 'bracket' my own perception and understanding about power relation in terms of teachers' behaviors. The descriptive notes were coded using an inductive coding method (Thomas, 2006). Using an

inductive coding method, I identified key themes in Sanam's narratives including classroom observation in his school and created small number of summary categories. I maintained ethical integrity revealing that the fact that his story would be the part of my research. To maintain ethical integrity, I obtained informed consent from Sanam and assured him of confidentiality regarding his participation in the research. This approach allowed me to gather rich narrative data providing insights into the challenges faced by minority groups' learner while learning language. More broadly this methodology enabled me to explore the issues related with social injustice and inequality in alignment with the works of scholars like Lin (1999), Kumaravadivelu (1999), Talmy (2010), Troudi (2016) with the existing unexpressed power hierarchy mindset among teachers while dealing with learners that ultimately results in social injustice. After 10 rounds of talk (within 30 minutes) with Sanam, I planned to observe live classroom session in English subject. Then, I shared the purpose of my research and observation with head sir and subject teacher of the school where he was studying. I assured their confidentiality and anonymity regarding school's permission in this research. They allowed me to observe the class after one week of my request visit. I observed English class (2 periods) having 45 minutes per period during a week interval and recorded the main points that support for this research. After 2 periods of class observation, 15 rounds of interviews (total 25) within 30 minutes were conducted until information saturation.

## **Results and Discussion**

The findings support the concept of critical theory, which helps build an equitable society by raising awareness and challenging the 'status quo' and Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence as they reveal the problems and struggles of minority groups' learner in our society and classroom where our behaviours and mindset are shaped with such social relationship that systematically benefit some pupils over others as a result, producing and reproducing inequitable power relationship in society and classroom. Such inequitable power relation is sometime seen in our behaviors, interaction, language use and learning practices. Our school conversation and behaviours are knowingly or unknowingly influenced by power relation. The following sections briefly describe how inequitable power relation can be seen in our behaviours and teaching learning practices.

### **Inequitable learning practices through power-guided behaviours**

I observed two English classes in Grade 9. After our mutual understanding on class observation, I entered into the Grade 9 class and informed the learners about English teacher's class observation. I asked their name and surname before English teacher entered. There were students from different ethnic communities in the class. There was a chair. There were two rows of 17 sets of furniture. Girls and boys were sitting in different rows. Teacher entered into the classroom and learners greeted the teacher and teacher also responded the greeting. Teacher directly started teaching the poem entitled 'Leisure' by W. H. Davies. Teacher did not link and

sum up yesterday's learning contents. Teacher wrote some vocabularies and their meanings on the white-board and make them learn by heart. Teacher did not care about students' seat arrangement. Some learners, who were sitting in the back rows, were struggling to see the words written on the board. Most of the tall and children from elite parents were sitting in the front rows and smaller and learners from minority groups, who have less proficiency in English, were sitting at the back bench. Teacher made them (boys only) read the poem calling at front. Teacher provided opportunities for those children who were from high economic status: ironed-shirt and coat, polished shoe and combed with hair-gel. Most of the students had very attractive bags, shining water-bottle. Some were in rough dress, uncombed hair and unpolished shoes.

Teacher did not provide opportunity for those who were introvert, shy, less interactive and minority students (minority group of Nepal). Teacher did not seem motivating for those learners who are sitting in last and second last rows. Some learners were not interested in learning and reading poem. Teacher talked and gave opportunities for those learners who are sitting in the front rows. Teacher gave no attention for those who were sitting in back rows and did not talk to them; did not inspire them to participate in the learning activities. Teacher did not make model reading for learners. Teacher mostly used English language. Teacher did not use PowerPoint slides although there was over-head projector. Teacher did not bring any teaching materials instead asked an English book with the student who is sitting in the first row. Teacher uttered only boys' name, at least ten times, uttered Sulav (name changed); was the first position holder, but teacher gave less chance for girls. Two of the girls asked (their faces showed there was emergency, might be monthly period) to go toilet but teacher did not allow; and he said, 'You can't'. They sat sadly. Teacher, indicating the learners sitting in back bench, said, 'You lazy guys better sleep than gossiping' and stopped their noise.

Minority students asked teacher to help them pronounce the words and meaning in Nepali language- leisure, bough, squirrels and teacher told them to consult the dictionary. Teacher said, 'Speak in English otherwise you will be fined. You know this is English period'. Their facial expression showed that they wanted immediate response. Teacher did not reach up to the last row where Sanam was sitting. Teacher did not provide any positive feedback for those who are sitting at the last benches. Fellow-friends who are sitting in the first rows also did not seem speaking with Sanam as he used to speak with vernacular accent and appear with non-ironed shirt and paint.

The above observation depicts that if schools cannot provide individual support to overcome their problems, they think that the schools are unfriendly, discouraging and hostile. Sanam and his friends did not get equal opportunity to learn. The language teacher gave priority for fast learner students and who are sitting in the first rows, The students who are sitting at the back were ignored and insulted. This is social injustice and inequality that prevent them from

enrolling into main stream of educational and political life. Teachers can encourage all children addressing their individual problems and transmit certain values of social justice and inequality to the students by providing equal opportunities. Teachers' positive attitude on judicial use of mother tongue can minimize the adverse effect of 'English only' solution. Curricular and extracurricular activities, context-specific teaching pedagogy and materials need-based explanation, fair treatments with all learners, sufficient support to empower minority learners might be the solution to reduce linguistic violence, psychological harassment and establish justice and equality in the school. In policy level, different stakeholders related to school system in Nepal have to formulate the clear policy to address the issue of social injustice and inequality and cultural and linguistic diversity within school policies and programs.

### **Discouraging learners in the name of power hierarchy**

Having explored on the issues of socially and legally unacceptable schools' behaviors, I now move to the issues of discouraging moments that students have to encounter during inside and outside classroom environment. Discouragement and low self-esteem is another main theme that that explores a part of Sanam's learning experiences at the school. As mentioned in our conversation, he was fed up with teachers' and friends' unfair treatment and insult as a result he could not feel motivated as a learning member schooling. He said, 'My teachers and friends laughed at my vernacular accent and non-ironed shirt paint and my friends teased me seeing my uncombed hair'. School is a form of mini-society. In our classroom, students are not treated equally. Students are judged on the basis of caste, ethnicity, geographical region, source-force, high economic status, businessmen and bureaucratic status. Sanam shared, 'My teacher never came to (me) my bench and ask about my difficulties'. Educational right (minority learners) of learning in a learner-friendly environment has been violated due to so-called power relation. Sanam further said, 'I wanted to sit in the front row or first bench but my friends rejected saying that they do not want to make me friend.' He added that he shared that issue of his interest to sit in first bench with the teacher but teacher did not show any interest to solve. This event discouraged him at deeper level. Students are not allowed to sit in the front bench who are from low economic status and marginalized and minority ethnic community. Teachers and fellow friends insult the students who are from minority group looking their mother-tongue accent, their dress and appearance. Teachers may not provide sufficient learning opportunities for medium and slow learners in comparison to smart learners. Teachers, sometimes, seem gender biased. Teacher provides opportunity for either boys only or girls only. Teachers may sometimes ignore the learning rights of differently-able children. These children are insulted and victimized in the name of their inability.

Teachers may focus on the students who are sitting in the front rows. Teachers may not provide equal learning opportunities for all. In this regard, Sanam further shared, 'Teacher does not come up to me and ask questions thinking that I cannot respond these questions; our teacher



interacts with first and second benchers only.’ This particular evidence shows that teachers sometimes forget their responsibilities of being teachers as responsible teacher. Schools fine and threaten the students in the name of speaking their mother tongue. Sanam said, ‘I asked Nepali meaning of an English word but sir did not respond saying that was English period.’ Students are punished in the name of not wearing tie and uniform. Having ironed-shirt and polished shoe, students are considered civilized but those students with rough dress and unpolished shoes are considered as ‘badmas’(bad student) . Sanam became emotional and shared, ‘During first month of my new school, I was in my village attire and accent, looking my get-up and talks, my friends and some teachers ignored me.’ Students are badly characterized on the basis of their hair-style and language accent. Schools seem like the factory that produce injustice and inequality as their product. Time is ever changing, so updating ourselves through continuous professional development and critical language teacher education and critical research in TESOL and language education can help to address the above-mentioned educational issues and difficulties. Culturally responsive techniques can insist on the local context understanding their socio-cultural and institutional practices. Furthermore, to address this gap, producing appropriate locally resource material considering local context, and the students need as well as implementing critical research pedagogy and socially responsive teaching mechanism could be beneficial.

### **Power hierarchy as a constitutionally deviated practice**

Having discussed on the socially inequitable and unjust practices and discouragement on the part of learners through power relation we now turn to the issue of ‘power hierarchy as a constitutionally deviated practice’. Constitutional right of getting equal opportunity in learning for all learners has been violated. In this regard Nepal’s constitution 2072 clearly mentions under part 3 entitled ‘Fundamental Rights and Duties’ (39.8): ‘Every child shall have the right to child friendly justice.’ Nepal’s constitution 2072 mandates that children have the right to receive education in a child friendly environment that can create social justice and equality. Slowly, Sanam became empowered and asked, ‘Why does sir not ask me questions? Why does sir not provide me opportunity to share my views?’ He further said, ‘My constitutional right to child friendly justice has been violated.’ These queries depict that Sanam was transforming himself as an empowered learner raising voice against biased behaviours in the classroom. Providing equal learning opportunity in the classroom can only respect the constitutional right to child friendly justice. In the name of being teacher, we may not have the right of exposing unnecessary power relation inside and outside the classroom. We teachers have to realize that sometime our behaviors, classroom interaction, informal talks and feeling of superiority may create social injustice and inequality and lead our learners towards learning discouragement. We, teachers can create such productive and conducive environment in the classroom so that all the learners feel better place to learn. To address this issue, we teachers have to behave in a child-friendly and human-friendly manner and respect constitutional provision.

## **Power hierarchy is against the agenda of critical theory**

A number of scholars have provided critical insights into inequalities, injustices, discrimination, exploitation and marginalization in the name of race, gender, geographical regions, ethnic minority (Talmy, 2010). Critical philosophies of language teacher education always challenge social inequalities in (ELT) classroom. Critical research has a 'different agenda from the constructivist interpretive approach' (Troudi, 2016, p. 90). The works of the Frankfurt School, with the scholars such as Habermas, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse were remarkable in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in establishing the main agenda of critical theory and its research, 'which was to help establish an equitable society' (ibid, p. 90). This research approach is carried out searching action and change to eliminate pain in society and redress forms of alienation, discrimination, injustice, exploitation and marginalization. Critical researchers drive beyond the economic analysis to combine 'cultural and ideological analyses in their understanding of why the contradiction of late capitalism, including the everyday oppressions and accompanying widespread sense of alienation, are still sustainable' (Collins, 2007, p. 67). In line with critical theory, here, slowly and gradually, Sanam became strong and boldly said, 'Next day, I will talk to my teacher about my difficulties and make him responsible for my better learning opportunity.' This evidence showed that he took initiation himself to change and establish child-friendly classroom with the insight of equalities and justices. Sanam further said, 'I will request my teacher to apply judicial use of mother tongue in English class and I believe that my learning improves.' The student who remained discouraged and silent for five months in new school and the same boy came with complete change and transformation raising the voice against biased behaviour in the classroom.

Critical theorists such as Foucault, Freire, Bourdieu, Giroux, McLaren and others represent multitude of critical theories and a general dissensus among them on the nature of criticality, seem to share a commencement of society divided and manifested by inequality with variance structural access to material and symbolic resources, opportunity, mobility and education (Talmy, 2010). Bourdieu (1986) notion of cultural capital provides a philosophical framework to explain the problems faced by ethnic minority children in the course of socialization and learning in school.

## **Conclusion**

This study attempted to find out discriminatory and contradictory relationship between power, culture and learning environment in the multicultural context of Nepalese classroom. Schools promote the reproduction and transmission of dominant English and Nepali culture and values and what it produces as symbols within the space of discourse, peer culture and pedagogy would act as carriers of violence against cultural minority learners in the name of power relation. Teachers' favour towards only smart and dominant learners and ignoring medium and slow learners are extra striking point in the school. What is found that teachers

seemed biased against the 'poor' learners, ignoring the extra support and care they need. Classroom instructional practices must promote equity and mutual respect among students. Culturally responsive instructions can emphasize 'localism and specificity' (Gay, 2013, p. 63) in such a way that institutional culture and instructional practices are shaped by the sociocultural characteristics of the settings in which they happen and the population for whom they are designed. Knowingly or unknowingly, power relation practices are on unforgivable. Teacher's job is not to discourage the learner but to motivate them at any cost. We teachers have to empower our learners through critical conscious and provide justice and equality offering alternative options committing ourselves to develop equitable and democratic approach in education. Further studies can be carried out to see the power relation in terms of our classroom behaviors in more depth and examine the effectiveness of learner-friendly classroom to promote inclusive, equitable access in education.

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