
Challenges in Teaching English Speaking and Listening Skills in Rural Nepal

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by secondary level English teachers in teaching speaking and listening skills in rural areas of Nepal. The research was carried out in Geruwa Rural Municipality, Bardiya District. A phenomenological research design was used and data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 English teachers. The findings revealed six main challenges: inadequate lesson planning, low teacher language proficiency, limited awareness of the curriculum, lack of resources and infrastructure, limited professional development opportunities and lack of collaborative support. Teachers reported struggling with time management due to administrative tasks which affected their ability to plan effective lessons. Many teachers lacked confidence in their English speaking skills. This impacted their teaching. Moreover, inadequate teaching resources and poor infrastructure hindered effective learning. The study suggests the need for more resources, better curriculum training and professional development programs to support teachers. This research highlights the systemic issues that affect English teaching in rural areas.

Key words: Teaching obstacles, phenomenological, language proficiency, secondary education, professional development

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Introduction

English language proficiency plays a crucial role in educational success and future career prospects, especially in non-native contexts like Nepal, where English serves as the medium of instruction in higher education. Among the four major language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), speaking and listening are fundamental to effective communication. Despite their importance, the teaching and learning of these skills in rural areas of Nepal present significant challenges. Limited resources, inadequate teacher training and socio-economic constraints all contribute to the difficulty of developing these skills in rural schools (Riddell, 2001; Richards & Lockhart, 2007). This study aims to explore the factors that influence the acquisition of speaking and listening skills among English language learners in rural Nepal, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by both teachers and students.

English language skills are more than just an academic requirement. They are also essential for professional success. In Nepal, English proficiency is critical for students' future employment opportunities (Richards & Renandya, 2010). Studies show that English-speaking abilities are often among the top skills sought after by employers in Nepal (Riddell, 2001). However, students in rural areas face a significant disadvantage due to inadequate instruction in speaking and listening. Research highlights that these students often struggle to understand native speakers' accents and idiomatic expressions, as they are typically not exposed to these elements in their classroom environments. Moreover, rural schools are generally under-resourced, with a few audio-visual materials or language laboratories to support listening skill development (Rai, 2020; Thapa, 2007). These challenges not only hinder students' language proficiency but also contribute to educational disparities between rural and urban areas in Nepal.

While various studies have addressed the challenges of teaching English in rural Nepal, limited attention has been given to understanding the specific difficulties related to teaching speaking and listening skills in these settings. For instance, Syal and Jindal (2014) point out that teachers in rural schools often lack proficiency in English speaking and listening themselves. As a result, they tend to prioritize grammar and written skills which are perceived as easier to teach and evaluate (Tiwari, 2024). This approach, while not without merit, overlooks the crucial role that oral skills play in overall language proficiency. Moreover, the scarcity of professional development opportunities for teachers in rural areas exacerbates these challenges. Many teachers lack the training necessary to implement effective methods for teaching speaking and listening and they often rely on outdated and traditional teaching strategies that do not align with current best practices in language education (Rai, 2003; Richards, 2007). Although some

studies have acknowledged these issues, comprehensive research on the combined impact of these factors on speaking and listening skill development is still lacking. This study seeks to address this gap by examining both theoretical frameworks and empirical data to provide a thorough understanding of the challenges involved.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the key factors that affect the teaching and learning of speaking and listening skills in rural Nepal. This includes examining teachers' language proficiency, teaching methodologies, access to professional development and the availability of resources. By exploring how these factors interact, the study aims to provide insights into the challenges faced by teachers and students and propose strategies to overcome them. The findings of this study will be valuable to educators, policymakers and institutions involved in teacher training and curriculum design. The research will also contribute to the broader field of second language acquisition by offering insights that could be applied to similar rural contexts in other countries. By addressing the barriers to effective teaching of speaking and listening skills, this study aims to contribute to improving language education in rural Nepal, thereby fostering more equitable access to quality education for all students, regardless of their geographic location.

Literature Review

The teaching and learning of English speaking and listening skills, especially in rural settings, is influenced by several key factors. These factors include teacher proficiency, access to professional development, curriculum implementation, teaching methodologies and infrastructure. They have significant implications for developing speaking and listening skills in students.

Teacher proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening skills, is a recurring theme in the literature on rural English teaching. Studies consistently highlight that teachers' limited language proficiency, especially in rural areas, negatively affects the quality of English language instruction (Richards & Renandya, 2002; McKay, 2006; Brown, 2001). In rural Nepal, teachers often report lower confidence in their English language skills, particularly in speaking and pronunciation which results in a reluctance to engage students in oral activities (Harmer, 2007; Juhana, 2012). This is supported by research that emphasizes the direct impact of teachers' language proficiency on students' ability to develop speaking and listening skills (Thornbury, 2007; Nunan, 1995). Teachers' inability to model correct pronunciation and intonation reduces students' exposure to authentic language use, hindering their language development. This challenge is not unique to Nepal; similar findings have been observed in other rural areas,

where teachers tend to focus more on grammar and written skills, neglecting speaking and listening due to their own limited proficiency (Luoma, 2004; Sinchana & Dinesh, 2023).

In rural settings, the lack of access to professional development opportunities further exacerbates the challenges of teaching English. Many rural teachers face significant financial and logistical barriers that limit their participation in workshops, training sessions and other forms of professional development (Bull, 2008; Manser, 1995). In Nepal, the problem is compounded by the scarcity of qualified trainers and the limited availability of formal training in modern language teaching methods (Borg, 2003; Esterberg, 2002). This gap in professional development is particularly concerning when it comes to teaching speaking and listening skills, as teachers are often not equipped with the latest pedagogical techniques for fostering communicative competence (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Tiwari, 2024). Without continuous professional development, teachers are unable to update their teaching practices or learn new strategies can lead to stagnation in teaching and ultimately hinder students' speaking and listening proficiency (Goh, 2007; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

The teaching methods used in rural areas also contribute to the challenges of teaching speaking and listening skills. Traditional methods of language instruction, such as rote memorization and grammar-focused teaching, are still prevalent in many rural classrooms (Anuradha, Raman, & Hemamalini, 2014; Creswell, 2011). While these methods may be effective for teaching reading and writing, they are less effective for developing oral communication skills (Illeris, 2007). Teachers in rural Nepal often rely on textbooks and lectures, with limited opportunities for students to engage in interactive speaking and listening activities (Patel & Jain, 2008). This approach undermines the importance of real-life communication and interaction which are essential for developing speaking and listening abilities (Zhang, 2009). The use of communicative language teaching (CLT) is seen as an effective method for fostering oral communication, but its implementation is difficult in rural areas (Pollard, 2008). CLT requires teachers to move away from traditional, teacher-centered methods and adopt more student-centered approaches which can be challenging for teachers who lack confidence in their own language skills (Richards, 2008). As a result, many teachers in rural settings revert to traditional methods, limiting opportunities for students to develop their speaking and listening skills (Brown, 2003).

In addition to teaching methods, infrastructure and resources play a critical role in language learning. The lack of access to resources such as audio-visual materials, language laboratories and technology-enhanced learning environments severely limits the effectiveness

of teaching speaking and listening skills in rural classrooms (Thornbury, 2007; Ur, 2002). In rural Nepal, many schools lack even basic infrastructure such as functional classrooms or reliable electricity which further hinders the potential for interactive, resource-based language teaching (Dakowska, 2005). The absence of materials such as audio recordings or real-life listening tasks prevents teachers from providing students with the necessary exposure to authentic language use (Fareh, 2010). As a result, students are deprived of the opportunity to practice listening comprehension and engage in speaking activities in meaningful contexts (Richards & Renandya, 2004). The scarcity of resources also affects the quality of teaching, as teachers are often forced to rely on outdated textbooks and methods, making it difficult to create a dynamic and interactive learning environment (Riddell, 2001).

Curriculum implementation is another critical factor influencing the teaching of speaking and listening skills. Many teachers in rural areas struggle to align their teaching practices with the objectives of the English curriculum, particularly when it comes to teaching speaking and listening (Shumin, 2004; Cowan, 2009). This misalignment is aggravated by the lack of training and support for teachers, who may be unfamiliar with the curriculum's emphasis on communicative competence (Curriculum Development Center, 2007). In rural Nepal, teachers often report having little guidance on how to teach speaking and listening skills effectively, as these skills are frequently not prioritized in traditional teaching settings (Curriculum Development Center, 2009). Consequently, teachers may inadvertently neglect speaking and listening activities in favor of reading and writing tasks which are perceived as more important or easier to teach (Gass, 2002; Harmer, 2007). This gap between curriculum objectives and classroom practices leads to gaps in students' language development, particularly in the development of oral communication skills (Khaniya, 2005).

The challenges faced by teachers in rural areas are compounded by the overall lack of support from education authorities. In many rural schools, teachers work in isolation, without access to mentorship, collaborative opportunities, or professional networks that could help them improve their teaching practices (Lantolf, 2002; Leech, 1994). The absence of such support systems makes it difficult for teachers to stay updated on contemporary teaching methodologies and to receive feedback on their instructional practices (Nagendra, 2014). The lack of support, combined with the challenges of inadequate training and resources, creates a challenging environment for teaching speaking and listening skills (Renukadevi, 2014).

Methodology

Study Design

This study adopted a phenomenological research design. The design was chosen to gain rich, detailed lived insights from teachers regarding their personal lived experiences and perceptions of teaching English, particularly speaking and listening skills, in rural settings. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for an exploration of subjective experiences, challenges and the complexities of teaching in rural schools.

Sampling

Purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants for the study. Purposive sampling was chosen because it allows for the intentional selection of individuals who have relevant experience and knowledge related to the research topic. The study focused on 11 secondary level English teachers from Geruwa Rural Municipality, Bardiya District. These teachers were selected based on their experience in teaching English, specifically speaking and listening, in rural areas. The sample included teachers from different schools within the rural municipality to ensure diversity in the experiences and challenges reported. The selected teachers were coded T1 to T11 for their anonymity.

Data Collection Technique

The primary data collection technique used in this study was semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interview allows for flexibility in the conversation while also ensuring that all key areas of interest are covered. Interviews were conducted virtually with each of the 11 English teachers and the questions were designed to probe the specific challenges they faced in their teaching, particularly related to speaking and listening skills. All the interviews were conducted through smartphones and in Nepali to ensure the teachers could express themselves freely and openly. The interviews were audio-recorded, with the teachers' consent, to ensure accurate data collection. In addition to the interviews, field notes were taken to capture the context of the interviews and any non-verbal cues that could contribute to the understanding of the teachers' experiences.

Data Analysis Method

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis which involves identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The analysis was done in steps. First, the interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the content. Second, initial codes were generated based on the challenges and

themes mentioned by the participants. These codes were then grouped into broader themes. Finally, the themes were analyzed to identify the most significant challenges faced by teachers in teaching English speaking and listening in rural areas.

Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for the organization and interpretation of qualitative data in a detailed and systematic way, making it possible to draw out common experiences and challenges faced by the teachers. The findings from this analysis were then compared to existing literature to contextualize the results within broader educational challenges in rural settings.

Results

Inadequate Lesson Planning

One of the most significant issues raised by teachers in rural areas was the lack of time and resources for effective lesson planning. All the teachers reported that their time was consumed by administrative duties and other responsibilities, leaving little room for the in-depth preparation of lessons. Teachers found it difficult to organize structured lessons that would effectively address the learning needs of students, particularly in speaking and listening skills. T5 shared, “I have to juggle between teaching and administrative work. With the added pressure of paperwork, there is hardly any time left to plan lessons properly. It’s overwhelming.” Another teacher (T1) remarked, “We are often under pressure to complete the syllabus and attend to many administrative tasks. As a result, lesson planning is rushed and the quality suffers.” Similarly, T6 said, “I try my best to plan, but it’s difficult with so many other things to focus on. The lack of time is a constant struggle.” This inadequate lesson planning was further exacerbated by the scarcity of teaching resources which hindered teachers’ ability to plan lessons that could engage students in more interactive learning methods.

Teacher Language Proficiency

Another recurring theme was the teachers’ concerns about their own language proficiency, particularly in speaking English. Teachers admitted that their spoken English was not fluent enough which affected their ability to effectively model language for students. Many teachers expressed feelings of insecurity about their own language skills, especially in the areas of pronunciation and fluency. This lack of confidence led to their reluctance to speak English in the classroom, thereby limiting students’ exposure to authentic spoken language. T4 shared, “I feel hesitant to speak in English because I am afraid of making mistakes in front of the students. My pronunciation is not perfect and that makes me self-conscious.” Another

teacher (T9) added, “I know my students need me to speak English fluently, but I struggle with my own language skills. It’s difficult to teach when I do not feel confident in my own abilities.” T2 explained, “Teaching speaking in English is a challenge for me. I find myself avoiding oral activities because of my own lack of fluency.” Teachers’ language proficiency is a fundamental component of language teaching and these challenges clearly affect their effectiveness in teaching speaking and listening skills to students.

Limited Awareness of Curriculum

The lack of familiarity with the curriculum was another major challenge identified in this study. Many teachers admitted that they did not have a clear understanding of the curriculum objectives and were not always able to implement them effectively. This lack of awareness resulted in lessons that were not aligned with the intended learning outcomes which negatively impacted the quality of education. T7 remarked, “I do not always have access to the updated curriculum and sometimes I feel like I’m teaching without a clear understanding of what the students are supposed to learn.” T10 also commented, “We rarely get training on how to implement the curriculum properly. This leaves us with little guidance on how to design our lessons effectively.” T3 expressed, “The curriculum is sometimes too broad and it’s hard to figure out how to cover everything within the available time. It feels overwhelming.” Without a solid understanding of the curriculum, teachers may deliver lessons that miss critical learning points, ultimately affecting student learning outcomes.

Inadequate Resources and Infrastructure

Teachers in rural areas reported that the lack of resources and inadequate infrastructure were among the primary barriers to effective teaching. The absence of modern teaching aids such as language labs, audio-visual tools and even basic resources such as chalkboards and projectors, made it difficult to implement dynamic and interactive lessons, especially for teaching speaking and listening skills. T8 shared, “We do not have access to audio-visual materials or even simple resources like a whiteboard. It’s challenging to engage students without these tools.” In a similar manner T6 explained, “Without any language lab or audio resources, teaching speaking and listening becomes repetitive and ineffective. We rely solely on textbooks which is not enough.” In the same way T11 said, “The lack of basic infrastructure makes it hard to create an interactive learning environment. We do not even have proper seating arrangements for group activities.” The absence of these resources led to an over-reliance on traditional teaching methods that do not adequately address the dynamic needs of teaching speaking and listening.

Limited Professional Development Opportunities

A recurring theme in the responses was the limited access to professional development opportunities. Teachers in rural areas often lacked access to workshops, training programs and other resources that could help them improve their teaching practices. This lack of professional growth opportunities was seen as a significant obstacle to improving their teaching quality, especially in areas like speaking and listening. One teacher i.e. T5 remarked, “We do not have many chances for professional development here. The workshops are either too expensive or held far away, making it hard to attend.” T1 also shared, “I’ve been teaching for many years without any real training or exposure to new teaching methods. There’s very little support for us to improve our skills.” Similarly, T7 explained, “We need more opportunities to attend workshops or seminars. Without these, we are stuck in the same teaching methods and there’s no room for growth.” Without adequate professional development, teachers struggle to stay updated on the latest teaching strategies which negatively impacts the quality of their teaching, particularly in skill areas like speaking and listening.

Lack of Collaborative Support

Many teachers reported feeling isolated in their teaching practices, with little opportunity for collaboration or peer support. This lack of a collaborative environment hindered the sharing of best practices, teaching strategies and teaching resources. Teachers working in isolation were unable to benefit from the collective expertise of their peers which could have improved their teaching of speaking and listening. T9 commented, “It would be great to collaborate with other teachers, but there’s no time for that. I’m the only one teaching English in my school, so I do not have anyone to share ideas with.” T8 also shared, “We do not have any formal structures for peer observation or team teaching. I feel alone in my classroom and there’s no one to offer feedback.” T5 said, “Collaboration could really improve our teaching. If we had a chance to observe each other’s lessons and discuss strategies, I’m sure it would help all of us.” This lack of collaborative support limited teachers’ professional growth and hindered the sharing of ideas that could have enhanced their teaching of speaking and listening skills.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by teachers in rural areas, specifically in relation to teaching English speaking and listening skills. These challenges are deeply interlinked, with systemic issues such as inadequate resources, lack of professional development opportunities and insufficient institutional support contributing significantly to the difficulties teachers face in the classroom. It is clear that the

complex interplay of these factors demands urgent attention to improve the quality of teaching in rural settings.

Inadequate lesson planning emerged as one of the most pressing issues for teachers. Teachers in rural areas often have to juggle multiple responsibilities, including administrative duties which significantly limit the time available for effective lesson preparation. This is consistent with findings from other studies which indicate that heavy workloads and administrative tasks can detract from teachers' ability to focus on planning and delivering high-quality lessons (Thornbury, 2007; Bada, 2015). Without adequate planning, lessons are less likely to engage students or meet their learning needs, particularly in areas such as speaking and listening that require active participation and interaction. According to Thornbury (2007), effective lesson planning is crucial for fostering meaningful communication in language classrooms. Inadequate preparation often results in lessons that fail to address the diverse needs of students, particularly in speaking and listening activities that demand a more dynamic approach. Therefore, to address this issue, there is an urgent need for structural changes at the institutional level, including reducing administrative burdens on teachers and providing dedicated time for lesson planning. Moreover, access to resources such as lesson planning templates, digital tools, or collaborative platforms could support teachers in creating more effective and engaging lessons.

Another significant challenge identified in this study was the teachers' language proficiency, particularly in spoken English. Teachers' lack of confidence in their own language skills severely impacted their ability to model the language for students and engage them in meaningful oral activities. This issue aligns with the findings of Phyak (2006), who emphasized that teachers' language proficiency is a critical factor in the effectiveness of language teaching. Teachers who are insecure about their own language abilities are less likely to use the language actively in the classroom which directly limits students' exposure to authentic language use. According to Ventsov (2016), language proficiency is not only about vocabulary or grammar but also about teachers' confidence and their ability to model fluent and natural communication in the classroom. Therefore, professional development programs that focus on improving teachers' spoken English skills are essential for addressing this challenge. These programs should focus on practical strategies for improving fluency, pronunciation and confidence in speaking English. Teachers also need to support in overcoming psychological barriers that inhibit their language use. Building confidence in language teaching can be as crucial as developing linguistic competence.

The lack of awareness of the curriculum was another significant barrier identified in the study. Teachers who are unfamiliar with the curriculum's goals and objectives often struggle to deliver lessons that align with intended learning outcomes. This issue is particularly concerning as it can result in missed learning opportunities for students. According to Kaniyazova (2023), teachers' understanding of the curriculum is fundamental to ensuring that their teaching methods and strategies are aligned with the intended educational outcomes. Teachers who are unclear about the curriculum may unintentionally teach content that is irrelevant or not aligned with the prescribed learning objectives, thereby hindering students' academic progress. Therefore, teachers require training in curriculum interpretation and implementation to ensure that they can design lessons that are both engaging and aligned with curriculum standards. Schools should prioritize curriculum training as part of teachers' professional development to ensure that teachers are well-equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students.

The lack of resources and inadequate infrastructure in rural schools also emerged as a critical challenge. Teachers reported that the absence of teaching aids such as audio-visual materials, language labs, or even basic technological tools made it difficult to teach speaking and listening skills effectively. This finding resonates with research by Alderson (2000), which underscores the importance of adequate teaching resources in creating an interactive and dynamic learning environment. Teaching resources, including multimedia tools, language labs and interactive materials, are essential for fostering student engagement and facilitating language acquisition. Without access to these resources, teachers are forced to rely on traditional methods, such as rote learning which may not adequately address the needs of students in language learning contexts. Therefore, educational authorities must prioritize the provision of resources to rural schools to help improve the quality of language instruction. This can be achieved by investing in infrastructure, ensuring the availability of digital tools and providing teachers with access to modern teaching materials.

Professional development opportunities were also highlighted as being insufficient in rural areas. Teachers often lack access to workshops, seminars and other professional development initiatives that could help them improve their teaching practices. This is a critical issue because ongoing professional development is essential for teachers to stay updated on the latest teaching strategies and methodologies. As Bista (2011) notes, teachers must be equipped with contemporary teaching practices to be effective in their profession. However, in rural areas, where access to professional development is limited, alternative models of professional development, such as online training or peer-led workshops, could be valuable in ensuring that teachers have the necessary tools to improve their practice.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that teaching English speaking and listening skills in rural areas presents a range of challenges for secondary level teachers. The six key themes identified (inadequate lesson planning, teacher language proficiency, limited awareness of curriculum, inadequate resources and infrastructure, limited professional development opportunities and lack of collaborative support) highlight the complex and interconnected nature of the issues faced by these teachers. Inadequate lesson planning due to heavy administrative workloads and a lack of time for proper preparation significantly impacts the quality of lessons. Teachers also face challenges related to their own language proficiency, particularly in speaking English which affects their ability to model the language effectively for their students. The lack of awareness and understanding of the curriculum further exacerbates these issues, leading to lessons that are not aligned with the intended learning outcomes. The lack of resources and infrastructure in rural schools, including the absence of language labs and audio-visual tools, makes it difficult to engage students in interactive lessons that focus on speaking and listening skills. Additionally, the limited opportunities for professional development and the absence of collaborative support networks hinder teachers' ability to improve their practices and adopt innovative teaching strategies.

The findings suggest that systemic changes are needed to address these challenges. Reducing administrative burdens on teachers, providing more resources and infrastructure, offering professional development programs and creating opportunities for collaboration among teachers are essential steps toward improving the teaching of English speaking and listening in rural areas.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the specific challenges faced by English teachers in rural areas, providing valuable insights for policymakers, educators and researchers who aim to improve English language teaching in these contexts. Future research could explore potential solutions to these challenges, such as professional development programs focusing on language proficiency, the integration of technology in rural classrooms and strategies for effective curriculum implementation.

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