

# Collaborative Language Learning Practices of Teachers in ELT Classroom

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## Abstract

*This study aims to explore the collaborative language teaching practices of English teachers in ELT classrooms in Nepal. Applying the theoretical framework of social constructivism, I used narrative inquiry to explore my participants' stories regarding their practices of collaborative teaching in English classrooms. Two secondary-level English teachers from two community schools in Rupandehi district were purposively selected. I interviewed them using a semi-structured interview to elicit relevant information. This study reveals that the teacher participants felt positive toward collaborative practices to construct new knowledge, bring a solution to problems and make learning successful. The study also reveals that English teachers and learners working together sharing and exchanging ideas develop mutual trust and respect for each other. In addition, it helps establish a social atmosphere conducive to meaningful learning and to solving students' problems.*

**Key words:** Collaborative language learning, critical thinking, learner-centred- instruction, professional development

## Introduction

Collaborative language learning is a type of learner-centred- instruction, whereby students work together in small groups to achieve a common goal. For Graham (2005), "collaborative learning is a small group of learners working together as a team to solve problems and accomplish a common goal" (p.11). When students learn separately, their performances do not necessarily affect one another either positively or negatively. McInerney and Robert (2004, p. 205) state, "Collaborative learning is a method that implies working in a group of two or more to achieve a common goal while respecting each individual's contribution to the whole" (as cited in Kozar, 2010, p. 16). The principle behind this is that more heads are better than one. If students are engaged in collaborative activities, they promote their linguistic ability, problem-solving skills, and learning motivation (Brown, 2008).

Collaboration is one of the effective approaches in English language teaching where teachers have the opportunity to assess and differentiate instruction for students more willingly. Regarding this, Puchner and Taylor (2006) assert collaborative practices among teachers assist them to improve their self-efficacy, teaching efficiency and skill, and improvement

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of instructional quality. Collaborative learning is a group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups in which each learner is held accountable for his or her learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others. In collaborative learning, there is face-to-face interaction and a mutually helpful atmosphere where the learners have a chance to practice the language through collaborative social skills with their group mates by the exchange of information between learners in groups to increase the learning of others. They learn better and retain more in a teacher-centred classroom. Moreover, they can learn new instructional techniques from one another. Collaborative activities also provide them with mutual support for planning and implementing lessons, assessing students' progress, sharing professional concerns, and addressing students' learning needs. In addition, it allows more opportunities for teachers to improve their classroom pedagogy and maximize their learning.

### **Problem Statement**

As an English language teacher, I experienced that the school administration wants to control both students and teachers in the name of discipline. They think teachers are the main resources for knowledge delivery. As a student, I experienced that my interests were rarely addressed by my teachers when I was studying in school. Likewise, as I started teaching, I was asked to keep my class quiet so that the students could not break the discipline. In such a situation, I found students' low engagement in learning. I believe collaborative practice enhances learning as it focuses on achieving the common goal of the learners. However, it seems more challenging to engage students and make them work together. I believe collaborative learning assigns teachers a supportive role in learning and the learners could explore their creativity. Collaboration involves group work or project work where the teacher facilitates learners to generate new ideas. In this regard, an important element of the creative process is the sharing of ideas in learning, and group participants share their diverse perspectives (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003).

As collaborative practices enhance learning, the policymakers and the curriculum designers of Nepal also started focusing on collaboration but the practical understanding of teachers' collaborative practices remains unexplored. Similarly, most community schools are not resourced in terms of teachers or teaching and learning materials to effectively deliver the curriculum in English (MoE, 2016). Thus, teachers and resources also play a significant role in collaborative classrooms. In the past, teachers were regarded as the sources of all knowledge and they delivered the knowledge to their students. However, the current practices of teaching and learning are different. The present study aims at exploring English teachers' perceptions and collaborative practices in teaching and learning English in classrooms.

## **Research Questions**

The study has addressed the following research questions:

1. How do the English language teachers perceive and practice collaborative teaching and learning in their language classrooms?
2. How do the English language teachers tell the stories of engaging their students in teaching and learning in their language classrooms collaboratively?

## **Significance of the Study**

In the past, teachers were regarded as the source of all knowledge and information and they were supposed to transfer knowledge to the learners that they needed, however, at present, they are regarded as facilitators and inspirers of learners to create a favourable environment for them where they can learn a language without obvious effort. Collaboration involves deciding goals together with others, sharing responsibilities, and working together to achieve more than what could be achieved by an individual on their own (Barfield, 2016). Moreover, collaborative language learning enables learners to develop creative thinking to boost their critical thinking by fostering their inner potential capacity. Learners are found to learn teamwork skills working collaboratively sharing ideas with their direct involvement and participation in communicative activities and developing better writing skills along with basic interpersonal communication skills. Such activities maximize students' interaction through the use of interactive tasks to develop critical thinking skills and communicative competence in learners to change the existing classroom setting. It is one of the best ways of resolving learners' doubts, and uncertainty and helps one another. Group activities are found as the major mode of teaching and learning.

This study will be significant to enhance the quality of the learners through collaborative language learning for developing learners' proficiency in the ELT classroom. Teaching and learning over a longer time in Nepal is a traditional one. However, the tendency of rote learning and memorization is being discouraged at present. Particularly, the study will be useful to Nepal English teachers to understand and implement collaborative teaching and learning for improving pedagogical practices. Furthermore, the policymakers, syllabus designers, textbook writers, teachers, students, and researchers who are involved in the field of language teaching and learning will be benefited from this study. Realizing this fact, I attempt to conduct this research to explore the English language teachers' collaborative practices in teaching the English language in Nepali classrooms.

## **Review of Literature**

Collaboration is a combined effort of two or more people working together to achieve a common goal. Language teaching and learning is a social process that involves and engages teachers and students in the activities. In addition, collaborative practice is an integral part of

language teaching and learning. A collaborative approach is an action that the teachers and students agree to collaborate with colleagues that leads to a change in their understanding and behaviour (Newell & Bain, 2018). The participants' involvement and sharing of understanding in a group enhance their skills to discover their own beliefs and innovative ideas. Vygotsky emphasizes on social-interaction and collaboration. He argued that language learning is a social process and lies in shared understandings between the learner and the tutor. Vygotsky (1978) concluded that developing mental functions must be accessed through collaborative not independent or isolated activities (as cited in Shabani, et al., 2010).

Collaborative teaching and learning resources that information is not something that is conveyed to students, but rather something that arises from active discourse among those who seek to understand and apply the concepts and techniques (Trentin, 2010). In collaborative practices, learners get ample opportunities to share ideas with members involved in the tasks or problems in a stress-free way. Similarly, teachers and students together get an opportunity to exchange ideas with each other as well as with peers (Gitterman, 2008). It helps learners to personalize learning with active involvement in the tasks so that they could share and explore more creative and innovative ideas.

Vygotsky (1978) states collaborative learning can be seen to occur through dialogue, social interaction, and joint decision-making with others, and these shared processes contribute greatly to individual and collective growth, as well as to co-constructed understanding and knowledge (as cited in Barfield, 2016). The shared process of language teaching and learning through dialogue and social interaction develops the learners' need and help them to address the problems that appear in the process of learning. With the principle of "unity is strength" the collaborative approach of language teaching and learning focuses on gaining the optimum development in educational pedagogy. I also experienced through my teaching and learning that one cannot do everything but the group of learners' efforts make everything possible.

Sharing and interaction are crucial in our culture which focuses on students' critical understanding and reflections. Similarly, Chen and Chang (2014) explored collaborative learning needs to promote and support other applications than individual learning. Similarly, Wardlow and Harm (2015) claimed that collaborative learning provides students with vital opportunities to actively engage with their learning, to connect and learn from others, to push discourse forward, to question and critique, and to build and create knowledge. Likewise, Jafar (2016) conducted a case study research on student engagement, accountability, and empowerment: a case study of collaborative course design. He argued that through deeper engagement through a collaborative approach to learning, the learner developed personal accountability and gets empowered because it is a concrete way to expand minds by inviting in a multiplicity of thoughts and experiences. The study by Svendsen (2016) in Norway showed collaborative practices of English Teachers for improving their Classroom Pedagogy. In eastern society, a teacher is regarded as an all-knowing and superior being whereas, in western society, he or she is regarded as a facilitator.

Through collaboration, teachers can share responsibilities for students and teaching tasks, so they need to develop collaborative skills and the capacity to solve problems. Likewise, Barfield (2016) explored that collaboration encompasses deciding goals together with others, sharing accountabilities, and working together to achieve the goals of learning more than could be achieved by an individual on their own. This study intends to explore teachers' collaborative understanding and practices to contribute to their achievement with this research document.

## **Research Gap**

Several types of research have been carried out regarding collaborative teaching and learning practices in English classrooms to investigate the activities adopted by students. However, there is still little research that investigates collaborative practices undertaken by English teachers. As teacher collaboration plays a vital role in improving the professional development, and self-efficacy of teachers, it is worthy to explore the collaborative practices of English teachers in the context of community schools in Nepal. Though there are studies on collaborative learning practices, they are not very much expressive on the issue of teachers' perception of classroom practices of collaborative teaching and learning, more specifically teaching and learning of the English language in the context of Nepal. Though the teachers apply collaborative learning in their respective classrooms, it is not documented how they perceive and practise it in real classrooms. Therefore, I intend to document how English language teachers perceived and practised collaborative learning in the arena of teaching and learning. Though there were researches on collaborative teaching and learning in the English classrooms in the context of Nepal, it has not been well-shaped through the research work to explore how the English teachers understand and practice it in their real language classrooms. This study does not claim that there are no practices of collaborative teaching and learning in the English classrooms, instead, it examines teachers' understanding, own experiences, and practices of English language teaching in Nepal.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

As a theoretical basis for my study, I adopted the sociocultural constructivism theory developed by Vygotsky in 1978. Vygotsky (1978) in the theory stated that learning often occurs in social and cultural contexts by sharing multiple perspectives through interaction with peers and teachers. He further asserted learning is a social process that is possible through interaction. This theory claims that dialogue with others is more important than just exposing the learner to new material through the provision of lectures. It also believes that learners learn in a better and more effective way if there is peer support in their learning process (Keshavarz, et al., 2014; Li, 2009).

## Methodology

For this study, which focused on the lived experiences of English teachers regarding collaborative practices, I adopted narrative inquiry as my research method because it is associated with lived experience of an individual and connected with their lived stories, holistic views, of teaching and learning practices in the English language classrooms. First, I purposively selected two English teachers from two community schools in the Rupandehi district to explore their lived experiences regarding collaborative practices. I selected the participants using purposive sampling procedures to get in touch with those who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues (Cohen, et al., 2007) to get sufficient information. I selected it as my research site due to the easy access. I used interviews for collecting stories and used the Nepali language to reach in-depth into the participants' life to explore cultural insights and lived experiences. For me, these approaches have been useful to collect stories as they have helped me gain in-depth and detailed understanding, as well as provided me an opportunity to explore and retell their stories. The data collected from face-to-face individual interviews were coded and categorized under themes. I transcribed and analyzed the information descriptively as the nature of the study was qualitative.

## Results and Discussions

Data obtained from the in-depth interview of participant teachers were analyzed and interpreted under different subheadings as follows: English language teachers' perception of collaborative learning, benefits of collaborative practices, and challenges of collaborative practices.

### Teachers' Perception of Collaborative Learning

Perceptions and beliefs have remarkable effects on the process of teaching and learning. It is necessary to have better insights into teachers' beliefs because they have been seen as one of the crucial factors that affect teachers and their teaching activities (Thu, 2009). Sharing and working in a small group, they explored knowledge that might be unknown to them. Regarding collaborative practices,

Similarly, Mohan opined, "*I give the topic to my students to discuss and work in a group, they share ideas and I give feedback. As a member of each group, I facilitate them. I also get new information from them*". Through such activities, they work together as they all have the common goal of learning. Each member gets the opportunity to explore their creativity.

Raju stated, "*Through collaborative practice, I share ideas and learn from each other. I can get the required information*". His lived story shows that English teachers positively perceive collaborative practice. This expression is in line with Johnson and Johnson's social interdependence theory which believes that learners learn best in cooperation rather than

competition. Like-wise, Mohan stated, *“Collaborative practice assists us for our professional development. We get more ideas about planning the lesson, designing tasks, delivering lessons into the class and assessing the performance”*. By doing so, teachers are more active and responsible for their profession. Mohan’s response elucidates that collaborative practice is an integral part of English language teaching. In collaboration, the teachers share their knowledge in the areas where they feel difficulty. In this regard, Raju opined, *“When I share my problems with other colleagues, they help me and I feel comfortable and confident”*.

The above narratives indicate that collaborative practices create comfortable situations and teachers become confident to teach and learn. They share their ideas in the classroom and learn in collaboration. Puchner and Taylor (2006) opine that teacher collaboration, facilitates teachers to improve their teaching effectiveness. Therefore, collaboration among English teachers is very crucial for developing their self-efficacy, and critical thinking.

## **Collaborative Practices of Teachers**

Until and unless teachers are involved in learning activities for interactions that can contribute a lot to making the learning and teaching process a great success. Active participation of students is the basic requirement of such a classroom. Collaborative language learning is effective for improving learners’ better proficiency.

## **Benefits of Collaborative Practices**

The collaborative practice supports teachers in their professional development. In this context, Mandel and Eisarman (2016) stated that the professional growth of instructors is promoted by being a part of the collaboration, sometimes showing itself as adding to each other’s knowledge about technology by making them aware of that tool, or sometimes as grasping the opportunity to incorporate something new into your instruction.

Raju stated, *“Collaboration provides mutual support and assistance for planning and implementing lessons, assessing students’ progress, sharing professional concerns, and addressing students’ learning needs”*. His lived story revealed the benefits of collaborative practices. By collaborating with others, teachers can learn new teaching techniques as well as get mutual support and help from their peers for planning, designing lessons, and sharing professional concerns. Woolfolk (2001) states language learners develop their language proficiency when they collaborate and interact with more advanced learners.

Regarding the benefits of collaboration, Mohan explained, *“Collaborative practices assist teachers in reducing their workload, learning from their colleagues, and designing better lessons. Collaborative practices enhance for developing of classroom teaching activities”*. In course of sharing ideas in a group, they get opportunities to develop social skills, cooperation and collaboration, communication and critical thinking, and creativity. Raju expressed a similar

view, *"The atmosphere of cooperation and mutual helpfulness motivates students. Each member of the group has a common goal so they contribute to their group by heart"*. Raju believed that collaborative learning activities foster cooperation rather than competition in learning among the learners and develop communicative competence.

Collaboration is considered as joint efforts toward a group goal. It is guided by the principle of social interaction and reflection which combines two or more people to work together for achieving a common goal.

## **Group Formation and Working Together in Collaborative Classrooms**

The teachers explore the inherent talents of the students and discover their capacities by encouraging, facilitating, and working together. Regarding this, Confucius stated,

Tell me and I will forget,

Show me and I may remember,

Involve me and I will understand.

The real understanding comes out when the learners practically get involved in activities and feel their active involvement in them. Involving and actively engaging in work or tasks explore meaning. Mohan claims, *"I use different collaborative activities such as group work, project work and makes my classrooms interactive and collaborative"*. He further argued, *"Students need to feel pleasure and comfort to get their teacher in the classrooms so that they could enjoy learning and explore more creative and innovative ideas"*. He formed groups and members focused on three activities- developing common goals, examining each other's core beliefs, and identifying the strengths that each person brought to the teams-to set the stage for creative interactions (Wild, et. al, 2008). In doing so, he focused on collaborative teaching and learning.

Raju said, *"There are not more than forty students in my class so I make five groups and one group leader in each including me. I facilitate each group in need. I work with them as a guide so that they could get help and explore their own"*. He narrated he worked as a facilitator in his class and helped each group respectively to explore new ideas and information. Collaboration encourages students to develop their independence and responsibility to construct knowledge on their own (Babapour, et al., 2018). Raju could find out the students who were good in a particular subject so he went through the result sheet and made a group for teaching and learning. He selected the top five students who were good at English and also encouraged them to guide the weak students by exchanging their knowledge and skills

Mohan made his English language classrooms more interactive and supported his students and created a lot of opportunities to explore ideas through their interests and demands. He gave equal value and respected his learner's choices and interests. He developed his

intimacy with his learners through playing volleyball and football in his school. And that led him to get connected and build rapport with his learners so that they developed trust and faith in one another.

He or she interacts with the students, refocuses questions; clarifies the ideas, and supports them. Then they learn collaboratively and become confident, independent, and autonomous. In this regard, Mohan said, "*When my students work in groups, as a facilitator, I move from one group to another and give them immediate feedback*". This expression reveals his awareness of the role of the teacher in collaborative practice.

## **Challenges of Collaborative Learning Practices**

Despite the benefits, there are various challenges to implementing collaborative practices in the English classroom. The participant teachers reported some challenges in its implementation in teaching English which is as follows:

### **Lack of Regular Professional Training and Collaborative Culture**

Collaborative sharing is also considerable for better learning. However, many teachers are reluctant to share their problems and experiences of their teaching with their colleagues. Regarding my query related to the challenges that teachers are facing while implementing collaborative-based instruction, Mohan expressed, "Teachers and learners can learn many things sharing ideas but we have very little collaborative culture among colleagues. We do not share our problems and new experiences frequently due to fear of losing prestige". His narratives reveal the value of collaboration in teaching and learning but he is unable to apply it in the real context due to poor collaborative culture among colleagues.

### **Time Management**

Time management is one of the key challenges in undertaking collaborative practices. Regarding this, Raju states, "We have a lack of time for planning lessons and designing materials". The views of the participants were in harmony with Carless (2006) and Park (2014) who argued the lack of sufficient preparation and planning time in collaborative teaching. Mohan asserts, "While using collaborative activities, it takes more time and my below-average students do not take part actively as talented students overtake the average students". His view is in harmony with Harmer (2005) who opines in collaborative activities, there might not have equal participation of students. One may dominate, while others stay silent. Wilson (2016) states that colleagues do not have enough time to appropriately and effectively pre-plan every aspect of their lessons. From the above perspectives and experiences given by the participants, it is clear that collaborative practices, though very crucial in English language teaching and learning, are not beyond the challenges.

## **Class Management and Administrative Support**

Class management is crucial to apply a collaborative approach due to learner differences, it is challenging for teachers. Good management creates the condition for successful learning. Poor class management and uncooperative administrative support are other barriers to implementing it.

Mohan said, *“I have a bitter experience in applying collaborative activities in my class as there is a paradoxical situation. When students share ideas on a task discussion, they make noise and school administrators blame me as a careless teacher”*. He reported due to school administration he is unable to apply collaborative practice frequently. This indicates that uncooperative administrative support is another challenge. In this vein, Raju stated, *“When I keep my students under my control, they are unwilling to share ideas”*. Raju’s real-life experience reveals that discipline is one of the challenges of the CLL class. When teachers control students, they are passive then they are discouraged to share ideas. His idea is supported by Johnson and Johnson (1989) that learners learn better when they do the task in small groups. Moreover, difficulties arise due to the lack of administrative support (Friend, 2008).

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This study reveals that teacher participants felt positive toward collaborative practices to construct new knowledge, bring solutions to problems and make learning successful. It develops students’ creativity and motivates them for collaborative and autonomous learning giving learners a voice in their choice and creating an appropriate learning atmosphere to develop cooperation with their peers realizing the power of collaboration. Increased interaction and maximized learning opportunities are the benefits of collaborative learning. The students learn through the process of sharing and interaction that helps them gradually develop their ideas and creativity as social interdependence theory claims that learners can learn better when they do the tasks collaboratively in small groups sharing the experiences. Besides, when English language teachers are engaged in working collaboratively, they can expand their logical thinking, social network and communicative skills. However, lack of regular professional training and collaborative culture among the colleagues, time management, poor class management, and less administrative support have been realized as challenges for effective implementation of it.

The study has pedagogical implications for implementing collaborative practices in English language classrooms. Future research can be carried out on in-service and pre-service teachers’ collaborative activities, and their prospects and challenges. Since it is a small-scale study with only two participants, it had some limitations. Further research is, therefore; necessary to be conducted using mixed-method incorporating different types of

research techniques such as questionnaires and observation following a quantitative research design covering a wider understanding and practices of collaborative practices.

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