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Enabling Students to Communicate in the Target Language in an English Language Class

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Abstract

This study has explored the role of pedagogical practices for students' reluctance to communicate in the target language in an English language class. It deploys observation and the semi-structured interview as the tools of information collection. Thematic analysis was used for the interpretation and the meaning making. Six students studying in grade 12 in a campus of Panauti were selected as the participants purposively. Interpretivism underpins the research paradigm in the study. The study concludes that various factors like learners' fragile foundation of the target language, lack of basic vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, disparity in focus for teaching language skills, etc. contribute to the learners' reluctance in communicating in the target language.

Keywords: *Reluctance, translanguaging, catalyst, multilingualism, disparity.*

Introduction

English as a foreign language is at the focus of teaching-learning in the Nepalese context. Adopting English as a medium of facilitation as well as a content in both private and community schools underpin to this reality. Teaching English as a foreign language aims to develop communicative competence in learners in the target language. But, students' reluctance in using target language has been creating frustrations in the teachers, learners and the parents. The history of teaching English as a foreign language indicates that the prime purpose of teaching EFL in the past was only as a means of communication in connection to everyday and professional life, and in the latter tradition, teaching EFL is regarded as a key to providing access to knowledge and educational institutions (Howatt & Smith, 2014). Since the need for teaching English as a foreign language seems still growing, factors contributing to students' reticence to use English in the classroom learning need to be explored to make teaching-learning effective.

Statement of the problem

Parents want their children to be competent in the English language so that they can easily get better opportunities in the future. To address the needs of the students and the interests of the parents, schools also focus on teaching the English language as a subject and medium of instruction. However, students prefer to communicate in other languages rather than in English. Either they communicate in their mother tongue or in the Nepali language. This has also caused stress in the teachers who teach using English as a medium of instruction or English as a discipline. It has also caused learning loss as the students lack the minimum language competence to ask questions, participate in interaction and discussions in the learning process. So, it is imperative to explore factors contributing to learners' reluctance in communication using the target language.

Literature review

Of the available studies, various aspects have been studied. One of the studies has focused on answering "why ESL/EFL learners feel embarrassed while learning to speak English and what influences it can have on their communication in the target language" (Tanveer, 2007).

This study seems to have reflected on learners' embarrassing feelings and their impact on students' communication in the target language. Another study has attempted to probe the reason behind Pakistani students' preference to use their mother tongue in only English classrooms (Asif et al., 2018). The researcher, through the study, has delved into the reasons for students' reluctance in the target language. The next study has emphasized on reporting "a large-scale survey carried out at one of Singapore's major universities on the use of English as a teaching medium at both undergraduate and postgraduate level" (Bolton et al., 2017). This report focuses on English as a tool of instruction. Yet, Zumor and Qasem (2019) have identified "students' perceptions regarding lecture comprehension, communication, pedagogy, assessment, and affect in an EMI setting."

In a comparative study, Santana (2019) explores "rapport between teacher and students in Spanish medium and English medium instruction". It shows how students' perceptions of the language cause difference in choosing language for communication, resulting in variation in the teacher-student rapport. Furthermore, Albertson (2020) reviews "the current body of research into reasons for Japanese university students' reluctance toward spoken class participation in English, along with a critical review of general teaching suggestions for encouraging participation". This study provides techniques for promoting learners' participation in English language classes.

Most of the available literatures seem to have used varied numbers of participants in the study. Tanveer (2007) involved six ESL/EFL learners, eleven EFL/ESL practitioners, and three EFL/ESL teachers. Likewise, Asif (2018) deployed 68 EFL learners, including males and females between the ages of 19 and 22. Next study carried out on 28.2% of the student population out of 7,575 undergraduates and 705 postgraduate students, including 222 faculty /staff out of 1,122 (2017). Yet, Zumor et al. (2019) carried out a study including 264 Saudi students who studied Computer Science, Engineering, and Medicine. Santana (2019) carried out research involving "The Spanish class consisted of 34 students, 29 female and five males. The English class consisted of 30 students, 25 female and five males; the age range in the two groups was 19". The researcher seems to have selected participants' number as per their convenience.

The researchers of the available studies had collected data using various methods. Tanveer (2007) deployed interviews and focus group discussion to collect data. Likewise, Asif (2018) collected data through triangulation, i.e. by means of three distinct data gathering tools: questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussion. Yet, Bolton (2017) collected data through an online survey. Besides this, Zumor (2019) collected data through a questionnaire with a four-point Likert scale. Other studies deployed literature review, video recordings, teachers' daily log of activities, etc.

For drawing conclusions, analysis is pertinent. Among the available studies, Tanveer (2007) analyzed data using interpretation and grounded theory. Another study analyzed the data through interpretation and diagrammatic presentation (Asif et al., 2018). Likewise, Bolton (2017) employed interpretation and description tools to analyze data. Unlike other researchers, Albertson (2020) analyzed through thematic analysis.

Regarding the use of EMI in teaching and learning, there exist diverse findings. One of the causes of students' anxiety in speaking English is that they are afraid of exposing their weakness among friends (Tanveer, 2007). This implies that students should be made aware of making mistakes as the sign of learning in the early stages of learning. However, most of the students want to speak in English, but they communicate in Pakistani only in English class because of shyness, personal, and psychological issues (Asif, 2018). For making communication in the target language, students personal, social, and psychological issues need to be explored first and facilitated accordingly. Zumor et al (2019) conclude that English Medium Instruction (EMI) causes a barrier to scientific content learning, causing anxiety, frustration, tension, fear, and embarrassment, resulting in poor educational outcomes; EMI deprives learners of their fundamental rights to understanding, communication, interaction, discussion and inquiry.

Research gap

Existing studies seem to have focused only on the students' personal, social and psychological issues that have discouraged learners from communicating in the target language (Asif, et al., 2018; Tanveer, 2007; Zumor, et al., 2019). Pedagogical issues and teacher related issues do not seem to be focused on yet. Here exists a knowledge-practice

gap. This study attempts to explore the role of pedagogical practices for students' reluctance to communicate in the target language in an English language class.

Research objective

This research aims to explore the role of pedagogical practices for students' reluctance to communicate in the target language in an English language class. To be more specific, the objectives of the research are to explore the factors that contribute to students' reluctance and identify how the teachers can encourage students to communicate in the target language in the English language class.

Interpretivism as a research paradigm

This study has deployed interpretivism as the research paradigms. The interpretivism helps to delve into the thoughts and perspectives of the participants to explore their subjective views on reality. Kuhn (1962) defines paradigm as "a way of looking at or researching phenomena, a world view, a view of what counts as accepted or correct scientific knowledge or way of working, an 'accepted model or pattern'" (p. 23, as cited in Cohen et al., 2018, p. 3).

The underlying assumption of the interpretive research paradigm is that an individual's personal experiences, beliefs, norms, and values influence the process of meaning-making (Waiba, p. 28). The nature of truth and knowledge is subjective. Rehman and Alharthi (2016) state that "Interpretive epistemology is subjective and external reality cannot be directly accessible to observers without being contaminated by their worldviews, concepts, backgrounds, etc." (p. 55). Reality is based on the subjective views and interpretations of the participants. For the interpretivists, the reality is multiple and socially constructed. In my study, the individual perspectives of each participant are given due value and interpreted with the idea that multiple realities exist. I have also interpreted my own subjective observation of lived experiences. The ontological assumption of the interpretivist paradigm is that the world view of both the participants and the researcher is value-laden and subjective. Knowledge is constructed based on the researcher's and the participants' world views in the social context.

Research methodology

Through this study, I have explored why students are reluctant to communicate in the target language in the English language class. I have chosen a campus in Panauti. Panauti's campus seems appropriate for the study as both the Private and Government schools are striving for English medium instruction in teaching-learning. In the schools, students from different socio-cultural and language groups study in the same class. Even teachers with different levels of English language competency facilitate English medium instruction. So, it can be an appropriate area to explore why students are reluctant to communicate in the English language. I chose the research site and the participants conveniently. I purposively included six students of grades 11 and 12 as participants. For confidentiality and privacy of the participants, I have used pseudonyms.

Method of data collection

The methods of data collection used in this study were observation of learners' performance and semi-structured interview. I also provided hands-on experiences to the learners to see the effect that could be made as a teacher. The researcher has also done member checking by involving other research participants to present their views on the factors contributing for enabling learners in the English language class.

Fragile foundational competency

Different factors contribute to students' hesitation in speaking in the target language in ESL class. Sanvi is one of the brightest students in researcher's class. She can read, write and present in the class in the target language, but she also feels hesitation. She says that she sometimes communicates in the target language in her English language class. She adds that she speaks in English class with the English subject teacher. She says that out of 40 minutes, she speaks in English for about 15 minutes. Regarding her hesitation in communicating in the target language, Sanvi tells:

Ma dherai English bolna sakdina. Practice chai garranchhu. Tara Ma sanga bolne manchhe hudaina. Tehi Vaera Nepalima bolinchha dherai jaso. Afthero asahaj kehi pani lagdaina. Tara ma bolda kheri aliali jhukinchhu. Mero grammar mildaina. Mero familyma ma matra chhu gharma. Ma sanga bolne pani kahi hudaina. Malai sentence haru banauna ali garo lagchha. Mero pahileko sachoorko kakshya aath samma sirharule pani kasaile bolnu hunthena. (I cannot speak English more. I do practice. But I do not have people to speak English. I usually speak Nepali. I do not feel difficult or uneasy. But while speaking, I get a bit confused. My grammar is wrong. In my family, I am alone. I find it difficult to make sentences. Teachers also did not use to speak in English up to grade 8 in my previous school.)

Sanvi points out that the classroom environment plays a significant role in using the target language. She says that she cannot speak English in class because she does not get English speaking friend in class. So, she mostly communicates in English in class. However, she does not feel awkward or uneasy. But she puzzles while speaking as she feels her grammar goes wrong.

In the same way, Asmi says, “*Sathiharu sabai Nepalibata bolchhan. Maile pani kosis garevane beijat hunchha vanne lagchha.*” She clearly says that she does not speak English, thinking that her friend may insult her if she speaks English in class. She further adds that she is afraid of making grammatical errors while speaking in English. Likewise, Kunjika says, “*Ali aaudaina, garo lagchha, laj lagera boldina*”. The reason behind not communicating in English is that she does not know much, finds it difficult and is shy. Rashmi says, “*Angreji bolna naaera milchhaki mildaina vanera kam bolchhu, boldakheri saathiharule khijyauchha ki jasto lagera*”. She speaks less in English for two reasons. One is fear of making mistakes, and another is that her friends may laugh at her. Sabnam also wants to communicate in English, but she does not know. Marshalina (2025) states, “Specifically, affective factors, classroom environment, linguistic competence, type of task, and the role of teacher were reported as highly influential factors of students’ willingness to communicate in English classroom” (p. 85). Learners also need to feel secure among friends and the

teacher for communicating in the target language openly. For this, errors and mistakes should be taken as common thing that happens in the learning process. Considering learners' prior knowledge, cultures, their L1, subjects of interests, designing syllabus with learners' participation, developing learner-friendly tasks etc., play a tremendous role in reducing learners' reluctance in communicating in the target language. Another participant, Rushma points to the weak foundational period as a barrier to speaking in English as follows:

Another reason is not paying attention from the very beginning. How does it work if we endeavor to eat pulses, rice, ghee, meat and fruit at the same time? In the beginner classes, they teach lessons and make write in paper and abandon. Then how can it be good by making effort after reaching the higher grades? How can we learn everything at once including the basic things of grade one in grade ten?

Rushma seems to say that speaking and listening skills of language teaching are ignored in the initial grades, which becomes a barrier for speaking English in the latter grades. Fundamental skills need to be focused on in the early grades for effective teaching-learning of the second or third language. Singleton and Leśniewska (2024) write that there are benefits of early second language acquisition in terms of auditory skills, particularly speech perception, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. Young learners have sharp listening skills. They imitate pronunciation and accents better and faster than the grown-up learners. So, focusing on speaking and listening skills from the early grades can contribute to enabling learners in speaking skills.

Disparity in the praxis of integrating language skills in pedagogy

English language teaching requires equal focus on the basic language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Basic level curriculum (1-3) of Nepal (2019) also emphasizes equally on listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in grades 1-3 in an integrated way. Basic level 4-5 and 6-8 curricula focus more on reading and writing. Out of 50% weightage of internal assessment, reading and writing carry 8 marks each; listening and speaking carry 10 marks each. But, out of 50% weightage of the external assessment, reading and writing skills carry 25 marks each. In total, the weightage given for listening and speaking carries only 8 marks for each. In the grade 9-10 curriculum, reading and writing carry 40 and 35

marks, respectively, for the external evaluation. Listening and speaking carry 8 marks each for the internal assessment. Likewise, the 9-12 curriculum allocates 35 and 40 marks for reading and writing, respectively. Listening and speaking carry 6 and 10 marks for the internal assessment, respectively. These figures indicate that listening and speaking skills are given less weightage in the curricula of grades 4-12. As a result, teachers over-emphasize on reading and writing skills, ignoring other skills like speaking and listening. Indicating the disparity in teachers' focus, Rushma views:

School and college also focus more on reading and writing tasks. Nepali or mother tongue is used at home as well. So, we lack practice in speaking English. There is no English speaking environment. Teachers teach being grammar based at school. Teachers teach. Students learn. But, our learning is paper based. Teachers teach in papers. Students learn in paper. Learning is limited to paper only. The students pass the paper tests but they fail to apply learning in practical life. Applicability of learning in practical life is ignored. Teachers teach grammar for improving speaking. Actually, English is a language. But, teachers teach only written aspects, not the language. Actually, English is a language, but teachers teach only in the written form. They learn only in written form and become good at writing only.

Teaching language skills in isolated forms become barrier. The primary language skills are listening and speaking. Focusing only on grammar, writing and reading cannot contribute to developing other skills like listening and speaking. Students want to develop, pay attention to and feel lacking in speaking skills (Darancik, 2018). Rather than focusing on the language skills in an isolated way, teachers should emphasize on the primary language skills first. What learners need in real life situation should be prioritized rather than focusing on writing and reading skills only. Language skills should be taught in an integrated way. However, learner's learning level and needs should be considered while planning teaching-learning.

Reclaiming translanguaging

Translanguaging refers to the theoretical lens that goes beyond the prescribed mono-lingual

and bilingual instructional strategies in teaching-learning accepting every learner's linguistic and cultural repertoire for meaningful learning. Translanguaging supports students for comprehending complex contents and texts providing opportunities to develop linguistic practices for academic contexts, making space for students' bilingual identities and socioemotional development (Garcia et al., as cited in Vogel & Garcia, 2017). Translanguaging provides space to learners' prior learning, language, culture and knowledge. It takes knowledge of multi-lingualism as a boon for learners as it opens broader understanding and inclusive world views. One of the participants, Sabnam says, "A teacher should guide properly even when translating in Nepali language." She seems to say that translanguaging could help her better to learn English language and communicate in the target language. I have argued that translanguaging offers a practical theory of language that sees the latter as a multilingual, multisemiotic, multisensory, and multimodal resource that human beings use for thinking and for communicating thought (Wei, p. 26). Translanguaging does not only include translating meanings from L1 to L2, but goes beyond that, celebrating multilingualism as an opportunity for expanding the horizon of human potentiality of creativity. It broadens the learners' understanding of a single subject, signs, images, words, etc. in multicultural and multilingual contexts. It challenges the notion of monolingualism that advocates the dominating value of a particular L2 or target language taking the learners' L1 as the barrier for learning other languages.

For enabling learners to communicate in the target language, teachers need to embrace translanguaging, multiculturalism, multilingualism and multi-modalities. Learners' prior language, linguistic diversity, diverse cultural upbringings, experiences and understandings should be utilized as an opportunity.

Flipping teacher's role as a motivator and catalyst

Foundational knowledge and competency are essential for learners to communicate in English. If the learners do not have basic words, structures and practices, they cannot communicate in the target language. Ashmi says that the teacher should facilitate without getting angry. She seems to say that the teacher's patience, untiring motivation and support can enable learners to communicate in the target language. In terms of the need for

pedagogical transformation, Waiba (2024) writes:

Our present teaching pedagogies detach us from the real-life situation. Local knowledge and the native vocabularies are dying. If we do not rethink current pedagogical practices, the young generation will not know our native cultures, and they will not learn others' cultures effectively. Beauty, native rusticity and multi-cultural practices will be endangered over time. (p. 48)

Our pedagogies should integrate learners' cultures and knowledge in the English language teaching-learning classrooms. Learners' space should be created for reflecting on lived experiences and recreating new knowledge. The teacher should act only as the catalyst for meaningful learning experiences.

One of the participants Rushma, expects teachers to act as the motivator for learning language. She posits:

If the teachers had taught for applying in the life instead of limiting to pass the exam, we would not have become this much weak in English. English is the second or the third language for us. Instead of motivating, learners' are laughed at. There is no one to point our weaknesses and motivate us for better efforts. So, I do not speak English due the fear of making mistake, fear of getting laughed at, and fear of getting teased.

Identifying learners' needs, supporting to learn the gaps, building rapport with the learners making them feel emotionally secure, and encouraging them with positive reinforcement can enhance speaking competency of the learners.

Conclusion

In this study, the researcher has dealt with the factors that are responsible for learners' reluctance to speak English in the English language class and the ways for resolving these issues. The study shows that learners' fragile foundation in the target language, lack of confidence, fear of being laughed at, lack of sufficient vocabulary, incompetence in grammar, shyness, lack of classmate speaking in English and the fear of making mistakes in the target language and giving less priority for the speaking skill while teaching English are the major factors that contribute for their reluctance in speaking English language in the ESL

class.

Students' reluctance in speaking English can be reduced by developing a foundation providing exposures in the basics of communication, followed by creating a wider space for the learners' prior lived experiences, language, culture and understandings. Translanguaging and multimodalities of teaching-learning can encourage learners to communicate in the target language more openly and confidently with a sense of self-respect and self-identity. Giving focus for speaking skills while teaching English can also contribute to enabling and empowering learners in speaking in the target language. However, the effectiveness of teaching communication skills through multimodalities such as pictures, signs, symbols, digital contents, culture integration, etc. are to be explored in the context of Nepal.

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