Exploring Research Practices in EFL Classrooms: Perspectives of Secondary-Level Teachers

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Abstract

Research is a systematic investigation to find a solution to a problem. The present study attempts to explore the practices of research activities in English language classrooms. To accomplish this, data were purposefully collected from seven secondary-level English teachers of Palpa through semi-structured interviews. The gathered data were subsequently transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically, categorizing them into seven distinct topics. The findings suggest that research acts as a fundamental source of knowledge for both teachers and students. Teachers mainly use observation checklists, questionnaires, and interview guides as classroom research tools. Nearly all permanent teachers engage in action research, while temporary teachers refrain from participating in research activities due to the perceived lack of relevance to their job promotion. Teachers tend to use both formal and informal approaches in their research activities. Conducting research in the classroom is essential, as it promotes interaction, collaboration, and critical thinking skills among students. This study may be valuable for those interested in incorporating research activities into English language classrooms.

Keywords: research instruments, language classroom, textual activities, writing assignment and project work

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Introduction

Research is a systematic inquiry aimed at solving problems by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information to answer specific questions. Often described as a structured, empirical, and critical investigation, research provides a controlled approach to problem-solving (Kerlinger, 1986). It involves formulating questions, gathering relevant data, and conducting analyses and interpretations in a structured manner (Hatch & Faraday, 1982; Nunan, 2010). Research applies established scientific methods to address issues, producing knowledge that is both relevant and reliable. By systematically and objectively examining events, problems, or phenomena, research seeks to deepen understanding and develop underlying principles and theories. As an intellectual and creative endeavor, research contributes to the discovery of new knowledge, rectifies errors, dispels misconceptions, and fosters learning that broadens the scope of understanding. To stay informed about current trends and build skills in specific subjects, teachers should incorporate research-based activities in the language classroom.

Research is the process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting information to answer specific questions. It is often regarded as a systematic, controlled, empirical, and critical investigation aimed at solving problems (Kerlinger, 1986). This process involves forming questions, collecting relevant data, and performing analysis and interpretation in an organized manner (Hatch & Faraday, 1982; Nunan, 2010). Research is a disciplined inquiry that uses scientifically accepted methods to solve problems and generate relevant knowledge. Through systematic and objective study of events, issues, or incidents, research helps to gain deeper understanding and develop guiding principles or theories. As a creative and intellectual endeavor, research not only brings new knowledge but also corrects errors, dispels misconceptions, and contributes to learning expansion. To help students develop skills and awareness of emerging trends in their fields, teachers should incorporate research-based activities in the language classroom.

Research is primarily conducted to deepen and expand existing theories through careful observation, real-world experiences, and dynamic experimentation, enabling teachers and students to broaden their knowledge within their fields (Neupane & Sharma, 2021). Its purpose is to offer authentic, validated knowledge in specific areas, allowing existing theories to be verified using scientific methods and principles. Research also uncovers various theories, approaches, methods, techniques, and activities related to teaching, assessment, material development, policy-making, and more, helping language teachers and students stay current with emerging trends in ELT. Additionally, research provides essential professional recommendations and insights to improve and reform existing issues. It fosters a logical approach to thinking about these issues, promoting logical and critical thinking, speaking, and writing among teachers and students. By enhancing the understanding of classroom dynamics and teaching-learning processes, research encourages teachers and learners to adopt more reflective and analytical methods, reducing dependence on external solutions for classroom and work challenges.

Research questions and data are crucial to the research process, as the entire investigation is guided by the research questions and relies on the data collected. Research involves gathering data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected through tools such as observation, questionnaires, interviews, and tests, while secondary data are obtained from sources like documents. Sampling is also an essential part of the research process, with three main types of sampling methods: random, non-random, and mixed. In random sampling, every member of a group has an equal and independent chance of being selected. In non-random sampling, the researcher selects the sample based on purpose or judgment, without randomization. Mixed sampling uses a combination of both methods. A literature review is another key component of research, providing valuable background information and insights that guide the researcher in their study.

Research in the language classroom is typically conducted through observation, introspection, or a combination of both. Observation involves systematically recording the behaviors of participants in the language classroom. Tools such as observation checklists, notebooks, and audio or video recordings can aid in this process. A skilled teacher can effectively manage the task of observation. The second method, introspection, involves asking students to reflect and respond to questions. According to Allwright (1988), introspection is a technique that encourages students to share their thoughts. Introspective data can be gathered through tools like questionnaires, interviews, or even diary entries. Triangulation, the third approach, involves collecting data from multiple perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding. In addition, other research tools and techniques commonly used for data collection and analysis include documentary analysis, classroom lessons, maps, quantified statements, diaries, and tests (Brumfit & Mitchell, 1989).

The analysis and interpretation of results are crucial aspects of research. Data can be analyzed using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. In qualitative research, raw data is transcribed and categorized thematically, while in quantitative research, data is typically presented in tables. Mixed methods research combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data interpretation. Research is often used to explain, explore, or compare specific situations by collecting and analyzing data (Creswell, 2009). It focuses on developing generalizations, principles, or theories that can help predict future events.

Research can be conducted using various methods and designs, including case studies, surveys, experimental research, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and action research. A case study involves an in-depth examination of a specific individual, teacher, class, school, or other entity (Wallace, 2010). Ethnography focuses on studying the cultural traits of a group in a real-world context (Nunan, 2010). Ethnographic research is a detailed, long-term study conducted in a natural environment. Phenomenology is based on exploring the lived experiences of individuals, where the researcher seeks to understand the essence of human experiences related

to an event, as described by participants (Creswell, 2009). Action research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by involving practitioners in self-reflective inquiry to improve current situations through problem identification and resolution in specific contexts (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 1985). A survey is a traditional research method used to assess people's attitudes, opinions, perceptions, or behaviors regarding a particular issue, event, or situation.

In Nepal, most English language teachers continue to rely on teacher-centered approaches in their classrooms, as many are not fully competent or trained in their profession. Even some trained teachers fail to effectively apply their knowledge and skills in the classroom. However, with the recruitment of qualified teachers and the integration of ICT, classrooms are gradually shifting towards a more learner-centered approach. In this model, students engage in purposeful, goal-oriented tasks, with the teacher facilitating opportunities for them to explore and learn independently. Learners are encouraged to solve problems using their own learning styles, strengths, capacities, and interests. This approach fosters higher-order thinking, critical thinking, problem-solving, learner autonomy, and a collaborative, active learning environment. Consequently, there has been increasing interest in incorporating research activities into English language teaching (ELT). However, no research has yet been conducted to assess English language teachers' views on the implementation of research practices in their classrooms. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the use of research activities in the EFL classroom.

Methodology

The present study is firmly rooted in the philosophical approach of interpretivism, which focuses on understanding the multiple, subjective realities of individuals. Similarly, it adopts a subjectivist epistemological stance, which recognizes that knowledge is not objective or fixed, but is instead created through the individual perspectives and interpretations of the participants. The study follows a phenomenological research design within the qualitative research framework. Phenomenology, as described by Creswell (2009), is a method focused on exploring and understanding human experiences, particularly the meaning individuals assign to those experiences in specific contexts. By focusing on the lived experiences of teachers, the study aims to uncover the diverse ways in which secondary-level English teachers in Nepal understand and engage with research activities in their classrooms. The study draws the data from a purposive sample of seven teachers from Palpa, selected for their relevance and insight into the research topic. The data collection process involved semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol developed to ensure that key aspects of the research questions were addressed. The interviews were recorded to ensure that the data collected was accurate and detailed, allowing for a deeper exploration of participants' thoughts. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, identifying recurring patterns and organizing the findings into seven distinct categories. Once the results were obtained, they were compared and interpreted

in the context of previous research findings, providing a broader understanding of the role and impact of research activities in language teaching. To assure participants' confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information from the transcripts has been removed, and the participants have been referred as per the identification codes. These codes included the teacher (T) code, which are used in the results section to identify the source of quotations.

Results and Discussion

The present study was conducted to investigate research activities in an English language classroom. Data were gathered through interviews with seven secondary-level English teachers of Palpa district and the collected information was transcribed and analyzed based on the following themes:

Teachers' Perspectives on Research

Teachers' perception refers to their personal perspective on a particular issue or problem. Investigating teachers' perceptions of research is crucial, as it offers insight into their views on specific topics. If teachers have a positive outlook, they are more likely to engage in various research activities; however, if their perception is negative, they may avoid such activities. Therefore, teachers were asked to share their opinions to understand their perceptions of research activities in the language classroom. Most of the teachers, however, provided pre-formed or standard responses.

Research is the process of discovering or exploring knowledge to solve problems. It is a problem-solving approach aimed at uncovering the truth. The process begins by identifying the problem, followed by collecting data or information to find a solution.

This viewpoint aligns with Burn's (1994) definition of research as an investigation aimed at finding a solution to a problem. However, T3 offered a different perspective on research. He explained that:

I think research is a kind of digging out or exploring or finding some sort of detail for a wider understanding and analyzing issues from different perspectives or deeper levels, to cause the intervention part of practical or real problems.

In conclusion, research is a process aimed at finding a solution to a problem by examining it from a broader perspective. The research process involves selecting a problem, gathering relevant information, and analyzing it to draw conclusions. It was also found that the overall attitude toward research was largely positive, which could be attributed to the knowledge gained through study (Hofmeister, 2007).

The Value of Research in Language Classroom

There is no question that research plays a valuable role in the language classroom. It serves as a source of input that enhances interactivity, organization, and the discovery of new knowledge. Research encourages students to become more independent and fosters autonomy in their work. It also helps boost learners' confidence and self-esteem. When asked about the importance of research activities in the language classroom, many teachers gave similar responses, which were as follows:

Research in the language classroom is essential as it provides teachers with valuable insights and contributes to their professional development. It is the foundation of all knowledge. Additionally, research helps students develop their social roles, improve collaborative skills, engage in critical thinking activities, and enhance their creative writing abilities.

Moreover, conducting research offers numerous benefits. It is carried out to uncover new knowledge, validate existing information, or make practical contributions in a given field. Research encourages a more rational, purposeful, and thoughtful approach to the challenges we encounter in our daily lives. It also helps to understand students' backgrounds, interests, and learning levels. In this regard, T5 has provided various insights into research.

Learners are the focus of teaching and learning activities, and language teaching follows specific patterns. In my view, it is a scientific process. Students come to school from diverse backgrounds, and unless we understand their realities, backgrounds, and levels, language teaching will not be effective. Additionally, other factors in the classroom should also be studied. Therefore, research is essential in the language classroom.

It can be concluded that research is a crucial activity in the language classroom, as it serves as the foundation of all knowledge. It fosters the development of collaborative skills, critical thinking abilities, and professional activities, while also unlocking students' inner potential. In this regard, Ulla (2018) emphasized several benefits of conducting research in the language classroom, stating that it is vital for professional growth. Research promotes critical self-reflection, allows teachers to identify and address classroom and school challenges, and enhances their knowledge and skills in teaching.

Research Activities into Language Teaching

Many language classrooms in Nepal still follow a teacher-centered approach. Traditionally, a transmission-oriented method dominated language teaching, with memorization and rote learning being the primary techniques. However, the focus of language teaching has shifted in recent times. Today, the classroom has become a hub for interaction, creativity, and collaboration through various activities. Research has also become a key component of the classroom. In this context, students were asked to reflect on their research activities in the language classroom, and many teachers responded as follows:

They engage in activities such as project work, writing assignments, reading and completing tasks, grammar exercises, and identifying pronunciation errors. Various comprehensive passages are provided, which students must read, generate questions about, and explore ideas, allowing for exposure and exploration. They also connect a variety of materials to their personal experiences. Additionally, students perform different textual analyses, such as studying grammar, vocabulary, and writing summaries.

Classroom research starts with questions related to classroom experiences, issues, or challenges. Research activities in the English language classroom typically follow four steps: observation, description, analysis, and explanation (Tarbiya, 2019). Classroom research involves various tasks and activities that both students and teachers collaborate on and carry out, such as problem-solving tasks, project work, and process writing activities. However, T6, another teacher, holds a different perspective.

Regarding research at the secondary level, I focus on writing activities such as creating brochures, prospectuses, and similar tasks. In reading exercises, students first read the text and then complete various follow-up activities. During the research process, I aim to understand the students' backgrounds and assign tasks accordingly.

The previous discussion highlights that many process-oriented research activities, such as reading and exploring, reading and writing, collecting and discussing, and field-based tasks, are used in the language classroom. However, some teachers concentrate on product-based activities like creating brochures, prospectuses, and short reports. According to Brumfit and Mitchell (1989), a variety of activities can be conducted in the language classroom, including studying language learning based on observed performance, comparing language experiences, analyzing the connection between theory and practice, exploring different teaching and learning styles, conducting case studies of classrooms in context, and examining teachers' beliefs about their practices.

Research Tools for the Language Classroom

Research instruments play a crucial role in enhancing students' interaction, collaboration, and imagination skills. Various tools, such as questionnaires, interviews, observation checklists, and test items, are commonly used in empirical research, while documents are typically employed in non-empirical or library research. Teachers were asked to identify the research tools they commonly use in the language classroom, and most of their responses are summarized as follows:

Teachers use similar research tools and methods to conduct research in the language classroom. They typically employ questionnaires, interviews, and observation checklists to collect data. With these tools, they complete project work, assign writing tasks, and gather opinions from various experts in their community on specific issues.

Just like tools in other fields, research tools are essential for uncovering problems. In phenomenological research, tools such as interviews are employed for observational studies. Some teachers use these tools to identify the root causes of certain issues, while others do not. However, some teachers, like T5, approach things differently in the classroom.

I conduct such activities in groups and pairs, but I do not do them consistently. I ask students to complete the questionnaire and interview, and then report their findings in the classroom. However, I have not yet used observation checklist activities.

The previous description indicates that the main research instruments in a language classroom are observation checklists, questionnaires, and interview guides. However, some teachers prefer using group work and pair work instead of these instruments. In this context, Brumfit and Mitchell (1989) identify various research tools and techniques for collecting and analyzing data in the language classroom, including documentaries, maps, diaries, lesson plans, semi-structured interviews, tests, quantified statements, questionnaires, and more.

Teacher-Led Research

The teacher serves as the primary source of knowledge for students. Teachers need to be competent, tech-savvy, and research-oriented, and they should connect classroom learning with real-world activities. Without teachers engaging in research activities, students are unlikely to follow suit. In this context, teachers were asked to reflect on their research activities in their professional lives. Their responses revealed that most teachers had only conducted action research, which is required for promotion and must be submitted to the educational office of their municipality. However, T2, who stands apart from the others, shared the following perspective:

Throughout my studies and professional career, I have carried out around six research projects. These include case studies, project works, and action research. I have also written both theoretical research and research-based studies.

There are primarily three types of research: pure research, applied research, and action research (Neupane & Sharma, 2020). Pure research aims to uncover theories or principles within specific disciplines, while applied research focuses on addressing immediate policy issues. Action research, on the other hand, is conducted to solve problems within the classroom. Although a few teachers have engaged in research, the majority do not carry out action research, with only a small number doing so. In this regard, T3 holds the belief that:

I have conducted over ten research projects, roughly a dozen. For instance, I have researched task design instructions, ELT method practices at the secondary level, and teacher professional development. I have also explored strategies for improving writing skills, as well as researched the communicative skills of learners.

Research is mandatory for permanent teachers. However, temporary teachers do not conduct them as they need to submit them to the municipality. In this light, another teacher, T5, responded with his opinions as follows:

I am not a permanent teacher and have not submitted any formal research reports. However, I have conducted informal research activities in the language classroom, such as investigating the impact of family disturbances on language learning and exploring ways to motivate less engaged students in the classroom

The above description indicates that many school teachers only engage in action research, which is typically conducted by permanent teachers. Temporary teachers do not usually undertake action research as they are not required to submit it for job promotion. One of the key benefits of teacher-initiated research is that it addresses the immediate interests and concerns of classroom teachers, bridging the gap between theory and practice (Beasley & Riordan, 1981).

Textual Engagement in Language Teaching

New trends in ELT emphasize learner-centered methods in the language classroom, where the teaching and learning process should be interactive and bidirectional. Various activities should be integrated to ensure language teaching is purposeful and goal-oriented. In this context, respondents were asked to share their views on the practice of textual activities in language classrooms. Their responses were similar, as they all allow their students to engage in different textual activities, prioritizing these activities in their teaching practices. They have students practice both subjective and objective questions, teach grammar through a text-based approach, and encourage textual analysis. For instance, one teacher mentioned that she has her students identify types of adjectives, passive sentences, tenses, key vocabulary, and the theme of a passage.

Many teachers emphasize textual activities in the language classroom, allowing students to read texts and engage in various tasks such as vocabulary, grammar, and writing exercises. However, some teachers, like T6, offer different perspectives on the practice of textual activities. He added that:

The types of activities a teacher should use depend on the context. For example, when teaching a poem, I ask students to perform a textual analysis, focusing on elements like language, metaphors, and vocabulary.

The aforementioned discussion highlights that various linguistic activities, such as identifying key vocabulary, grammar, and answering questions, are commonly practiced. However, very few teachers encourage students to identify metaphors, symbols, and other contextual elements. Similarly, the secondary curriculum (2076) emphasizes classroom

activities like question and answer sessions, simulation and role play, group and pair work, information-gap activities, inquiry and discovery, brainstorming, mind mapping, and quick writing.

Engaging in Project Works and Writing Assignments

The secondary level curriculum emphasizes various field-related activities, such as project work and writing assignments. It also introduces tools like dictionaries, newspapers, magazines, and language games. At the end of each unit, project work and writing assignments are incorporated. These activities help students improve not only their writing skills but also their listening, speaking, and reading abilities. Additionally, students develop important skills such as cooperation, collaboration, communication, management, and leadership. In this context, teachers were asked to share their experiences with project work and writing assignments, both inside and outside the classroom, and their responses were as follows:

Teachers typically guide students through various stages or processes when completing project work or writing tasks. Occasionally, they provide a specific format, but at other times, students are free to develop their own approach. However, some teachers, like T3, mentioned, "I sometimes ask students to follow formal procedures, and sometimes informal ones." In a formal procedure, students systematically work through stages like identifying problems, setting objectives, determining methods, tools, and sampling, conducting analysis, and drawing conclusions. Teachers also allow flexible submission times, and students are encouraged to visit the field, ask questions, and write their reports based on data gathered from observations, interviews, or questionnaires.

While preparing a project, some teachers provide a format, and some of them do not. Any formal report follows the IMRD format, which stands for introduction, method, results, and discussion as the main components of a report. However, T5 responds somehow differently:

I typically support students in completing their project work. I encourage them to conduct interviews and ask celebrities questions, then write reports in class. They follow multiple stages or processes when working on projects or writing tasks. I offer some guidance or instructions before they begin, but sometimes I don't provide a specific format, allowing them to write freely. On other occasions, students request a specific format, and they follow it.

In conclusion, there are various approaches to conducting research, both formal and informal. In the formal process, students follow the standard IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) format for completing project work. In contrast, the informal process does not adhere to a specific format. Teachers also offer flexibility in the time required to complete and submit the work. While some teachers allow students to prepare a detailed report after field visits, others prefer not to assign extensive tasks.

In this regard, Hedge (2008) states that projects are comprehensive tasks that combine various language skills through a range of activities. These activities, which are part of the project process, may include planning, gathering data through reading, listening, interviewing, observing group discussions, problem-solving, and both oral and written reporting, as well as presenting the findings.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the research practices of secondary-level English teachers in Nepal, using a phenomenological research design and interviews as the primary data collection method. The findings revealed that research activities help enhance students' internal potential. The curriculum includes various research-based activities, focusing on skills such as reading, writing, grammar, project work, and speaking. However, some teachers tend to emphasize product-oriented tasks, such as creating brochures, prospectuses, and short reports. In language classrooms, the primary research tools are observation checklists, questionnaires, and interview guides. Nevertheless, many teachers prefer using group work and pair work over these formal instruments. Furthermore, most teachers only engage in action research, and this is primarily done by permanent staff, as temporary teachers do not conduct such research due to its irrelevance to their job promotion. There are many ways of conducting research, both formal and informal. In the formal process, students follow the standard IMRD format in completing project work. In an informal format, they do not follow any particular format. Teachers also provide some flexibility in the time it takes to complete and submit it. Some teachers allow them to prepare a detailed report after visiting the field, while other teachers do not assign lengthy tasks.

The curriculum and material experts need to incorporate different research-related tasks and activities in the language curriculum so that students can develop collaboration, critical thinking, analytical skills, and leadership skills through the present teacher-dominated classroom, which can be changed into a liberal democratic classroom. Moreover, the present research can be beneficial to those who want to employ project- and research-based activities in the language classroom.This study is a small-scale phenomenological investigation conducted within a qualitative research framework. As a limited study, it does not address all aspects of the topic. Future researchers interested in exploring this area may consider using a quantitative or mixed-methods approach, or they could apply the same qualitative design at different educational levels.

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