

Challenges of Teaching English at Nepal Sanskrit University

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The author of this paper discusses the challenges of teaching English language and literature at Nepal Sanskrit University in general and in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth in particular. Based mainly on the experiences and observations of the author, the paper discusses the challenges of both teaching English for general purposes and teaching English for academic purposes.

Abstract

The author of this paper discusses the challenges of teaching English language and literature at Nepal Sanskrit University in general and in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth in particular. Based mainly on the experiences and observations of the author, the paper discusses the challenges of both teaching English for general purposes and teaching English for academic purposes. Moreover, it includes the experiences of fellow teachers of English and the opinions of select students of Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth as well, and has used theories on second language acquisition, foreign language learning and teaching English for academic purposes to support the main argument. The paper concludes that while some of the challenges of teaching English are common to

all the universities in Nepal, some are specific to Nepal Sanskrit University alone, and suggests measures to overcome the challenges specific to the University.

Key Words

EGAP, ESAP, inclusive classroom, English as Foreign Language.

Introduction

Nepal Sanskrit University offers courses on various modern subjects⁸. Students enrolled on the Shastri programme must choose two optional subjects: one from the classical and the other from the modern ones. Besides, the university offers three compulsory subjects: English, Nepali, and Sanskrit. Alternatively, they can take up Sanskrit Racanā instead of Compulsory English. This means that students can escape the study of English if they want, but, still, they cannot avoid the study of modern subjects altogether. Most students these days choose compulsory English against Sanskrit Racanā⁹. The reasons are many and varied: some of them believe that they cannot escape the study of English since English is spoken worldwide, some others believe that they want to preach the Bhāgavata Purāṇa in English, few of them say that English makes it easier for them to get a job, and other students believe that they cannot operate modern gadgets and

⁸ The university has categorized its courses into classical and modern subjects. The modern subjects include English, Nepali, Mathematics, Economics, General Education, Political Science, Hindi, and Maithili. Similarly, the classical subjects include Ṛg Veda, Sāma Veda, Śukla Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda, Vyākaraṇa, Prācīna Nyāya, Navya Nyāya, Siddhānta Jyotiṣa, Phalita Jyotiṣa, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, Śāṅkara Vedānta, Sāhitya, Dharmaśāstra, Tantra, Itihāsa Purāṇa, Sarva Darśana, Bauddha Darśana, Prācyā Rājaśāstra, and Nītiśāstra.

⁹ The trend of choosing English against Sanskrit Racanā is increasing every year. Compared to the past years, for example, only a nominal percentage of students have chosen Sanskrit Racanā at Pindeswar Vidyapeeth, Dharan in the academic year 2022.

technologies without the working knowledge of English¹⁰. One of the students majoring in English typically said that he was studying English to be able to understand western philosophy that he wanted to compare with Hindu philosophy. These are only some of the representative reasons; the main reason is the growing influence of English in Nepal. This influence can be seen also in the fact that some students take up optional English instead of optional Nepali, Hindi or Maithili. Thus, most students at Nepal Sanskrit University study three languages at a time, whether or not they take up optional English.

Where should the study of English at Nepal Sanskrit University be placed in the conventional order of language teaching and learning? This question needs to get some consideration before proceeding with the discussion of the challenges of teaching English at Nepal Sanskrit University. Nepali is the first language of most students, since, excluding some exceptions, they speak Nepali as their mother tongue. Where should English and Sanskrit be placed, then? The opinions of the theorists are divided. For Rod Ellis (1997), second language “can refer to any language that is learned subsequent to the mother tongue” (P. 3). He says that it can refer to the learning of the third or fourth language as well. It means, for him, both English and Sanskrit can be referred to as a second language.

However, Ellis’s definition is incomplete in the case of the present discussion. Sanskrit and English should not be treated in the same manner, at least, at Nepal Sanskrit University. The history of languages shows that while Nepali and English are distant relatives to each other, Nepali and Sanskrit have close ties. In this regard, the opinion of Gass et al. (2013) is more comprehensive than that of Ellis. They define second language acquisition by making a

¹⁰ During the preparation of the paper, the writer had conducted a survey among the select students representing Major English as well as Compulsory English. The writer has presented the opinions without any distortion and manipulation.

distinction between a second language and a foreign language. For them, second language refers to the learning of a nonnative language in the environment in which that language is spoken, while foreign language “refers to the learning of a nonnative language in the environment of one’s native language” (P. 4-5). This means learning English in the environment of the Nepali language, for them, is learning a foreign language, not a second one.

This definition too is insufficient for the discussion being forwarded here. Teaching English at Nepal Sanskrit University is not just teaching English as a second language or a foreign language, since the courses, both in Compulsory English and Major English, involve advanced texts designed for advanced level of students. Concerning this discussion, Hyland’s (2006) distinction between English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) can be more telling. For him, such activities as questioning, note-taking, summary writing, giving prepared presentations and so on can be generic academic practices, while ESAP “concerns the teaching of skills and language which are related to the demands of a particular discipline or department” (P. 9). The division of the English curriculum of the university into Compulsory English and Major English can be compared to Hyland’s division of EGAP and ESAP.

This article, however, does not intend forward the discussion on the distinction between second language and foreign language, nor does it get into the discussion of EGAP and ESAP. The references of the theorists have only been used to give this paper a direction towards the discussion of the challenges of teaching English, a foreign language, in the environment of the native language. Based mainly on the experiences of the writer of this paper, the study, in general, discusses the gap between the students' competency and the course on English language and literature in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth, Dharan. It attempts to explore

the problems the students face in learning a foreign language, and the challenges a teacher faces in the classroom.

Result and Discussion

The Challenges of teaching English in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth

It has been discussed above that the students in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth study English as a foreign language, either for general academic purposes or for specific academic purposes. One may believe that the challenges of teaching English as a foreign language in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth are similar to those in other institutions. Many of the challenges may be the same as those faced by the language teachers teaching foreign languages around the world. However, the writer of this paper has faced many challenges specific only to the students of Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth in particular and Nepal Sanskrit University in general.

Only the adult students enrol in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth since the college runs classes for Bachelor's Degree. It is not uncommon to generalize that teaching English in the college is not only easy but also exciting as "adults learning English bring to the task a mature personality, many years of educational training, a developed intelligence, a determination to get what they want, fairly clear aims, and above all strong motivation to make as rapid progress as possible" (Broughton et al., 1980, P. 187). However, the case of Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth, excluding some exceptions, is quite the opposite.

Most students, against the assumption of the theorists mentioned above, bring to the task an immature personality as far as learning English is concerned. They may be mature concerning the study of Sanskrit language as they come afresh to join the Bachelor's programme from various *Gurukuls*¹¹ that prepare young students for Hindu theology, Sanskrit grammar, and classical Sanskrit

¹¹ The practice of following the Brāhmanical tradition of celibate studentship in a teacher's household. Such a practice is still prevalent in Nepal, though with some modifications.

literature. But the same situation makes them immature concerning the study of the English language and literature, mainly for three reasons. First, the *gurukuls* discourage them, covertly or overtly, from learning English, as it is regarded as the language of the *mlecchas*¹². One of the students reluctantly said that he studied at a *Gurukul* in eastern Nepal until sixteen. Then, under the assistance of the *Gurukul*, he was enrolled on the Pūrva Madhyamā and Uttara Madhyamā courses in a college in Sikkim where he was supposed to study English. He narrated his experiences that he passed his examination in English as the examination processes were facilitated by the *Gurukul* where he studied. Another Shāstrī second-year student supported him that the students show a lethargic attitude to the study of English as they have been inculcated from early childhood that English is not their core subject and that what they require in English is just a pass-mark.

The second reason is that by the time they begin to learn English due to some mandatory provisions of the government concerning school examinations and certificates, they have already passed a certain age of learning, an age in which children in other schools scale a certain level in learning English. The students in *gurukuls* have the burden of covering that level of learning as they begin the school syllabus only in their early adolescence. And the third reason is that many *gurukuls* are unable to manage human resources, the techno-physical infrastructure and the facilities that a school requires to facilitate teaching-learning activities. These explanations voice against the aforementioned assumptions that the adult students aspiring to learn a foreign language have many years of educational training and a developed intelligence.

¹² A term used by the Vedic Āryans to designate the foreigners, who do not follow the rituals of the Veda and who speak languages other than Sanskrit.

The next assumptions that they have a determination to get what they want and that they have fairly clear aims are partially true. The determination and the aims of the students learning English in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth have been discussed briefly above in the introduction paragraph. Aims and determinations, especially in the field of learning, however, can be met only with a systematic study, diligence, patience and comprehensive education which we rarely find in the students of Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth. Instead, the students of the Vidyapeeth tend to exhibit the tendencies of the students of vocational education than that of the students of academic education. Like the students of vocational education, they spend more time out of the college, performing theological rituals and cultural rites, which are hardly a part of their curricula. All the participants of the survey accepted that the *karmakāṇḍic* (related to Hindu rites and ritualistic performance) activities of both the teachers and the students are responsible for the students' poor performance in not only English but in other subjects as well. Such a tendency is against the assumption that adult language learners have strong motivation to make rapid progress, which has been quoted above. One of the biggest challenges for English teachers, therefore, is to break this chain of unacademic tendencies prevalent in the students of Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth.

Such tendencies of the students are against the norms of good language learners highlighted by Rubin (1975), who believes that a good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser, has a strong drive to communicate, is uninhibited and willing to make mistakes, focuses on the form by looking at patterns and using analysis, takes advantage of all practice opportunities, monitors his or her speech and that of others, and pays attention to meaning. But students in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth lack these features of language learners. Instead, most of them belong to the worst type of language learners as described by Krashen (1981) due to their attitudinal factors (lack of interest in the target language and

its speakers and/or self-consciousness, high anxiety, etc.) and low aptitude or interest in grammar (P. 38). And these contrary attitudes and aptitudes in the students, in their own words, are the results of excessive time they spend in unacademic *karmakāṇḍic* activities. It is next to impossible to break this chain of unacademic tendencies as long as the university allows the students to work outside during college hours.

Given that the students enrolled in the Vidyapeeth are focused on learning English, that they have set their aims and they have a strong determination – Can they learn English as effectively as they are supposed to? They might but only if the traditional syllabus is abandoned and a comprehensive perspective concerning the formation of the syllabus and the selection of the course contents is adopted. The practice, so far, shows that Nepal Sanskrit University has either adopted the syllabus of Tribhuwan University as it is or has just changed the course contents without modifying the syllabus. The fact that the specialities of Nepal Sanskrit University are different from the specialities of Tribhuwan University has been undermined.

The writer of this paper has learnt through experiences and observations that the students enrolled in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth have a comparatively weaker base in English. They have problems with the formation of simple sentences, reading course contents, understanding the class lectures, making class notes and speaking simple sentences. The syllabus, however, covers the study of genres, and the students are required to give analytical answers in the examination. This is where another Challenge lies for the teacher. He or she must teach the course contents, as the course is fixed and the examination system is completely centralized. To fight these challenges, they adopt the conventional method of giving notes and lecturing in Nepali, which spoils the learners' learning capacity yet further. They are, thus, compelled to rote memorize long passages (which are

literally of no use in their real life and which they will forget soon after their exam is over) to pass their exams.

When asked about the teaching-learning processes in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth, all the students involved in the survey expressed their dissatisfaction. They said that the English teachers should use only English as a medium language. They said they have difficulty understanding English, but frequent code-switching by the teachers is not a solution; it makes the process of learning rather difficult, instead of easing it. When asked about the solution they said that the teachers should give more time in the classroom, interacting with the students and giving them tasks in the classroom.

The opinions discussed above point out that the students of Pindeshwar campus require a syllabus that gives them basic ideas and structures of English language. In such a syllabus, the choice of language content should “relate to both subject matter and linguistic matter” (Richards & Rogers, 2001, P. 25), i. e., what is taught and how it is taught. To put it the other way, they require a syllabus that teaches them the mechanics of practical writing. They require a syllabus that teaches them all the skills of language learning like listening, reading, speaking and writing. Moreover, they require a syllabus that gives them more time for practice, production and interaction. In short, they need a basic course on language learning in the first year. Gradually, in the subsequent years, the course needs to be upgraded to cover broader aspects of language learning.

Alternatively, this challenge can be an opportunity for the Vidyapeeth and the university to introduce a make-up course that can help Students Bridge the gap between the university course and their competency in English. Such a course can be similar to ‘Sheltered subject-matter teaching’, which “has more recently been seized upon in many parts of the USA as a (supposedly) viable alternative to bilingual education for minority-language children” (Larsen-Freeman & Long,

2014, P. 506). For this, the university can assign its teachers the whole task of designing the course on foreign language acquisition, taking those classes as supplementary ones, and even evaluating them through periodic tests and assessments. Concerning the need for such a sheltered class, one of the students majoring in English, who had typically taken English language classes in a private institution before joining the university, said that he could work as a volunteer to improve the English of the weak students, but he was doubtful about the students' attendance in the class due to their near-daily involvement in *karmakāṇḍic* activities.

The case of optional English, however, is a different one. Students majoring in English literature have comparatively a stronger base in English. Many of them come afresh from English medium schools. They take up Major English not out of compulsion, but out of interest. This is evident in the fact that some of the students shift to another subject even in the middle of the session. Therefore, while the course on Compulsory English (as it has been discussed in the paragraph above) covers basic language skills and practical writing along with some local colours in it, the course on Major English should include the study of genres, critical theories and canonical studies in both synchronic and diachronic ways following the global trends in Major English.

This does not mean that teaching Major English is challenge-free. Nepal Sanskrit University, in general, provides inclusive education as far as English is concerned. Students other than those from Sanskrit schools or Gurukuls must pass an entrance exam that is held only for Sanskrit or Classical subjects, but as far as English is concerned, admission is open to any student completing Grade 12 or the equivalent, notwithstanding what subject he or she has studied in school. This allows every student to take up Major English. The teacher in such a class providing inclusive education should teach diverse and heterogeneous students

with differences in learning competency and background (Viebrock, 2018, P. 54). Sometimes the differences between the students are insuperable ones. Frequent switches of code, explanation in the native language, distribution of handouts and class notes, and other conventional methods are still in use to facilitate the weak students to pass the exam. Such a conventional practice has made learning subordinate to passing exams at the University.

The discussion so far suggests that teaching Major English is different from teaching Compulsory English in terms of their purposes. The aims and objectives of these courses outlined in the curriculum too suggest that they belong to two different domains. While the main objective of teaching Major English is to provide “a background to the history of western ideas and practical guidelines for writing about literature and doing research in it”, that of Compulsory English is to familiarize “students with different disciplines of literature and language skills” (Mahendra Sanskrit Vishwavidyalaya, 2057). Following the arguments of Hamp-Lyons (2001), the course on Major English can be categorized as ‘English for academic purposes’ (EAP), and the course on Compulsory English as ‘general English’ course as he writes, highlighting the differences between the two, “Many EAP courses/programmes place more focus on reading and writing, while most general English courses place more focus on speaking and listening. General English courses tend to teach learners conversational and social genres of the language, while EAP courses tend to teach formal, academic genres” (P. 126-127). Such a division of English courses based on purpose is similar to the division made by Hyland discussed in the introduction above, and helps generalize that the challenges of teaching Major English are different from those of teaching Compulsory English.

Apart from the challenges discussed above (they are mostly specific to Nepal Sanskrit University in general and Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth in particular), an

English teacher in Pindeshwar Vidyapeeth has to face many other seen and unseen challenges (these challenges are common to other universities as well). While the seen challenges involve the physical infrastructures like digital classrooms, computer labs, audio-visual tools and gadgets, the unseen challenges involve socio-cultural, ideological, religious, and psychological factors that affect language teaching. These challenges can be overcome only if the University, the campus administration, teachers and students work together with enthusiasm, moral alacrity and responsibility.

Conclusion

Nepal Sanskrit University has been teaching different modern subjects including English apart from classical subjects. The course on English has been divided into two based on the purposes. While Compulsory English offers courses in general English, Major English offers courses for academic purposes. Teaching English at the university is challenging because of the students' unacademic tendencies, the inclusive classrooms, the conventional syllabus, and the physical and socio-cultural factors. Some of these challenges are common to all the universities in Nepal while some of them are specific to Nepal Sanskrit University. The challenges specific to Nepal Sanskrit University can be overcome by the formation of a syllabus for a sheltered course for teaching English as a foreign language that teaches students listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, and by the selection of the students for Major English based on their GPA in School Examination and the subjects they have studied at the secondary level. The sheltered classes can be run for several months as a bridge course before the academic session begins, or they can be run parallel to the academic classes as a make-up course.

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