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(Re)thinking English Language Teacher Education: Towards Contextualized and Coordinated Efforts for Enhancing Teacher Competencies

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Abstract

This paper explores issues around the implementation of English language teacher education programs in Nepal. It also presents the challenges facing teacher education and stakeholder opinions on future transformation of English language teacher education. The data were obtained through in-depth interviews with four teacher educators, four school heads, one assistant dean and 2 education officials. The analysis of the data adopted a grounded theory that enabled the author to build on themes emerging from the interview data, and the authors' insider experience as an English language teacher educator further facilitated the contextual interpretation of the available data. The findings showed an existence of misalignment of the teacher education programs and contemporary market demands, thereby creating gaps between the graduates' attributes and expectations of the schools. It further identified lack of coordination between school curriculum regulating agencies, teacher education institutions and the schools, that eventually led to the production of teaching human resources that lacked adequate competencies. This implies that English language teacher education programs needed reforms through competency-based framework. Findings further indicated a need for contextualization of current and prospective teachers' professional development initiatives.

Keywords: English language teacher education, coordination, teacher shortages, program misalignment

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Introduction

The 21st century context demands more knowledgeable society where the teachers and teacher educators are expected to play a critical and contributing role to social transformation. Teacher education programs thus can contribute to this orientation by streamlining the current curricular and instructional practices in line with the market-driven demands. The market now puts increasing pressure on teacher education institutions to produce the teachers who can supply the knowledge and skills that current students need for their future. The existing teachers and prospective teachers are also expected to have different type of dynamism in terms of knowledge and skills such as use of the latest information and communication technologies (ICTs), understand and implement latest subject knowledge, both in planning and instruction in their respective workplaces. Development of teachers' professional competence in the rapidly changing knowledge and technology-based society is one of the most pressing challenges teachers experience in the recent years.

Studies have shown that both initial and in-service teacher education programmes with flexible alternatives, broad knowledge base and communicative spaces facilitate active learning (Tang et al., 2020). Facilitating this learning through the development of high quality, dynamic and context-specific policies and programs is another pressure the teacher education institutions (TEIs) are facing. To be more specific, countries like Nepal facing with resource limitations for the management of basic infrastructure, quality teaching and learning conditions including quality teacher educators for teacher training are entangled with such challenges. However, close observations of current curriculum and the language teacher education programs show an uncritical adoption of western patterns of teacher education, which have higher face values but having lower-level practical impacts not fitting in the diverse educational context of Nepal (Poudel & Choi, 2022). In other words, Nepal in general is facing with challenges for contextualizing her teacher education programs for the national need. At this critical juncture teacher education programs of Nepal are to be restructured and rationalized in such a way that they bring in

innovation and novelty in curriculum development and pedagogical practices. To do this, there is a felt pressures in establishing a working environment among stakeholders of teacher education and teaching, that largely includes the Curriculum Development Center under Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the universities (including their constitutional and affiliated colleges running teacher education programmes). This paper focuses on this concern by exploring the existing practices of English language teacher education and projecting the future initiatives for redesigning English language teacher education to meet the contextual specificities in Nepal.

Understanding of history of teacher education in Nepal. According to Awasthi (2003), the history of teacher education in Nepal can be traced back to the establishment of Basic Teacher Training Center in Kathmandu in 1948 which was set up with a view to training the primary school teachers. This center was also known as नर्मल स्कूल तालिम) *Normal School Taalim*(in Nepali (Bhattacharya et al., 2014). This center provided training to the primary level schoolteachers from about 55 basic schools established around the country. It was a non-academic training provided to the teachers with a minimum qualification of grade eight. This training center was closed in 1954 AD which was followed by the establishment of College of Education in 1956 AD. While during that several primary schools were established across the country, there was a shortage of trained teachers. Realizing this scarcity Nepal National Education Planning commission [NNEPC, 1954] recommended for the new directions to be adopted in Nepal in regard to teacher education. For instance, the same report stated that then Minister Dilliraman Regmi and Chief of the delegates from the US Mr Paul W. Rose both indicated the need to train more teachers, and the training of primary teachers in the training center was not sufficient. Hence was the need to establish a teacher education college in Kathmandu. The report states, ‘...it shows that there is growing participation of the people in education since they are coming to Kathmandu from even Bajhang and Baglung in search of teachers...’ (p. 25). In the same report, Mr. Paul W. Rose indicated ‘the need of 500,00 teachers to the earliest for Nepal’s rapid development of education’ (NNEPC, 1954, p. 2). Similarly, Dr. H. B. Wood,

one of the Professors from Oregon University of USA who had arrived in Nepal to assist the restructuring process of education, urged the need of teacher's training to orient them about their work, responsibilities, and obligations. Moreover, he said, "*teachers are the main pillars of the system of education and we should be very much careful about their attitude, manner and training*" (NNEPC, 1954, p. 2). It seemed that most of the policy initiatives taken during the early phase of teacher education has the Western influence, with the work of the experts Britain and the US. This showed, English language teacher education in Nepal has a historical link with the colonial traditions, especially of Europe and the US. The consequences are that till date, there is a legacy of adoption of the western-centric materials, methods and resources in pre-service teacher education programs in Nepal's universities (Choi & Poudel, 2022). This study situated its focus on this concern, exploring the possibilities of contextualizing the English language teacher education programs in Nepal.

Literature review

The status and inadequacy of teachers were commonly reported in several reports of education commissions formed in Nepal. Like earlier reports, the report of All Round National Education Commission (ARNEC, 1962) mentioned that almost 3000 teachers had been trained from the Normal Schools. This report aimed at enrolling and recruiting good people in teaching profession. The provision of mandatory B.Ed degree for all who would like to join as teachers at the secondary level was established by this report. It made a strong recommendation for making assurance of the job placement for the graduates of B.Ed from College of Education. It provisioned for enhancing content-based curriculum with due continuation of the methodology in pedagogy.

Special focus on enhancing teacher education in Nepal was made by National Education System Plan (1971). One of the significant moves in the area of education as a whole was the formation of NESP. It made the compulsory provision of teacher training for those who wanted to pursue the career in teaching. A bit more professionalism was seen in the area of teaching and teacher education. Hada (2010) writes-

The implementation of the NESP 1971-76 provided a milestone for providing a new prospect and dimension to teacher education program. After the implementation of the NESP, the MOE and IOE worked together to give the teacher training system of the country a new prospect and dimension. (p. 148)

Teacher recruitment in Nepal was systematized only after NESP (Baral, 2014). The NESP mentioned clearly about the increment of trained teachers in schools, trainings for them, enhancing the quality of such training, special in-service training for teachers of the subjects such as Science and Mathematics, and professional development of teachers. Such programs had some positive impact on teacher education and development.

Various institutions and teacher training centers were established in many places of Nepal. All these institutions such as College of Education, National Vocational Training Centers and Primary School Teacher Training Centers came under the single umbrella of the Institute of Education (IOE) under Tribhuvan University. The NESP added more responsibility for IOE to develop and train teachers needed for the primary to the secondary level. The courses it included were *Proficiency certificate level* (pre-bachelor), Bachelor (B. Ed.), Masters (M. Ed.) and Research degrees (M. Phil and Ph. D.). This institution ran the above-mentioned courses for both in-service teachers and pre-service teachers.

In 1962, National Center for Educational Development (NECD), which is now integrated within the Center for Educational Human Resource Development (CEHRD), was formed under Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES). This institution at the government level has been running several teachers training programmes around the country, especially the trainings conducted for in-service teachers. In this connection, Hada (2010) writes;

At present, 10-month primary teacher training as per the recommendation made by NEC (1992) is in practice. The 10-month PTT program is divided into three phases of which the first and the third phases are operated by NCED whereas the second phase is implemented by Distance Education Center. NCED has established several Primary Teacher Training Centers known as ETCs to operate the PTT programmes.

According to Hada (2010), the growth of public education created a critical shortage of trained teachers and a need for more efficient mechanism for training for teachers and measuring their effectiveness in standardized ways was required. Further, more professionalism in teacher education grew with the recommendation of National Education Commission (NEC, 1992). This commission made mandatory training for the teachers working in schools. The in-service teachers who didn't have training were provided with 10 months trainings and fresh graduates were encouraged to study under Faculty of Education established under TU. The one-year B.Ed program for those who had completed graduation from other faculties was massively run in order to produce teachers in their respective subjects of specialization. This program is run till now by various universities of Nepal.

At present in Nepal, Faculty of Education under Tribhuvan University has been running pre-service teacher education programmes through its constituent campuses and affiliated campuses. Similarly, Kathmandu University, Purbanchal University, Nepal Sanskrit University, Far Western University, Mid-western University and Open University are running various courses at various levels aiming at preparation of teachers. These institutions have been working, in their capacity, for producing qualified teachers who will join as teaching workforce in Nepal's public and private schools. Referring to the development of teacher education in Nepal, Kafle and Aryal (2000) wrote;

Nepal has moved through a myriad of teacher education system over the years since the dawn of democracy in 1951. From the first Nation Education Commission of 1954 to the last High Level National Education Commission of 1998, teacher education system was given different orientations with renewed emphasis on its quality, efficiency and relevance. As a result, the national policies of teacher education have not remained consistent with regard to its duration, approaches, modalities and content. This inconsistency in the policy has had a telling effect on the overall efficiency and quality of the teacher training practices (p.107)

For long, Nepal's teacher education policies and programs had an inconsistent relationship. This means, development of quality, efficiency and relevance in teacher

preparation remained under-focused issue. A professional teacher needs to develop theories, awareness, decision making abilities and other proficiencies. Through this process we can make association among content, process and outcome, but how that happened in Nepal and what contextually specific policies and courses developed for producing quality English language teachers has been unclear.

Several studies (e.g., Aryal & Kafle, 2000; Subedi, 2015) have reported the problems and challenges of teacher education in Nepal. They have shown the inadequate transfer of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours of teachers from the training environment to the school contexts (Subedi, 2015). In addition, the lack of well thought out policies, limited resources and understanding related to the rigour required in preparing teachers are some of the issues well discussed in relation to teacher education programs. However, there is very limited research on what were the challenges faced in making the language teacher education competitive and of good quality for Nepal's schools. This study situates its focus on this concern by exploring how the current programs in operation can be rethought or redesigned to ensure the quality of teachers.

Conceptual framework

The comprehensive reading of the literature and the researcher's reflection on the English language teacher education programs including its curriculum, content and pedagogy, a conceptual framework was developed, and that was further refined based on the empirical data obtained from interviews. Figure 1 illustrates the policy-practice issues in teacher education in Nepal. The researcher attempted to locate the gaps in the productions and demands of teachers and would explore the beliefs about the teachers who have graduated and are expecting to graduate in a year or so from the current English language teacher education program at a university in Nepal. After identifying such gaps, they were analyzed and interpreted in connection with the state policies and subsequent reforms made so far. The conceptual framework reported in figure 1 is not for analysis and reporting of the findings but for the overall conceptualization of this study.

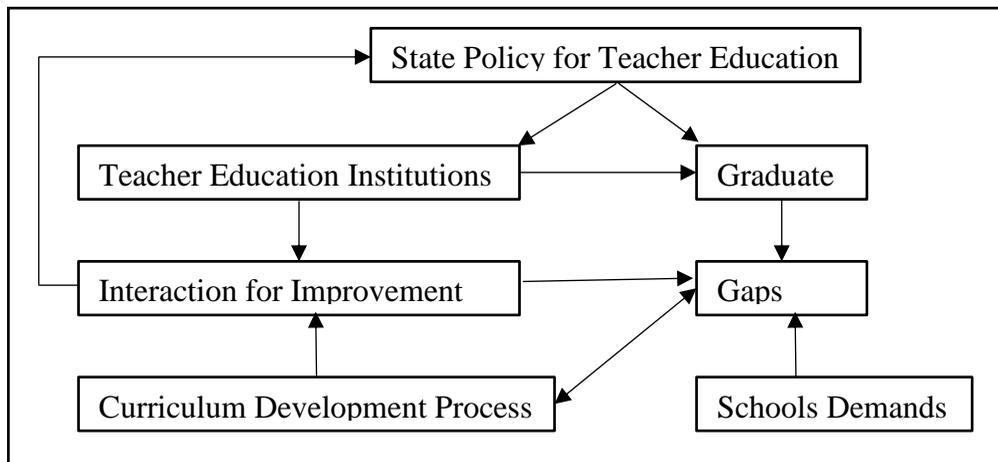


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows that teacher education institutions' policies and their production of human resources are influenced by the macro-level state policies that provision teacher education. However, the school-level demands do not align with the qualities of graduates from the current teacher education institutions. This reveals the fact that the current teacher education curricula fails to meet the demands of the society they are serving. At the same time, the school demands do relate to curriculum development process which is in control of the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. It also shows that the graduate attributes need to meet the expectations of the school curriculum developed by CDC and also the schools' changing demands.

Methods

This study adopted qualitative research design to explore the relationship between English language teacher education programs and market demands, especially those demanded by schools. The data were obtained through in-depth interview with teachers, teacher education experts and school heads which provided me to understand the whole phenomenon of teacher education. A qualitative inquiry deemed appropriate to explore a program, event, activity, process or one or more individuals regarding their actions or involvement in implementing or putting the policy into action (Creswell, 2009). This study

adopted a single-case design (Duff, 2018) in which the data about the issue (i.e., English language teacher education), which is a case here were drawn through in-depth interviews, critical reading of the course materials and researchers' self-reflexivity.

This study included a total of 11 participants (teacher educators) from the teacher education institutions (university), curriculum experts at CDC and the school heads. Table 1 below summarizes the detail of the participants.

Table 1: *Participating institutions, participants and methods of data*

Institutions/organization	Positions/Designation	No.	Methods of data
University (teacher education programs)	Department of English Education (teacher educator)	4	In-depth interviews
University	Ass. Dean	1	In-depth interviews
Schools	School heads		In-depth interviews
	public (2) and private schools (2)	4	
CDC	Education Officers (trainers)	2	Semi-structured interviews

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the observation and interview data. The audio-recorded and written recorded observation and interview data were transcribed, and the coding scheme was created for specific themes (Riazi, 2016). Finally, drawing on the assigned codes on the text, larger categories were identified, and broader themes were generated from the micro categories. Following this task done by the author, data coding was further strengthened working with a qualitative researcher whom the author invited for code validation. The findings reported in the thematic categories were the one agreed by both coders (i.e., the author and a hired coder). In this section that follow, I present the results and discussion in an integrative way.

Results and discussion

This study reported several concerns regarding the English language teacher education curriculum and current competencies of the graduates of the program, signalling a dire need to reform teacher education programs that can best respond to the national and local needs of school education.

Misalignment between market demands and language teacher education.

There is no doubt that Nepal's teacher education passed through a problem history and unplanned development. Although this situation is quite common across developing and least developed countries around the world, Nepal's English language teacher education programs which were inspired and supported by the United States have been realized to be ineffective as were expected. They are unable to meet the market demands for supplying the adequately skilled teaching human resources, the cause of which is the absence of a good planning. This study identified a misalignment between the market expectations and the competences developed on pre-service teachers through teacher education programs. A head teacher from a public school 1 said;

I am very surprised to see that even the newly appointed English teachers are not able to handle English teaching very well. Some students in secondary level have complained about the inefficient pronunciation and grammar knowledge of our new teachers, leave alone the proficiencies of our teachers who joined teaching decades ago.

Similar, and even more discouraging comments were made by a head teacher from a private secondary school as;

We announced vacancies for secondary level English teachers. Many applicants were fresh bachelor graduates (BA/B.Ed.) but we were not satisfied with any of them regarding their English proficiency. Despite our interest to hire the fresh graduates, we had to re-announce the vacancy due to not having a satisfactory applicant. Later we had to hire an experienced teacher for the post. This is our experience of hiring English teachers. Though there are many graduates, their attributes do not meet our schools' and students' expectations. I don't know why the graduate qualities are like this.

Hence, lacking proficient teacher graduates is one of the problems, and the stakeholders thought that this problem is going to be even serious given the current curricular practices and programs of the teacher education institutions in Nepal. The programs are poorly implemented and the rigour in skilling the prospective teachers in universities is weak. *In this regard, Cochran-Smith (2004) writes the problems in teacher*

education programs lies due to universities and colleges not being able to address larger set of educational issues, questions, and conditions that teachers are likely to face in their future workplaces. While producing the well-prepared and effective teachers is the stated goal of the teacher education institutions, their currently available teaching standards, educators' knowledge and skills as well as the curriculum that they are delivering collectively pose threats to the future of teaching, especially in Nepal. It is due to the embeddedness of teacher education with the social, economic and political issues of the respective context, it is a contested and problematic enterprise. *Cochran-Smith (2004)*, in relation to teacher education, claim that there are three conceptualizations of problems of teacher education. They are a) teacher education as a training problem, b) teacher education as a learning problem and c) teacher education as a policy problem. In Nepal's case, as the data from this study confirmed, English language teacher education is not a policy problem, rather a problem in training and learning.

Loose coordination amount major stakeholders. At present, it seems that teachers need more skills than knowledge, because of the easy availability of content of learning on the internet. It is less important to recite and be prepared to explain 'what is' and 'what means what', rather it is more important that teachers need to be skilled in delivery the content in such a way that students engage in learning. Hence is the growing importance of methodologies of teaching English rather than the contents of learning. If learners are engaged in learning in several ways, there is more chance for a successful learning.

In making this happen, the major stakeholders of teacher preparation and implementation of teaching are the universities, the curriculum development center as well as in-service teacher training agencies, and the schools where teaching and learning takes place. This study found that there is a loose coordination between the Curriculum Development Center that is responsible for development of school level curriculum, the teacher education institutions such as Faculty of Education of several universities and their affiliated colleges and the schools where the real implementation of the curriculum takes place with the help of graduates from teacher education institutions. An education officer said;

We have developed the curriculum for schools, and some teacher educators from

the universities are involved in it, but the problem is neither we clearly know what progress has been made in teacher education institutions/colleges recently, nor the educators there know what we are aiming at. Although we both parties are working for improving the quality of learning in schools, there are rare opportunities for us to be tied for collaboration. I think there lies the problem for us not meeting the quality standards.

The points raised by the education official working at Curriculum Development Center reflected the loose connection between the universities providing teacher education and the government agencies regulating curricular changes in schools. It seems that they are too far in terms of coordinating for quality enhancing in schools. This had led to a lack of teachers or teacher education graduates' knowledge of curriculum expectations in schools. Head teacher in a public school said;

I think our English teachers (perhaps teachers of all subjects) do not know the details of our curriculum. Maybe they know about the contents of the curriculum while preparing for teacher service examination but perhaps they do not know the essence of it. I don't think the universities and colleges teach about what curricular contents and goals are developed for school education.

Our teacher educators are charged with training teachers for the best behavior that is established and practiced in the professional communities at home and abroad. However, due to teaching and learning constraints in their institutions, they are not fully capable or able to educate students to meet the goals. In our context, it was reported from the informants that the existing approaches to teacher education are creating more problems than improvements of teacher qualities. The current infrastructure, teaching contexts and teaching style lag far behind than what is happening in schools. The traditional systems and curriculum developed decades ago which are not upgraded frequently are insufficient to meet today's needs and expectations. The participants argue that the empirical research base for specific and generally applicable teaching behavior was thin and that the competency-based teacher training programs are lacking in our contexts. Prospective teachers do not clearly know what competencies in English language teaching in schools are required for them to meet the market needs.

English teacher shortages. Shortage of quality teachers or teachers with sufficient competencies is one of the concerns raised by participants of this study. It was reported that due to the unscientific as well as poorly contextualized curriculum and educating practices in teacher education institutions, there is a shortage of competent teachers which has negatively affected quality of education in schools. Although, in this study, the concerns were raised about English teacher education programs, some of the concerns raised by the participants were genuinely generic and applicable to other subject areas as well. Referring to the English teacher shortage concerns, the head teachers and teacher educators called for a collective action to recognize the centrality of teachers' roles in educational as well as social transformation. One of the teacher educators said;

I think the teacher education programs should aim to educate prospective teachers with the competencies required for the 21st century teachers and learners. If we continue to implement the tradition curriculum, I think the market demands will be far from the reach of our graduates and that will lead to shortage of quality teachers for our schools which are making rapid advancement in teaching and learning.

This educators' view and experience reflect the need of rethinking the current educating practices in teacher education programs, which are also applicable to Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programs. Similar propositions were also made by UNESCO (2015) as;

Societies everywhere are undergoing deep transformation, and this calls for new forms of education to foster the competencies that societies and economies need, today and tomorrow. This means moving beyond literacy and numeracy, to focus on learning environments and on new approaches to learning for greater justice, social equity and global solidarity. Education must be about learning to live on a planet under pressure. It must be about cultural literacy, on the basis of respect and equal dignity, helping to weave together the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. (p. 3)

From these data, it is relevant to expect that the programs in English teacher

education aim at equipping our prospective teachers with the knowledge and skills that best empower them to deal with the current and future challenges in teaching. Developing teacher expertise as per the contemporary global and local changes in one of the major concerns of teacher education programs (Tsui, 2003). For the current English language teacher programs are to be redesigned and contextualized so that they can contribute to enhance linguistic and cultural literacy towards supporting the national goal of achieving whole-child development (Choi & Poudel, 2022; Poudel & Choi, 2022).

Developing competency-based programs for English teachers. Teachers of all subjects cannot be divorced from the community they are working in and serving to. They need and are expected to exhibit some behaviour that reveal their competencies. For instance, English teachers not only need language skills but also the skills in delivering language content through the use of latest technologies. Beside this, they need creativity and innovation. All these competencies are included within the broader framework of the 21st century skills for teachers. In Nepal, although the need of competency-based curriculum has been felt and streamlined through educational policies and plans, how they have been translated into the teacher education curricula and in schools is still unclear. While the curricular changes in Nepal's universities and schools are relatively slow, it is hard to locate which change addressed which competencies and how they are implemented in practice at teacher education programs. Not to be negated is the fact that skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking are the main skills for 21st century competencies required for learners and teachers, and are, though indirectly, included in the curriculum, it seems mandatory to redesign the curriculum so that English teachers develop those skills while also enhancing their professionalism. Regarding this, one of the education officials said;

We have based our training for teachers on the competency framework, and we have seen that there are significant improvements in teachers' skills in implementing these competencies through school curriculum. This is about in-service teachers. However, I am not sure if there have been any changes in curriculum of Faculty of Education regarding the competencies defined in the

education policies. If they have not, I think it is already late for our prospective teachers develop such competencies which the market puts into priority now.

The education officials and teacher educators communicated their awareness of the competencies required for current and prospective teachers. But the educators were not sure about how such competencies have been developed in pre-service teacher education programs. One of the educators said, *“I teach English courses assigned to me, and there are no mentions of such competencies. I complete the course and try to make sure if the course objectives are met, but cannot assess which competencies are achieved by our students”*. A study by Petek and Bedir (2018) in Turkish context concluded that awareness programs were needed for pre-service teachers about 21st century skills. They also reported that awareness trainings significantly changed pre-service teachers’ perceptions towards critical thinking and creativity, both of which are the essential skills for teachers. The findings of their study relate to this present study as awareness trainings on implementing competency framework in teacher education is a dire need in Nepal’s case.

Conclusion and implications

This study explored the historical background of teacher education in general and English language teacher education in particular, and highlighted the need to redefine and redesign the current teacher education programs to ensure that they meet the demands of the present and future teaching contexts in Nepal. As the review of the historical background of teacher education in Nepal showed that the continuity of colonial constructs in teacher education programs and practices could not address the highly contextual needs of teachers and the schools they are working at. Four major findings were reported in this small-scale study; the misalignment between the programs and the market, the loose coordination among stakeholders, shortages of quality English teachers and a need of integrating a competency framework while developing teacher education programs. It was also found that the teacher educators were not sure about how the competencies, if any, have been integrated into the courses despite their awareness of the 21st century competencies required for teachers to deal with present-day teaching contexts. This showed that prospective teachers require to have opportunities to enhance their subject

matter knowledge and pedagogical skills, both of which build on the key competencies emphasized in 21st century skills. But in doing so, a sustainable and strong coordination between the curriculum development bodies, teacher education institutions and schools employing teaching graduates, so that efforts from all these agencies contribute towards producing qualified English language teachers who can deal with the changing demands of the current and future teaching contexts.

These findings imply that reforming English language teacher education curricula and the trainings associated with them are extremely needed to contextualize teaching graduates' qualities. This also leads to policy changes in teacher education programs, increased coordination between line agencies working towards improvement of quality of education and engagement of teacher graduates in curriculum development processes through several alternative channels and modes. Similarly, it is to be noted that the findings of this study did not include teachers as participants. Hence, future studies that explore current and potential teachers' skills, attitude, knowledge and challenges in enhancing the core teaching competencies might provide powerful insights from the bottom up to rethink the English language teacher education programs and policies.

Note: This paper largely draws on data obtained for a mini-research study submitted to University Grants Commission, Nepal.

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