



English Language Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Textbook Use in Nepali Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Innovative pedagogical approaches to language teaching stress fostering communication abilities and contextual usage of language. This qualitative narrative study explores English language teachers' perceptions and practices of textbook use in Nepali secondary schools. Four secondary level English language teachers were purposively selected as the participants from public schools in Kanchanpur district, Nepal. I employed narrative interview protocols with open-ended questions and classroom observation as research tools for collecting necessary data, and the data were analysed and interpreted using thematic analysis. The findings of the study showed that English language teachers have been entirely dependent on texts and exercises of the prescribed textbooks in their classroom practices. The study also revealed that English teachers have positive perceptions and knowledge of curriculum objectives and textbook alignment, but in classroom pedagogy, they fail to teach language through the given content and tasks. The study further showed that English language teachers spent more time explaining the content rather than focusing on language learning activities. The study implies that English teachers at secondary level need to employ student-centred innovative approaches creating language learning environment in the classroom, and engage students in activities using textbook contents and tasks, and even going beyond the textbook tasks.

Keywords: ELT pedagogy, textbook-based, perception, observation, narrative

Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) in the Nepali context has undergone significant shifts due to the influence of innovative pedagogical approaches. In

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recent decades, ELT pedagogy has evolved and moved worldwide towards more communicative, interactive and learner-centred teaching approaches from traditional teacher-centered approaches and methods like grammar-translation, which dominated classroom pedagogy for decades. As recent innovative teaching approaches aim to promote contextual and practical usage of language that emphasize communicative competence and performance, critical thinking and learner autonomy, the curriculum and textbooks for classroom pedagogy should be developed accordingly. The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), which is responsible for designing and implementing school-level curriculum in Nepal, develops and prescribes curricula and textbooks for the school level. This centre is also involved in evaluating, reviewing and updating school-level curriculum and the whole teaching-learning process is guided by curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). CDC has made efforts to develop curriculum and textbooks of English for the secondary level, aligning with the global evolution in language education that could meet the national curricular goals and global pedagogical trends. The present secondary-level English curriculum of Nepal aims to enable students to communicate their ideas in English and expose them to the vast treasure of knowledge available in both written and spoken English (CDC, 2021b, p. 39). On this basis, as Acharya (2024) discusses, English textbooks can be regarded as the most effective teaching and learning materials in the classroom to foster English as a foreign language in Nepali context (p. 142), the CDC has prescribed the textbooks as primary teaching resources to support modern classroom pedagogical practices and develop communicative language skills up on learners.

The advancement in Nepali ELT pedagogy has been marked by a gradual shift in teaching methodologies, i.e. traditional, teacher-centred teaching to modern, more innovative and communicative approaches. According to Bhatt (2024), English language teachers in secondary schools are increasingly adopting innovative, student-centred teaching strategies moving away from conventional, teacher-centred teaching methods (p. 128). In the same vein, Bhandari (2020) states, the traditional way of classroom teaching-learning has shifted to learner modes of learning, and these learner modes of learning create opportunities and provide students' autonomy for learning and change teachers' role from knowledge provider to facilitator in the classroom (p. 10). Similar to the context, Kadel (2020) states that, the curriculum of compulsory English at secondary level has been developed and prepared for learner-centred classrooms (p. 185). This indicates that textbooks and curricula are attempting to keep up with the growing significance of contemporary pedagogical strategies. Despite this advancement in pedagogy, several challenges persist in secondary-level ELT pedagogy. Though the curriculum and textbook of secondary-level English have been developed considering student-focused learning activities, the implementation part is weaker. In this context, Kadel (2020), further states that ELT classrooms always remain teacher-

directed, with textbooks and teaching strategies insufficiently addressing the needs of students in the classroom (p. 179). Similarly, Bhandari (2022) asserts, teachers often follow textbooks and provide structured content and exercises. In line with the same, Phyak (2016) states that in most public schools in Nepal, teaching English largely means teaching the textbook, and learning is often reduced to memorizing answers and reproducing them in exams. This suggests that classroom pedagogy becomes teacher-centred when textbooks are used exclusively. Textbook influence, in this sense, tends to coincide with teacher-centred approaches in which teachers deliver lectures from the book and students receive information passively (Bhatt, 2024). Therefore, prescribed textbooks should not be made the means of content delivery in the classroom. It should be utilised in classroom pedagogy as a primary teaching resource that could shape modern pedagogical practices and help learn students the language skills aligned to the national curriculum.

Furthermore, in the education system of Nepal, particularly in public secondary schools, prescribed textbooks by the CDC are more than just teaching resources; they become the sole source of curriculum implementation in the classroom pedagogy (Karki, 2014). This reveals that a textbook is a guide that leads to a proper direction through which teachers and students meet their goals. It serves as the primary source of content and structure for classroom teaching. Gautam (2022), in this context, states that most of the classroom activities are directed by the textbooks, and teachers feel confident if the textbook is in front of them (p. 102). Regarding EFL classrooms, textbooks work as a foundation to lead whole pedagogical practices, including the examination system and other activities. For many teachers, especially those with limited knowledge and experience and a lack of professional training, textbooks provide a ready-made curriculum and guide for planning the lesson (Timsina, 2021). However, this kind of centrality and dependency of textbooks regarding classroom pedagogy hinders innovative practices, learner autonomy and the development of communication skills. In line with this, Pokhrel (2021) emphasises that textbooks alone are insufficient for effective learning and advocates for integrating diverse learning materials and activities to promote learning achievements through student engagement (p.108). They are the only limited sources to meet the objectives of the curriculum. In this sense, textbooks can become ‘a tyrant to the teacher’, restricting flexibility and adaptability in teaching methods (Harmer, 2007). Although textbooks are essential resources in English language classes, their rigid structure and inadequacies demand a more dynamic, engaging and contextually appropriate pedagogical approach. It is possible to more effectively meet the needs of learners and facilitate more effective language learning by utilizing a variety of pedagogical techniques, including additional resources and materials, and modifying contents to the specific circumstances for which English language teachers require to be resourceful, equipped with professional skills of manipulating and even creating authentic materials on the other specific contexts (Baral, 2010).

There can be multiple alternative ways to achieve the requirements of the curriculum and contemporary pedagogical trends. English language teachers can employ student-centred pedagogical methods like task-based, project-based, content and language integrated learning, problem-solving, etc. and authentic materials like newspapers, magazines, podcasts, menus, blogs, YouTube videos, etc., in the classroom. They can make use of pedagogical techniques like role play, extensive reading, quizzes, group discussions, presentation, debate sessions, etc., with collaboration by integrating ICT during teaching in the classroom. Such approaches and techniques facilitate and engage students in active language learning and enhance communication, creativity, critical thinking and problem solving through real-world tasks (Bastola, 2021; Bhandari & Bhandari, 2024; Neupane, 2024; Paudel et al., 2024). In this context, sociocultural theory of language learning emphasises that social interaction promotes language development and that language development or learning occurs through communication and collaboration with others. It further states, learners/students remain in need of support and guidance, which can be provided from the teacher and more experienced peers in the classroom (Vygotsky, 1978). However, textbooks seem to be the sole source and are taken as inevitable material for teaching-learning purposes in public schools in Nepal. They are regarded as essential and reliable materials to carry on classroom teaching and even plan the overall teaching process (Acharya, 2024). As textbooks are highly used teaching materials for classroom pedagogy in Nepalese public schools, they are supposed to provide students with the required knowledge and skills to match their level.

However, students at government schools may not have been provided a natural environment to learn English from native exposures (Bista, 2011). The present English textbooks for secondary level, particularly for grades nine and ten, contain a variety of authentic materials and tasks aiming to make students learn and practice language skills for real-life situations. These textbooks integrate language skills and aspects with balance along with ICT materials (CDC, 2078). This indicates that Nepali secondary EFL pedagogy focuses on teaching of language through content and tasks. As previous research studies indicated the inappropriate use of textbooks and the only source for classroom pedagogy becomes insufficient, failing to provide a language learning environment, achieve curricular objectives and adhere to modern pedagogical shifts. In this sense, it becomes a pertinent issue to explore how English teachers perceive, experience and make use of textbooks to teach language, as it aims to teach language through content and tasks. Thus, this study aims to explore English language teachers' perceptions and classroom practices regarding the use of textbooks for effective teaching and learning of English in Nepali secondary classrooms.

Methods and Procedures

This study adopts a qualitative narrative methodology based on primary information. To explore the perceptions and practices regarding using textbooks in classroom pedagogy, I selected four English language teachers who have been teaching English at the secondary level for more than ten years. I selected Kanchanpur district, Nepal, as a research site and four public secondary schools from different locations based on convenience in the data gathering process, as I belong to the same district. To select participants from the site, I employed a purposive sampling procedure. The rationality of purposive sampling of participants entirely depends on the researchers' subjective judgment, keeping in consideration the purpose of the study. Similarly, I selected two male and two female teachers to ensure gender equality among participants and to collect representative data from them, making the data collected from them more accurate and trustworthy. For the collection of data for my research topic, I developed an informal, flexible, in-depth narrative interview protocol with several open-ended questions. Likewise, after obtaining the consent from school administration and research participants and assuring them for privacy and secrecy of the audio and video recordings, I also gathered data by observing the research participants' teaching in real classrooms.

I met the research participants in person and conducted interviews with them. Taking permission from them, I recorded their voices on my cell phone. I interviewed them in Nepali medium so that research participants could share their perceptions and experiences freely. Further, I transcribed audio recordings into printed form and translated those transcriptions from Nepali to English. To develop themes, I examined the data several times. I organised the data into different themes based on the purpose of my study. Finally, I analyzed and interpreted themes by the guidelines of thematic process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) which includes familiarizing the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, naming themes and writing up aligning to the purpose of exploring teachers' perceptions and practices of utilizing textbooks for classroom pedagogy in Nepalese secondary English classrooms. Since ethical considerations are unavoidable in social science research, I committed to and followed all necessary moral and academic norms throughout the whole study process, from gathering data to analysis and interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Data gathered employing in-depth narrative interviews and classroom observations were analysed and interpreted under the following three main themes.

Heavy Reliance on Textbook Teaching

Since the overarching objective of the English curriculum at the secondary level in Nepal is to foster students' ability to communicate effectively and explore the vast resources available in the English language, both spoken and written (CDC, 2021b, p. 39), the CDC develops the textbooks for this level based on objectives of the curriculum. It aims to make the students learn language for real-world contexts. However, the common understanding of teaching English in Nepali context is the teaching of prescribed textbooks. Most of the teachers often follow the texts and exercises given in the book while teaching, and on this basis, measure the students' learning achievements. Sapkota (2015), in this context, states that "a common understanding of teaching English in the Nepali context implies teaching the prescribed textbook lessons and learning means following the teachers' instructions" (p. 71). In this context, it is worth mentioning the perception of Deepak, one of my research participants, regarding the textbook. He stated that,

The textbooks undergo periodic revisions and changes. In my experience as a secondary-level English teacher, this is the third time I have changed English textbook for grade nine. And these textbooks are also supplied too delay in the schools, which hampers our daily teaching learning process and later creates difficulty in finishing the course in time.

This narration, shared by Deepak, very evidently demonstrated that classroom teaching is entirely dependent on the prescribed textbooks that the CDC develops and distributes in the public schools. Likewise, his narration indicated that, teachers do not use reference resources to prepare and plan lessons for classroom teaching in compliance with the curriculum. In the very situation of understanding the utilisation and influence of the textbook, another participant, Binita, narrated,

Textbooks are updated and changed regularly but the orientation programs for new courses and the supply of textbooks are never delivered on time. As a result, it becomes difficult for us to adjust to new textbooks and, it also hinders and slows down our teaching.

The story of Binita more evidently showed that English teachers' classroom instruction is solely dependent on the prescribed textbooks. Her story also highlighted the reality that teachers remain under pressure to complete the course in the allocated time with the limited available resources. Similar to the experiences of Deepak and Binita, my third research participant, Dikshya, stated that,

We are always remain in pressure to finish the course in time. The school administration, students, and even guardians blame us for inadequately conducting teaching if it is not completed within the scheduled time. Therefore, we typically follow the textbook's texts and exercises while teaching.

Dikshya's sharing demonstrated the fact that teachers usually adhere to the texts and

activities in the English classes. Her story also showed that due to the afraid of being accused of poor teaching by the parents and school authorities, teachers oblige to get through the textbook and finish in time. This indicates that teachers are not only responsible for textbook teaching but many other factors create a kind of pressure on teachers following textbook teaching. In a similar line, the fourth participant Krishna's shared his experience, and sated that,

By the assessment system applied in exams, and particularly in the SEE exam, we have to teach and complete the course. The preparation of the question paper almost follows the textbook passages and exercises. Therefore, our teaching rarely goes beyond the textbook passages and exercises.

Krishna's experience is more vivid when viewed in the context of teaching from a textbook. It accurately stated that teachers are compelled, for a number of reasons, to follow the typical teaching of textbook contents and exercises. His story also showed that the evaluation system in tests and examinations creates pressure to thoroughly follow the textbook sections and exercises. This further indicates that the evaluation system does not give equal priority in assessing all language skills and focuses more on learners' competence compared to performance. In this way, all my teacher participants' experiences regarding classroom pedagogy showed textbook-based classroom teaching practices. Their narratives are so intelligible that they have been completely dependent on texts and exercises of the prescribed textbooks provided by the concerned higher levels of the educational framework.

Positive Perceptions towards Curriculum and Textbook Alignment

Regarding the facilitation and alignment of the textbook with the curriculum, my research participants showed positive belief that the present secondary level English curriculum facilitates their teaching activities. In this context, Krishna posited that,

The current English curriculum for grades nine and ten of the secondary level is good and extremely helpful. Nothing is lacking there,; each textbook unit simultaneously covers both grammatical tasks and major language skills. If it is properly executed in the classroom, our teaching becomes effective and successful.

This narrative of Krishna demonstrates the fact that the present secondary level English curriculum has been designed as an excellent and supportive document for planning effective instructional practices in the classrooms. His sharing also showed that the textbooks have been developed by curricular aims that all language skills and aspects have been included in each chapter for practising in the classroom. His sharing further indicated the proper implementation to make teaching and learning productive and efficient. In line with the same, another research participant, Dikshya, narrated that,

Our teaching strategies are based on the curriculum. It provides us with guidelines regarding using the teaching methodology and offers suggestions to employ student-centred teaching in the classroom. Altogether, CDC has developed a textbook compatible with the objectives of the curriculum.

The narrative of Dikshya explored the curriculum as the foundation for carrying out teaching and learning activities. Her story also showed the significance of a curriculum that directs and suggests selecting student-centred pedagogy during classroom teaching. Likewise, the third research participant, Binita, narrated her positive perceptions towards the present curriculum. She stated that,

Our English curriculum for secondary level facilitates and directs the whole classroom teaching from the selection of teaching methods and techniques to the ways of taking assessments. If it can be followed properly throughout the academic session in the teaching-learning and evaluation system, it gives effective outputs.

This narration of Binita revealed that the curriculum is the basic document that controls, directs and suggests the entire pedagogical planning of the subject teacher regarding teaching methodology and assessment system. However, her story indicated towards lack of proper execution. Similar to the story of Binita, the fourth participant, Deepak stated that,

The present curriculum of grades nine and ten suggests implementing student-centered teaching. It emphasises students' learning through different activities. CDC has developed these textbooks in a very careful way so that they could fulfil set curricular aims. The contents and exercises are very interesting and beneficial for practising language learning.

This narrative assertion of Deepak explored that there is a very good compatibility between textbooks and the curriculum. It also revealed that the textbook exercises and materials are highly engaging and useful for improving language skills. In this sense, my teacher participants' narratives indicated that they keep the knowledge of the curriculum well and make an effort to plan their teaching according to the textbook designated based on it. However, as their narrative also indicated, there are problems with the proper execution of curricular objectives only through textbook teaching.

Teachers' Use of Textbooks in the Classroom

As the English curriculum for grades nine and ten is designed to empower students to express their ideas effectively and confidently in English, it gives stress on using a communicative method in classroom pedagogy. The updated version of English curriculum for grades nine-twelve also emphasises communicative approach to language teaching, focusing on all four language skills essential for students' real-life contexts, aligning with practical language use (CDC, 2022, as cited in Khadka,

2024, p. 47). The textbook for this level has also been designed in line with the same curriculum objectives. It indicates that if the curriculum's suggestions are implemented, it suggests teaching language through content and tasks given in the textbook. In this line, the argument made by Sapkota (2015) can be appropriate that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is more appropriate in Nepali context. He states, "It is high time to shift our practices to a more productive approach to teaching, and CLIL meets the present needs" (p. 71). In line with the same, Paudel et al. (2024) state, CLIL is about learning two things simultaneously: a language and the content (p. 60). This indicates that secondary-level English pedagogy demands CLIL as an appropriate method of teaching. In this situation of ELT pedagogy of secondary English classes, to discover how my research participants are practising teaching, I observed their real classroom teaching. As I observed Binita's class, she initiated her teaching like this: first, she wrote the teaching topic, date, etc., on the whiteboard and instructed students to open the book to the page number. Then, she asked some questions related to title word meanings and delivered their meanings in both English and Nepali. Then after, she asked one of the students to read the first paragraph of the text. As the student finished reading, she again asked and gave the meanings of new words, and started explaining the concept of the paragraph. While explaining, she asked some related questions randomly in the class. Some students attempted to answer, and the majority of them remained silent. During the asking questions, the classroom seemed to some extent interactive. Similarly, she taught the remaining paragraphs, and towards the end of the class, she asked some questions related to the text. Finally, she gave the students, as a home assignment, the exercises given in the book.

As I minutely noticed, she went thoroughly through the textbook topic and attempted to make the class interactive, but she became more active in the class in comparison to her students. Because of the students' less participation, she made more use of the lecture method. She spent more time explaining the word meanings and concepts. In this way, though she attempted to involve students in teaching learning using interrogation with them, I found her not well prepared for engaging students in language learning activities. They were not provided with more opportunities for practising language learning. So, as Tiwari (2021) states, "the main focus of the teachers was to teach content primarily focusing on vocabulary items rather than having real interaction" (p. 384), Binita's classroom teaching also covered the given content in the book, but she couldn't engage students in language learning activities.

Similarly, I observed the classroom teaching of Krishna regarding textbook-based teaching. I noted that he also completely followed the text and exercises given in the book. His classroom teaching was like this: first, he asked the students to open the book, and page number and write the teaching topic on the whiteboard. They all opened the book and the topic. Then he asked the meaning of the title word randomly

in the class, and gave the meaning and concept of the title. Then, he taught difficult vocabulary from the given text and moved to have students read the paragraphs. After finishing reading, he explained the concept of the paragraph. He asked questions during teaching vocabulary and explaining the concept of the paragraph. He mostly used lecture method and students except replying yes sir/ no sir, replied some answers in Nepali, and remained most of the time unanswered and silent in the class. He used the strategy of asking questions to elicit the meanings and answers, and made them read aloud the text to engage in learning, as they got the opportunity to learn reading skills and pronunciation during reading. In this way, Krishna attempted to engage students in learning activities but with very limited techniques. He was also found spending much of his teaching time on content explanation rather than on creating language learning opportunities.

Furthermore, I observed the classroom teaching practices of Dikshya to confirm how she makes use of content and tasks to practice language learning in the classroom. I found her too, mostly using the lecture method and spending much of the time on content explanation. More or less, she also initiated the class in similar ways by asking questions. She asked vocabulary and text-related short questions like,

Have you heard the word ‘ecology’? What do you mean by this?
What is the meaning of environment?

And, students mostly replied like,

Yes, ma’am. Prayawaran/ watawaran ma’am.

Dikshya clarified the meaning of the title words both in English and Nepali. She taught sub-title words given in the text and tried to elicit the meaning from the students, they attempted to reply but mostly in Nepali. When she moved further, she asked students to read the text and facilitated them in pronunciation during reading. During clarifying the concept of the paragraph, sometimes, she went through line-by-line content explanation. She could not create interactive environment in the classroom to make students’ participation in language learning activities.

Likewise, I observed the real teaching of Deepak to see how he uses textbook to teach language in the classroom. I did not find much difference in his teaching, too. He started the class by writing the teaching topic on the whiteboard. The topic was ‘Surprising Customs’. He talked about the meaning of the title words. He asked the meaning of ‘surprising customs’ whether they had heard and known before. He asked like this:

T: Do you know the meaning of surprising? Can you say the meaning of customs?

Ss: Yes, sir. Aascharyajanak.....

The meaning of ‘customs’ they cannot reply. Deepak clarified the meaning

and the concept of the title both in English and Nepali. He moved ahead and asked the students to read aloud the paragraphs. During the reading, he facilitated them in pronunciation. As their reading finished, he taught paragraphs. While teaching paragraphs, he read aloud line by line and explained the concept. He taught meaning of difficult words of the paragraphs. While explaining the meaning, he used English and Nepali language both. And finally, as he finished the paragraphs, he gave homework, the exercises given in the book, and concluded the class. As noticed, Deepak could not create language learning atmosphere in the classroom. He also spent much of the class time on finishing the content given in the book.

In this way, all the participants were found practising similar ways of delivering the content in the classroom. They were found mainly focusing on teaching reading and writing rather than listening and speaking which may have been due to their lack of confidence in conducting learning activities or the fact that the textbook is filled with reading texts and writing exercises. However, the curriculum comprises all language skills and aspects to be taught in the classroom. They also stated that the curriculum and textbooks have been developed with good compatibility so that language learning activities can be conducted in the classroom. But from the class observation, they were found spending more time on content explaining rather than focusing on language learning activities. They may have to follow their teaching by the requirements of the exam, which primarily give emphasis on reading and writing skills. In this context, Shrestha and Gautam (2022) stated that “teachers may feel more confident in teaching reading and writing and those skills are prioritised in external assessment” (p. 30). The class observation also discovered that teachers often began their teaching and discussions in the class with brief textual questions, to which students responded simply in words or in phrases sometimes in English and largely in Nepali (Tiwari, 2021). Likewise, it showed that they have been spending their class time on completing the course rather than conducting the learning activities effectively. It further found that teachers’ seriousness regarding the type of content that has to be utilised to teach students certain things like language skills, grammar, etc., was insufficient.

Conclusion

This research study aimed at exploring English language teachers’ perceptions and experiences of textbook use in Nepali secondary schools. It also attempted to discover teachers’ classroom practices of utilising given content and tasks from the textbook for language learning activities. The study revealed that English language teachers have been entirely dependent on texts and exercises of the prescribed textbooks in their classroom pedagogical practices. The study also found that teachers of English retain complete knowledge of the curriculum, and attempt to plan their

teaching, aligning their objectives with textbook content and tasks. However, as it showed, there are challenges to the proper execution of curricular objectives only through textbook teaching. They were found conducting their teaching according to the requirements of the examination that prioritise reading and writing skills. The study further revealed that English language teachers spent more time explaining the content rather than focusing on language learning activities. It also showed the lack of seriousness of teachers in conducting effective language learning activities, as they often began their teaching and discussions through interrogation and spent their class time on completing the course. This study, in this way, uncovered the textbook-based content teaching in Nepalese secondary English classrooms.

As the study explored the predominance of teacher-centred, textbook-oriented, and limited student engagement in classroom teaching practices, it suggests that English teachers at the secondary level to employ student-centred teaching and focus on creating a more language learning environment in the classroom. They need to conduct student-engaging activities for promoting language learning utilising textbook contents and tasks, and even going beyond the textbook exercises. They should give more time to language practice than to content explanation. This research study has certain constraints, like; it is a small-scale study that only included four English teachers of Kanchanpur district, Far Western region of Nepal. The study utilises interview protocols and classroom observation only for gathering the data. As a result, the findings' generalisation may not be accurate in different circumstances throughout the country. However, teachers who teach English at secondary may find the study helpful. Likewise, this study could be insightful and informative for scholars who are interested in investigating textbook-based teaching and learning.

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