

**English language teaching,
learning and assessment
in Nepal:**
**Policies and practices in
the school education system**

Prithvi N Shrestha and Ganga Ram Gautam

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Introduction to the series

Across South Asia, English is widely seen as the language of social mobility, educational opportunity, employability, global business and dialogue. Many consider English language skills to be an essential component of economic development and growth – both on an individual and national level. However, the inclusion of English within language-in-education policies that must simultaneously promote other national languages, along with its history as a colonial and/or elite language in most countries in this region, means that it does not always sit easily within education systems. The place of English within school systems in South Asia has fluctuated over time and a number of challenges remain around ensuring equitable, high-quality provision of English language teaching and learning for all who want or need it.

This report is one of a series of five focusing on the policy and practices relating to English language education in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It aims to provide a contemporary snapshot of the role that English currently plays within the lives of school children and the wider community. It explores the current scenario, considering both the private and government school sectors, including reflections on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis. It also looks to the future: how might some of the current challenges be addressed, and what opportunities exist to support the development of this aspect of the school education system?

Across the series, the author teams collaborated in defining the overall focus and structure, and peer-reviewed each other's work to provide feedback and ensure coherence across the reports. The authors have focused primarily on a review of policy documentation, reports and data provided by relevant government departments, academics and international agencies. This is supported by input from a small number of important stakeholders such as teachers, curriculum and textbook writers, and policy officers. Their input is often included verbatim to provide further contextualised insight into the realities of the classroom and wider education system.

Providing a detailed overview of even a single subject like English within any school education system is a significant task, particularly in large, complex and multilingual countries. Coupled with the historical, political and cultural factors that are unique to English in South Asia, we are conscious that these reports have their limitations and can serve mainly as an entry point to this vast and complicated topic. Nevertheless, we hope that readers will find them informative and useful for critical discussion, research and development – particularly those who are involved in English language education implementation in this region.

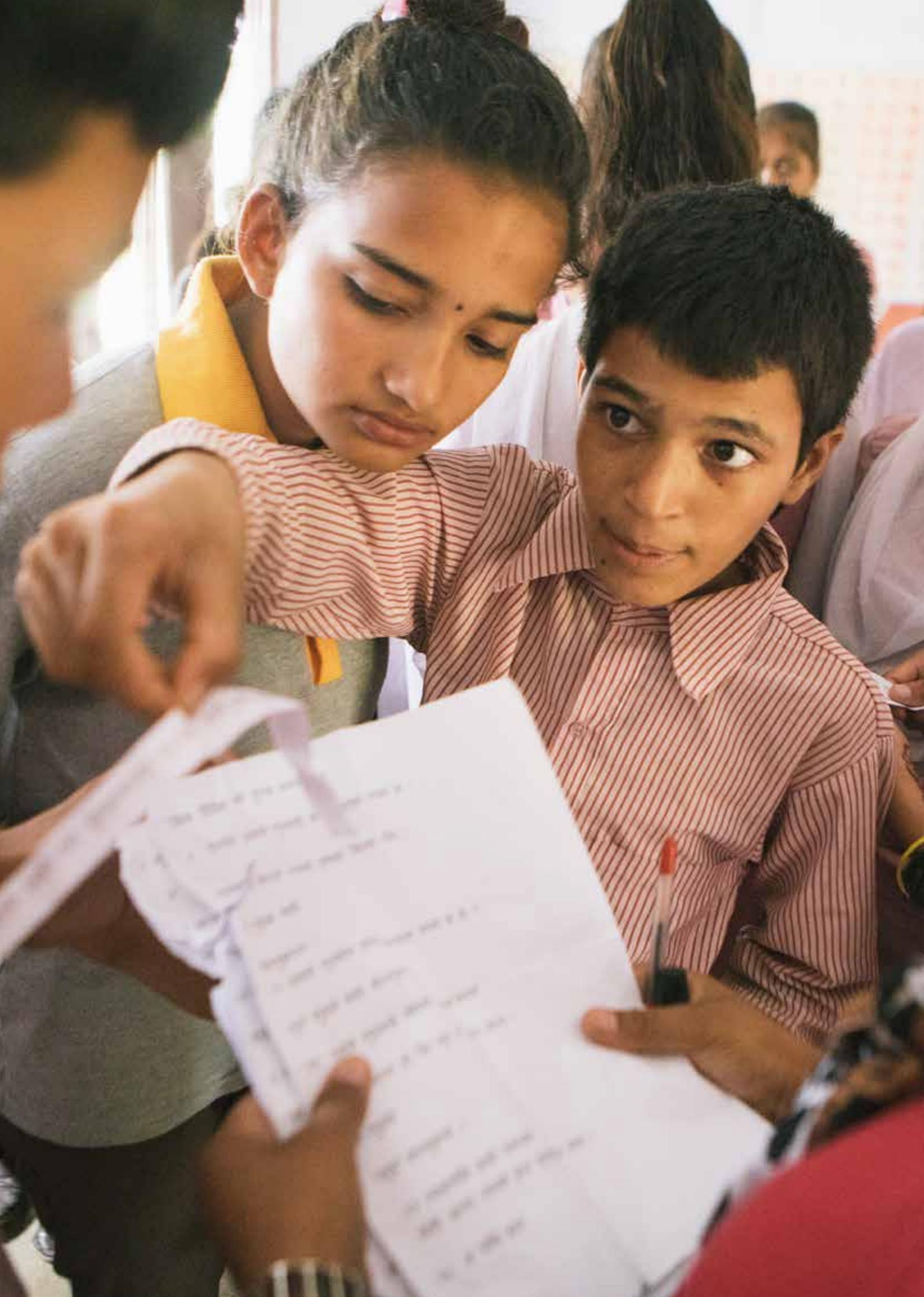
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Abbreviations

CDC	Curriculum Development Centre
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for languages
CEHRD	Centre for Education and Human Resource Development
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
ELT	English Language Teaching
ELTLA	English Language Teaching Learning and Assessment
EME	English Medium Education
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
MoEST	Ministry of Education Science and Technology
NASA	National Assessment of Student Achievement
NESP	National Education System Plan
NELTA	Nepal English Language Teachers' Association
NME	Nepali Medium Education
NNEPC	Nepal National Education Planning Commission
OCE	Office of the Controller of Examinations
RELO	Regional English Language Office (USA)
SEE	Secondary Education Examination
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
SSRP	School Sector Reform Plan
TPD	Teacher Professional Development
TSC	Teacher Service Commission

Executive summary

This report presents an overview of the status of English language teaching, learning and assessment (ELTLA) in Nepal. It situates ELTLA in relation to the school education system, language(s) in education policy history and the multilingual and multi-ethnic context of Nepal. The purpose of the report is to provide readers with an understanding of the status of the English language in the Nepalese school education system and its various roles in education and wider Nepalese society. The information for this report was primarily drawn from national policy documents, government school education reports, reports by non-government organisations and the published empirical studies on language education in Nepal. Additionally, key informant interviews were conducted with a language education policy maker and four English language teachers to gather further information.

English language education started in Nepal during the Rana rule in 1854. It began as a foreign language and gradually it has become the second most widely used language after Nepali in various spheres of life, although the country has 123 languages spoken by various ethnolinguistic communities. It has a longer history than the Nepali language within the education system in Nepal. From the beginning, English has been associated with privilege, power and social inequality, as it has been used by rulers and the elite for their own political gains and personal benefits; indeed, the language is still not easily accessed by people from low socio-economic status or rural areas.

The official education policy and language in education policy documents have historically given English a special status in Nepalese society, even when a monolingual policy was adopted. It is taught as a compulsory subject from Grade 1 through to undergraduate level and is the medium of instruction in all private schools by default. The current education policy (National Education Policy, 2019) stipulates that schools can choose to teach through mother tongue and Nepali or Nepali and English in primary education (Grades 1–3) and Nepali and English in basic education (Grades 4–8) and secondary education (Grades 9–12). There is a consistently growing demand from parents for English-medium education (EME), as they see EME as instrumental for their children's better future. As a result, many community (state) schools have recently shifted to EME.

In some ways, English has a bright future in Nepal. However, the lack of learning resources and sufficiently qualified English teachers, along with other subject teachers adopting EME with limited English, have created many challenges. The School Sector Development Plan 2016/17–2022/23 and

School Education Sector Plan 2021–30 aim to provide further teacher professional development and teacher preparation programmes using multimedia resources to address these gaps. Private schools (about 29 per cent of total schools) and a small number of reasonably resourced community schools are able to provide English language learning opportunities (both as a subject and medium of instruction) to children while many community schools outside cities fail to do so. This has resulted in inequitable access to English, which has contributed to social inequalities. This shows clear gaps between policy and practice.

As the demand for English continues to grow, there is a strong need to prepare teachers for both English language teaching, learning and assessment and English medium education (beyond primary level) across the country, developing locally and socio-culturally sensitive English language curriculum and language learning resources that promote multilingualism and translanguaging, as well as a robust programme of research to inform future languages in education policy decisions.

1 Introduction

Nepal is a small, multilingual and landlocked country with rich and diverse ancient cultures in South Asia and home to over 29 million people. It has 123 recorded languages spoken¹ and there are more than 140 ethnic groups across the country (Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2011). The people predominantly practise Hinduism (81 per cent) followed by Buddhism (9 per cent) and Islam (4 per cent) (ibid.). Historically, Hinduism has influenced the education system in Nepal (see Gellner and Letizia, 2019; Phyak and Ojha, 2019).

Nepal had 35,520 schools with 7.2 million enrolments and about 153,000 teachers in 2020 (CEHRD, 2020a). The country has undergone a number of education policy changes since the advent of democracy in 1951. These reforms have often been driven by changes occurring in the neighbouring countries (Regmi, 2021), which have also affected the status of English language in school education. This report aims to provide an account of the status of English language teaching, learning and assessment within the school education system in Nepal as well as its various roles in wider Nepalese society. It includes the following.

- An overview of school education
- Reflections on the role of English in the country
- A brief history of education and English language policies
- A consideration of existing English language teaching, learning and assessment (ELTLA) practices
- Discussion on English language teacher education
- A review of the challenges and opportunities for ELTLA in Nepal

In this report, school education refers to Grades 1–10² in the school education system in Nepal although the latest National Education Policy (MoEST, 2019) stipulates that school education covers Grades 1–12. Grades 1–8 is officially called basic education and Grades 9–12 secondary education (CEHRD, 2020b). This report excludes Grades 11 and 12 because, from Grade 11, students have options to choose specialisations such as science and thus education becomes more specialised. Within Grades 1–12, basic education (Grades 1–8) is free and compulsory while secondary education (Grades 9–12) is free but not compulsory, as stated in the National Education Policy 2019 (MoEST, 2019).

This report is primarily based on desk research conducted at the end of 2021. We have derived information from various government education policy documents since they became available (e.g. Nepal National Education Planning Commission, 1956), non-government organisations' reports on school education (e.g. Ministry of Education et al., 2016) and key relevant empirical research papers on language education and ELTLA in Nepal (e.g. Giri, 2015; Hayes, 2018; Phyak and Sharma, 2020). To supplement and enrich the desk research, we also conducted key informant interviews with important stakeholders of ELTLA. They included one (language) education policy maker (male) from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and four English language teachers (one female and three males). In addition, we have drawn on our own country-specific knowledge and expertise given our directly relevant backgrounds (both authors are of Nepali origin).

1 The Language Commission of Nepal published a report in 2021 which identifies eight additional languages, making the total languages spoken in Nepal 131. See <https://languagecommission.gov.np/pdf/1643703141.प्राचीन-20वर्षिक-20प्रतिवेदन.pdf>

2 The term Class is also used widely to refer to a Grade.

2 School education system in Nepal

School education in Nepal does not have a long history (Wood, 1965). Until 1951, the country was under the autocratic regime of the Ranas who forbade all Nepalese people to access education except for their own family members and courtiers. The Durbar (palace) High School established by Jung Bahadur Rana for his family followed English-medium education so that the Ranas could communicate easily with the British in India at that time. Although later Rana Prime Minister Deb Shumshere attempted to provide free universal primary education in 1901, he did not succeed (Sharma, 1990). School education became available to the wider public only after 1951 when the Rana regime ended and a new political era began.

Nepal has witnessed many political changes since 1951, which also meant changes in education policies and the school education system. In this report, it is not possible to provide a detailed account of the education policy development but a brief summary is given as contextual background.

The first official attempt to develop national education policy began with the establishment of the Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NNEPC) in 1956 (Nepal National Education Planning Commission, 1956) to oversee education when Nepal was politically unstable. With the help of American Professor Hugh B Wood, NNEPC produced a report on education and outlined a national educational plan (Wood, 1965). This plan emphasised making Nepali, originally known as *Khas* or *Gorkhali Bhasha*, as the medium of instruction in schools. Then in 1962, King Mahendra introduced a new party-less political system called *Panchayat* and had the slogan of *ek bhasha, ek bhash, ek dharma, ek desh* (one language, one way of dress, one religion, one nation) to spread Nepali, Hinduism and other national symbols throughout the country and create a unified national identity (Rai et al., 2011). He introduced the New Education System Plan (NESP) in 1969 (Ministry of Education, 1971) to strengthen the monarchy and nationalise education as highlighted by the first goal of education: 'To produce citizens who are loyal to the nation, monarchy and national independence and who remain ever alert and active toward their rights and duties under the Panchayat System' (Ministry of Education, 1971:21).

NESP further embraced Nepali as the language of instruction in schools and made school education accessible to all. A similar education policy with some minor changes continued with King Birendra until 1990 when the Panchayat system ended for a multi-party democratic system. This led to a new constitution that

recognised all local languages as national languages. The major change in the education policy was the use of languages other than Nepali in instruction (Rai et al., 2011).

Politically, Nepal became a federal republic after the end of the decade-long (1996–2006) Maoist civil war and monarchy in 2006. This radical political change led to more decentralisation of school education, meaning the management of schools and policy reform have become the responsibility of the provincial government within seven provinces and associated municipalities (753 in total), although this work is in its very early stage (Ministry of Education, 2016). Further changes can be seen in later education policies due to the international influence on Nepal and the involvement of various donor agencies such as USAID and World Bank (Regmi, 2021).

At different stages of these education policy changes, different grades of school were identified as primary, lower secondary and secondary. For instance, initially, Grades 1–3 were primary and then Grades 1–5. Grades 6 and 7 were lower secondary, which later included Grade 8 as well. Secondary education included 8–10 and later Grades 9 and 10. From the early 1990s, higher secondary schools (Grades 11–12, known as 10+2) were established. In 2009–10, the school education system was restructured into basic education (Grades 1–8 to serve 5–12 year olds) and secondary education (Grades 9–12 to serve 13–16 year olds) (CEHRD, 2020b). A school can be lower basic (Grades 1–5), upper basic (Grades 6–8), basic (Grades 1–8) or secondary (Grades 9–10; Grades 11–12 or combined into Grades 9–12) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Structure of school education in Nepal from 2016³ (CEHRD, 2020b)

School levels	Grades	Typical age
Lower basic	1–5	5–9
Upper basic	6–8	10–12
Basic	1–8	5–12
Secondary	9–10	13–14
Secondary	11–12	15–16
Secondary	9–12	13–16

3 Excludes early childhood and pre-primary education.

Key facts about education in Nepal

Population 
29,192,480
 (CBS, 2022)⁴

Number of government-funded (community) schools 
27,704
 (CEHRD, 2020a)

Political division

Seven provinces:

- Province 1
- Madhesh
- Bagmatai
- Gandaki
- Lumbini
- Karnali
- Sudurpaschim

Private/Institutional schools

6,687
 (CEHRD, 2020a)

Religious schools

1,129
 (CEHRD, 2020a)


Compulsory education
 Basic Education
 (Grades 1–8)

Number of in-school learners (Grades 1–12)

Total
7,021,622 (2020)

 Girls **3,527,966** |  Boys **3,493,656**
 (CEHRD, 2020a)

Number of teachers (Grades 1–12)

Total
316,734 (2020)

Basic education  **254,578** | Secondary education  **62,156**
 (CEHRD, 2020a)

Enrolment rates

Primary (5–9 year olds)
 **96.3%** (2019)

Secondary (10–16 year olds)
 **61.9%** (2019)⁵

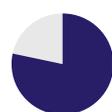
School completion rates

Primary
 **120%** (2019)⁶

Lower secondary
 **99.5%** (2020)⁷

Expenditure on education (per cent of GDP)

 **4.4%** (2018)⁸

Male
 **78.6%** (2018)⁹

Adult (15 and over) literacy rate

Total
 **67.9%** (2018)

Female
 **59.7%** (2018)

⁴ Preliminary Report of National Population 2021 by CBS: <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/Home/Details?tpid=5&dcid=3479c092-7749-4ba6-9369-45486cd67f30&tfsid=17>

⁵ UNESCO Institute for Statistics: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/np>

⁶ World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.CMPT.ZS?locations=NP>

⁷ World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CMPT.LO.ZS?locations=NP>

⁸ and ⁹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/np>

The latest education policy (Rashtriya Shiksha Niti 2076 BS) was approved by the cabinet in 2019. The vision of this policy is 'Educated, civilised, healthy and capable human resource; social justice, transformation and prosperity' (MoEST, 2019:06). The new policy was developed to reflect the need of Nepal emerging as a federal republic with the ambition to become a middle-income country by 2030 (MoEST, 2019:05).

2.1 Current school education system in Nepal

Currently, there are three types of schools in Nepal: community schools, institutional schools and religious schools (CEHRD, 2020b). Community schools are government or public schools and receive full to partial funding from the government. Some community schools, called Community Unaided Schools, receive only negligible funding. Institutional schools, also traditionally known as private or 'boarding schools', are run through private trusts, public trusts or under the Companies Act. Such schools receive no government funding. Teachers and other staff salaries are privately funded and any student expenses such as textbooks are paid by parents. There were only a few elitist private schools in big cities until 1990 when 'boarding schools' started mushrooming due to an open and liberal policy towards them (Caddell, 2006). The religious schools tend to promote religious education, and if they follow the national curriculum they receive government funding for teacher salaries and free textbooks. There are three types of religious schools: Madrasahs, Gumba/Bihar schools and Gurukuls. They are related to three religions respectively: Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism.

As of 2020, there were 27,704 community schools and 6,687 institutional schools. Additionally, there were 1,129 religious schools among which 911 were Madrasahs, 114 Gumba schools and 104 Gurukuls (CEHRD, 2020a:31). Out of 5,319,004 students enrolled in basic education (Grades 1–8), 3,806,639 (71.56 per cent) were in community schools and 1,512,365 (28.43 per cent) were in institutional schools, thus making the latter a significant player in basic education in Nepal. The 2020 school education data (CEHRD, 2020a) also shows that a larger proportion of boys were enrolled in institutional schools than girls (638,582–42 per cent – girls versus 873,783– 58 per cent – boys). This indicates continued favourable investment in education for boys in Nepal (Khanal, 2018). In addition, there are about 87,000 students enrolled in basic religious schools.

Out of 1,702,618 secondary education enrolments, 874,280 (51.34 per cent) were girls in 2020 (CEHRD, 2020a:08). The secondary community schools had 1,210,565 (639,761 – 53 per cent – girls) enrolments while the secondary institutional schools had 481,174 (230,663 – 48 per cent – girls). The religious schools had a small share of 7,826 (2,481 – 32 per cent – girls) enrolments. These figures suggest that secondary institutional schools had about a 29 per cent share of the total enrolments in 2020. In fact, this growth of institutional basic and secondary schools has been phenomenal, as they only had a share of about 16 per cent at basic and 19 per cent at secondary levels in 2015 (Bhatta and Pherali, 2017).

In addition to the funding model, the institutional schools (i.e. private schools) are significantly different from the community schools for various reasons. Firstly, all institutional schools have historically followed an English-medium education (EME) (Giri, 2015; Pandey, 2020). Secondly, they are mostly concentrated in the urban areas of the country as they require significant financial resources to run, achieved through student tuition fees. Thirdly, they are expensive and thus not accessible to the children and parents with a low socio-economic status. Yet, as far as possible, parents in Nepal prefer to send their children to an institutional school due to the perceived benefits of EME and parents' desire to provide better education to their children (Caddell, 2006; Pandey, 2020; Phyak and Sharma, 2020). Due to the surging demand for such schools by parents, there are 'budget' institutional schools for 'low-middle class, working class and peasant communities' (Phyak and Sharma, 2020:325). Fourth, these schools have consistently outperformed the community schools in the Secondary Education Examination (SEE, previously known as School Leaving Certificate (SLC)) (Ghimire, 2019, 2021). Finally, unlike community schools, institutional schools tend to have less political influence from the mainstream political parties and thus provide an uninterrupted education to students (Ghimire, 2019), which may attract many parents.

Our key informant interview data indicates that students from private schools have better English language proficiency mainly due to the exposure to the English language in schools and mandatory requirement to speak English on the school premises. During the interview, our key informant teachers pointed out that most of the other subject teachers in private schools engage students in drilling tasks to memorise the textbook content in English at primary level. As

these teachers have a low level of English language proficiency themselves, they are not able to involve the students in interactive or communicative activities in the English language. For assessment purposes, these teachers prepare a set of questions and their answers, which students are required to memorise. In the exams, students are asked similar questions and respond to them from memory. However, during class time, teachers ask their students to communicate in English both with their teachers and peers.

Due to the significant demand for EME from parents and the declining student recruitment in the community schools (Phyak and Ojha, 2019), the Education Act 2016 and the National Education Policy 2019 have made a provision for Nepali and English or both as the medium of instruction from Grade 1 in community schools. However, such a provision does not automatically lead to high-quality EME in schools due to the lack of teacher preparedness for EME (Ojha, 2018).

2.2 Key government departments responsible for education

School education is managed by local governments. However, all the major policy decisions are made at the ministerial level while operational and management decisions are made at various levels. The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) is responsible for developing the curriculum, textbooks and teachers' guides. For each subject there is a subject committee often headed by a university professor, representatives of schoolteachers and CDC officials. A designated subject expert of the CDC co-ordinates with the subject committee while developing, revising and implementing the curriculum, textbooks and teachers' guides.

The Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD), under the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST), is the apex body that oversees the entire school education with its roles in planning, resource management, monitoring, teacher management, learning management, research, non-formal education and teacher training. The National Examination Board (NEB) looks after the national examinations of Grades 10 and 12. The Teacher Service Commission recruits the teachers through open competitions and manages teacher promotions to different levels.

According to the Constitution of Nepal (2015), local government (i.e. at the municipality level) is responsible for managing basic and secondary education whereas the provincial and federal governments are responsible for managing higher education. Key roles of the local government include monitoring educational activities, managing the Grade 8 exam, teacher management, school mapping and resource management. However, the elaboration of the specific roles of the local government in managing the overall school education system is yet to be elaborated. Therefore, the major tasks that include curriculum development, textbook writing, hiring of teachers and teacher training are still under the federal government under the 'concurrent' power (of local, provincial and federal government) as provisioned by the Constitution of Nepal (2015). Some provincial governments have also provided different types of support to the schools such as infrastructure development under the same provision of 'concurrent' power. However, on paper the only explicit role of the provincial government provisioned in the constitution is to manage higher education within the province. The role clarity of the three-tier government is still in the transition phase and will become clearer once the current Education Act is revised (in process) by federal parliament.



3 The role of English in Nepal and language in education policy

3.1 Introduction of English in Nepal

There is no validated record of exactly when English was introduced in Nepal, but it appears that it entered Nepal as a foreign language around the 17th century through British missionaries (Giri, 2015). These missionaries trained Nepalese people to support their work within the country.

A potentially significant development of English education is marked by the recruitment of Gorkha/Gurkha soldiers by the British East India Company after the Sugauli Treaty of 1815. The Gurkha soldiers were trained through English and when they returned home, they promoted English education (Giri, 2015). However, the formal introduction of English into the education system in Nepal was during the Rana era (1846–1951) after the first Rana Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana visited England in 1851 and was impressed by the British system of education (Caddell, 2007; Giri, 2010). The first school he established in 1854 was called Durbar (Palace) High School and was intended for only members of his family and his elite supporters. The school adopted English medium education (EME) following the British system. Thus, the Ranas educated themselves in English and built stronger diplomatic ties with the British to maintain their continuous autocratic rule in Nepal (Eagle, 2000).

Also during the Rana regime, the first higher education institution called Trichnadra College was set up in 1918 to provide higher education to the graduates of the Durbar High School. This also followed an EME approach and the British curriculum (Eagle, 2000:16). In 1932, the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination board was established to conduct examinations at the end of Grade 10. The SLC board started its work in 1934 when the English language examination began in Nepal (Shrestha, 2018). It is worth noting that until 1970, English had two papers worth 100 marks each in the SLC while Nepali language had only one paper of 100 marks (see Wood, 1965), further emphasising the privilege of English over Nepali within the education system. This brief historical context of how English language was introduced in education in Nepal shows it as a language of privilege, power and elitism (see Giri, 2010; Phyak, 2011; Shrestha, 2008).

3.2 English as a subject within the Nepali medium curriculum

After the fall of the Rana regime in 1951, Nepal embarked on providing school education to the masses. The formal planning of (school) education was started by the Nepal National Education Planning

Commission (NNEPC) in 1956 through a landmark report (Nepal National Education Planning Commission, 1956). EME continued in higher education beyond 1951 until the new National Education System Plan (NESP) (Ministry of Education, 1971) was set up by King Mahendra. NESP introduced Nepali as the medium of instruction across all levels of education, including schools. Both NNEPC and NESP included English as an international language in the school curriculum and thus English has maintained its continuity in school education in Nepal since the 1850s. In this sense, English has a longer history in formal education in Nepal than the national language Nepali does.

Nevertheless, the intentions of the government were clear through their emphasis on the use of Nepali as one language in education, almost banning other indigenous languages despite the rich multilingual context of Nepal. According to the planning commission in 1956:

[I]t should be emphasised that if Nepali is to become the true national language, then we must insist that its use be enforced in the primary school. Should Nepali not be the mother tongue of the teacher then special care must be exercised that the teacher does not frequently lapse into local tongue or become indolent about encouraging first and second grade children to use Nepali as early as possible. Otherwise, Nepali, though learned, may remain a "foreign" language rather than the child's basic, thinking language. Local dialects and tongues, other than standard Nepali, should be vanished from the school and playground as early as possible in the life of the child. (Nepal National Education Planning Commission, 1956:92)

The 'one language' sentiment of the policy is further reflected below:

The study of a non-Nepali local tongue would mitigate against the effective development of Nepali, for the student would make greater use of it than Nepali – at home and in the community – and thus Nepali would remain a "foreign" language. If the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language, then other languages will gradually disappear and greater national strength and unity will result. (Nepal National Education Planning Commission, 1956:93)

Due to its strictly monolingual policy in education, the Panchayat era (1960–1990) is considered the 'darkest era' in the language policy history of Nepal

(Rai et al., 2011:11). Nepali became the sole language of instruction in schools, although it was spoken as the first language by only about 53 per cent of the population (Eagle, 2000). The first goal of education was serving the monarchy and the Panchayat system: 'To produce citizens *who are loyal to the nation, monarchy and national independence, and who remain ever alert and active toward their rights and duties under the Panchayat System*' (emphasis added, Ministry of Education, 1971:21)

In addition to the adoption of Nepali as the main medium of instruction, English was introduced from Grade 4 by NESP and made a compulsory subject up to undergraduate level in higher education (Eagle, 2000). The language was also promoted as the language of science and technology. While NESP tried to enforce Nepali-medium instruction in public or government schools in the 1970s, a growing number of elitist private 'boarding' schools¹⁰ continued with EME during the Panchayat era (Eagle, 2000:36), continuously serving the EME needs of the elite, affluent families in cities.

3.3 The development of multilingual language-in-education policy

As a result of popular protests, the Panchayat system ended in 1990 when a multi-party democracy was restored in Nepal. A new constitution was written in 1990, which was a significant moment in the history of language in education policy in Nepal as it recognised Nepal as multilingual and multi-ethnic:

(1) The Nepali language in the Devanagari script is the language of the nation of Nepal. The Nepali language shall be the official language.

(2) All the languages spoken as the mother tongue in the various parts of Nepal are the national languages of Nepal. (Article 6, His Majesty's Government of Nepal, 1990)

This marked the end of the monolingual language in education policy, which allowed primary school students (Grades 1–3) to have education in their first language. However, this responsibility was left to the local government and the school. Due to the lack of teaching materials in the first language, providing education in a child's first language was extremely difficult. Also, due to the new liberal policy towards private schools, the number of profit-oriented 'boarding schools' started growing at an exponential rate from 1990 (e.g. 785 in 1988 to more than more than 6,000 in 2020). This was partly as a result of many middle-class parents' desire to educate their children in English for their better future.

The School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) 2009–15 (MOE, 2009) reinforced the choice for the medium of instruction in community schools by giving this responsibility to the School Management Committees. Community schools continued to come under pressure to introduce EME in their schools to attract more students and the number of community EME schools has been growing (MoEST, 2021b) although they face challenges¹¹.

In 2016, the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016/17–2022/23 (Ministry of Education, 2016) was introduced. Building on SSRP, this plan presents a clearer language in education policy than previously, adhering to the Education Act 2016 (8th Amendment) Clause 7. According to this Clause, the medium of school education could be English, Nepali or both but the English subject should be taught only through English. SSDP has a more detailed and nuanced description of the 'languages of education' policy in schools. Depending on the location of the school, the surrounding ethno-linguistic communities, teacher language proficiency and the available teaching and learning materials in local languages, schools have been divided into three types and the medium of instruction designated accordingly:

1. **Nepali language-dominant schools** – Nepali medium instruction (NME) or bilingual (Nepali and English) from Grade 1
2. **A local language-dominant schools** – mother tongue medium of instruction up to Grade 3 and transition to NME from Grade 4 or bilingual (first language for oracy and Nepali) or NME with some oracy development in mother tongue
3. **Schools with students of diverse linguistic backgrounds** – NME and Nepali taught as a second language.

This policy recommends shifting the language of instruction from Nepali to English from Grade 9 because it assumes that students' English language proficiency may have developed sufficiently enough to follow EME (Ministry of Education, 2016:139–40). The plan was designed following the federal structure of the country in 2015. The National Education Policy 2076 (MoEST, 2019) reinforces the languages in education policy outlined in the SSDP.

¹⁰ There were 35 'boarding' schools in 1977, which increased to 785 in 1988 (Jha, 1989 cited in Eagle, 2000:36).

¹¹ For example, see this news report of 2019: <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/community-schools-struggling-with-english-medium/>

The role of English education has also been explicitly outlined in the recent Act entitled 'The Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education, 2075 (2018)' in which Clause 26 reiterates the provision of English as one of the mediums of instruction and further elaborates the role of mother tongues and Nepali language in Clause 28. In the current school curriculum (Curriculum Development Centre, 2018b), English is taught as a compulsory subject from Grade 1 to Grade 12, meaning students must pass this subject to progress to a higher grade. It is given the status of international language, with English still considered a foreign language in Nepal. In addition to the compulsory paper, English is also taught as an optional subject in Grades 9 and 10.

However, SSDP ended in July 2021 and its implementation met with many challenges, including the provincial governments being in a transitional period and teachers lacking sufficient capabilities to achieve its target. The new Education Sector Plan 2021–30 will need to address these issues (MoEST, 2021a).



Nepal education and English language policy timeline

1854

Rana Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana introduces English in formal education to educate his family members with the establishment of Durbar High School

1918

Establishment of Trichandra College (first higher education college) by Chandra Shumshere, which followed an approach of English medium in higher education

1934

First School Leaving Certificate examination held in Nepal, which included English as a subject (two papers)

National Education Planning Commission set up with emphasis on making Nepali the medium of instruction in schools and English in higher education

1956

1951

Creation of Ministry of Education by King Tribhuvan

1950
–
1970

Opening of private English-medium schools and missionary schools allowed in Kathmandu and other parts of the country

English as a subject taught in public schools

1971

National Education System Plan 1971–76; Nepali as the sole medium of instruction; English as a compulsory subject introduced in the school curriculum from Grade 4 through to undergraduate level

English assessed in the School Leaving Certificate Examination (end of Grade 10) and a pass (32 per cent) required for university admission



Ful

ive

Care

ion

Duty

Beauty

Hhing

3.4 Language in the School Education Sector Plan 2021–30

The School Education Sector Plan 2021–30 (MoEST, 2021a:13) builds on SSDP and has a mission ‘to improve the quality, relevance and equity of school education by making the curriculum, teaching-learning and evaluation processes effective ...’ In contrast to SSDP, this plan (p.47) emphasises the use of languages for instruction to prevent barriers to children’s learning: ‘Using languages as mediums of instruction that are not a barrier to children’s learning in schools by using mother tongues, local languages or more than one language, especially in preliminary basic grades’. A unique feature of this plan is that it does not specify English as one of the languages of instruction but promotes multilingualism in line with the constitution and the wider literature on languages of instruction. It remains to be seen how the plan will be implemented and to what extent the EME trend in community schools will continue.

Our key informants made some comments on the role of English in education. The government official from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) said: ‘English has been given a very important status in our education system. English and Nepali subjects are taught as compulsory subjects at school level. So Nepali and English languages are given equal importance in school education.’ Interestingly, he further reported that some community schools have started an ‘English-medium wing’ in their schools, charging moderate fees in order to attract the students who otherwise would be going to the institutional (private) schools. This means there are two parallel programmes in the same school, creating socio-economic (and linguistic) divisions among the students. The English teachers we interviewed also agreed that this kind of trend exists in different parts of Nepal, but at the same time they very strongly felt that creating two groups in the same schools, with the message that English-medium education is superior to the Nepali-medium education, is against expectations of school ethics. Also, the teachers observed that they have seen low morale among the students studying in the Nepali medium, mainly due to the lack of affordability of their parents to pay even moderate fees.

In terms of teaching hours dedicated to English in each grade, it is given four credit hours (one credit hour = 32 clock hours, 128 hours annually) in Grades 1–3. This is one credit hour fewer than that for Nepali and the mother tongue. In Grades 4–10, English is allocated five credit hours (160 hours annually), equivalent to the hours given to Nepali. However, in Grades 11–12, English receives four credit hours (128 hours annually)

while Nepali has three credit hours (96 hours annually) (Curriculum Development Centre, 2018a:04–7).

3.5 English language proficiency, gender and location

The link between language proficiency and gender has been examined to see if the latter plays a role in language learning in a number of research studies. Several have found that being a male or female language learner does not seem to have discernible effects on language learning and proficiency (e.g. see Milla and Gutierrez-Mangado, 2019). Similarly, according to the Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index (which included Nepal as one of 112 countries), there is no perceptible impact of gender on English language proficiency across the globe (Education First, 2021). However, this global picture does not seem to apply to the students in schools in Nepal.

Although Nepal does not participate in PISA¹², the National Assessment of Student Achievement (NASA) for Grades 3, 5, 8 and 10 has been carried out by the Education Review Office in Nepal since 2010¹³. The NASA reports include student performance on literacy (Nepali) and numeracy at Grades 3 and 5, Nepali, mathematics and science at Grade 8 and mathematics, science, Nepali and English at Grade 10.¹⁴ Only the Grade 10 NASA 2019 report (Acharya et al., 2019) provides information about English language proficiency by gender and location. There is a significant difference between the achievement of Grade 10 boys and girls in English in a sample of 21,741 students (11,443 girls and 10,308 boys) when the six proficiency levels used by NASA are examined (i.e. Below basic, Basic, Proficient 1, Proficient 2, Proficient 3 and Advanced¹⁵). The boys demonstrated higher proficiency levels in English than the girls: 25.5 per cent boys and 32.8 per cent girls at Below basic level and 35.9 per cent boys and 29.3 per cent girls at Proficient 2 – Advanced levels (Acharya et al., 2019:155–6). The low performance of the female students could be for reasons including the English language learning opportunities they have received, parental investment in English language learning resources for them, personal motivation and their socio-cultural milieu.

Location equally plays a role in a student’s English language proficiency in Nepal. While the community schools in urban areas and district headquarters have more resources and offer the option of EME, many community schools in more rural areas lack resources and do not have fully qualified English language teachers. Additionally, the students in urban areas are more exposed to English outside of the classroom than those in rural locations. The 2019 NASA data for Grade 10 (Acharya et al., 2019:153–4) shows that

¹² PISA = Programme for International Student Assessment, used to assess 15 year olds’ reading, mathematics and science, by Organisation for Economic Co-operation for Development (OECD).

¹³ See <https://ero.gov.np>

¹⁴ Interestingly, the most recent report for Grade 3 suggests that students in English-medium community schools had higher literacy in Nepali than the students from Nepali-medium community schools (Education Review Office, 2020).

¹⁵ These proficiency levels look similar to the scales (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2) in CEFR. (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>) although there is no benchmark mentioned in the NASA report.

geographical locations significantly impacted on levels of English language proficiency. For example, students from three provinces (Bagmati, Gandaki and Lumbini) demonstrated a much higher level of English language proficiency than those from the other four provinces. It appears that the student's language proficiency decreases significantly in the western provinces compared to the eastern ones. One reason for this disparity seems to be related to the outperforming three provinces having big cities such as Kathmandu, Pokhara and Biratnagar, which also have more resources and are business and trade hubs (including for tourism).

The geographic divide was also confirmed by our key informants. The Ministry of Education official said that students from low-income bands are greatly suffering mainly due to the lack of resources. These students do not have adequate materials such as notebooks, pens and reading materials. This affects their education in general and results in the subject of English in particular. These students do not have access to any other English language resources except the textbooks, while students from middle class and affluent families have access to smartphones, satellite TV and the internet, which offer further exposure to the language. Our key informant teachers teaching in the rural schools also mentioned that some of their students do not have notebooks to undertake the written activities and exercises.

3.6 English for higher education, employment and status

The English language undeniably plays a significant role in preparing students for higher education and employment in Nepal. English is a compulsory subject at least up to undergraduate level in universities (Linn et al., 2021). It is also the case that many university undergraduate programmes in Nepal (e.g. Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University), especially in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) and other applied science disciplines such as medicine (including nursing), veterinary and forest science, require potential students to sit admission tests in English in which they have to perform well to secure a place. Similarly, the programmes in these disciplines follow EME (Linn et al., 2021; Phyak and Ojha, 2019), which means students with limited English may be denied any opportunity to study these subjects and, even if they pass the admission test, they may struggle with their higher education studies due to most of the content being in English (e.g. journal articles and books).

More recently, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of Nepalese students seeking higher education abroad, especially in Western countries such as the US and Australia (Dhungel, 2019; Ghimire and Maharjan, 2015; Thieme, 2017). These students have to demonstrate a high level of English language proficiency through tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, which serve a gate-keeping function to pursuing English-medium higher education overseas. This means their English language proficiency significantly affects materialising their higher education dreams overseas and aspirations of living abroad. Therefore, students from institutional and the community schools offering good-quality EME are more likely to succeed in their studies and achieve their ambitions than those who come from Nepali medium schools (Owen et al., 2021). This means providing good English language learning opportunities to students in all community schools potentially plays a significantly positive role in a student's higher education career, although the debate on the medium of instruction continues (e.g. Awasthi, 2008; Phyak and Sharma, 2020).

In addition to enabling access to higher education studies, having expertise in English language skills can affect an individual's job prospects in Nepal. There are a number of employment sectors where one needs a high level of proficiency in English. For example, most jobs in the tourism sector and reputed hotels require good English and possibly basic language skills in other foreign languages. For jobs in international non-governmental organisations such as UNESCO and foreign diplomatic offices, English is essential. Furthermore, any staff in addition to teachers who work in English medium institutional (private) schools should possess a good level of English proficiency. There are also many multinational companies in Nepal, including Coca-Cola, Unilever, Dabur and Pepsi, which use English as the official language and thus employees are expected to know good English. Anyone wanting to work in the media and organisations that carry out research of high calibre needs to be proficient in English because it is the dominant language used in their outputs and communication rather than Nepali, or they use a mixture of both (e.g. see Pandey, 2020). Girls studying in rural schools consider English as an indicator of their empowerment and thus would like to learn it (Gautam, 2016). In brief, people with a high level of English language proficiency are more likely to succeed in securing prestigious jobs with many more options for their professional career.

One of the questions that emerged during the key informant interviews was whether or not the English which students are exposed to at school level is adequate for them for their future study and work. The interview participants were unequivocal that graduates of community schools were less exposed to English and thus they have to attend either language institutes or IELTS/TOEFL class preparation centres to learn English in order to qualify for study abroad and/or employment in the private job market. This further indicates that the English language skills students develop during their school education does not prepare them well for future study and the job market.

The role of English in Nepal can be seen widely even in public spaces. Signposts, hoarding boards, names of restaurants and shops are written in English despite the fact that they are targeted at the local population who do not use English in their day-to-day communication. Similarly, menu items in restaurants and the brochures of the NGOs are also often written in English. This shows that English has taken centre stage in Nepal. There are numerous privately run English language institutes in the urban areas and the students crowding into them to learn English show the love of English among the youth population. Our key informant English teachers said that students do want to learn English to become proficient in it so that they can grow academically and can gain a good job.

There are certain perceptions commonly associated with an individual's English language ability in Nepalese society. Almost all these perceptions are positive (Pandey, 2020), although it is argued that the dominance of the English language may have facilitated the decline of other local languages and increased social inequalities (Eagle, 2000; Giri, 2010; Phyak, 2016). The key positive perceptions about an individual's English language ability include a higher status in society, better education, better paid jobs and international reach through communication.

4 English language teaching in practice

The practice of teaching and learning of English in schools has not been adequately researched thus far. The limited research indicates that there are a number of issues that need to be taken into account to understand the English language teaching (ELT) practices in Nepal. This section will discuss pertinent and relevant issues and aspects of ELT.

4.1 The multilingual context

Given the multilingual and multi-ethnic context of Nepal, the status of English in education is frequently debated. There is an ongoing debate at the moment about whether English should be taught right from the beginning of school (i.e. Kindergarten in institutional schools and Early Grade class in community schools) or at a later stage. As the Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees the right to education in children's mother tongue at the primary level, some activists have long been advocating for primary education in children's first language (Rai et al., 2011; Seel et al., 2017). At the same time, because the Nepali community is very diverse and there are complex migration patterns around the country, identifying a single mother tongue to teach in is a major challenge in many schools. As a result, some are advocating multilingual education right from the beginning, including English as a subject.

Discussion of these two issues is often seen at the political level. However, in reality, many schools are enforcing the use of English even at the primary level in the name of parents' will to educate their children in the English language because of its instrumental value. Nevertheless, it is not obvious whether parents specifically want their children to be educated in English medium (across all subjects) or they simply want their children to acquire good English – and whether these two things are becoming confused. Thus, the issue of language in education is very complicated and the discourse generated within the community in this regard is often more political rather than academic or pedagogic. There is hardly any discussion in Nepal on how children learn better if they are in the multilingual context and how English could best be situated in children's educational journey; for example, if it was taught well as a subject. Due to the lack of locally generated research evidence in this area, the debate continues but the spread of English both in education and other social spaces is gradually increasing. However, it is worth noting that evidence from other countries (e.g. see Coleman, 2011) shows that introducing English medium too early leads to poorer learning achievements and doing so in a poorly resourced context can have severe consequences.

4.2 English language curriculum, textbooks and resources

4.2.1 The curriculum

English is one of the core subjects in the school education curriculum. School-level curriculum has been developed in five blocks: Basic Level Grades 1–3, Basic Level Grades 4–5, Basic Level Grades 6–8, Secondary Level Grades 9–10 and Secondary Level Grades 11–12. In each block, the curriculum lists the expected general English language competencies followed by grade-specific competencies. The school curriculum for English adopts a communicative view of ELT and divides the curriculum into four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The overall aim of each level of the English language curriculum in the most recent curriculum developed by the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) reflects this, as shown below.

Grades 1–3

- *The major focus of this curriculum is on language skills viz., listening, speaking, reading and writing. By the end of Grade 3, children will be able to use English effectively in a limited set of situations. This curriculum is based on the principle that children learn English better when they get ample exposure to spoken and written English and sufficient opportunity to use it in a stress-free environment. (Curriculum Development Centre, 2018a:17)*

Grades 4–5

- *The aim of teaching English at these grades is to enable students to develop basic communicative competence so that they can use the language in real-life situations. The major focus of the curriculum is on basic language skills, viz., listening, speaking, reading and writing and, thus, they are given equal importance. (Curriculum Development Centre, 2021a:34)*

Grades 6–8

- *This curriculum aims to enable the students to exchange their ideas with the people who speak or write English. It also aims to expose the students to the vast treasure of knowledge and pleasure available in both written and spoken English. The major focus of this curriculum is on language skills viz., listening, speaking, reading and writing and, thus, it aims to develop communicative competence on the part of students. The students learning English in these grades will develop their linguistic base in English for their further studies. (Curriculum Development Centre, 2020:64)*

Grades 9–10

- *This curriculum aims at enabling students to communicate their ideas in English. It also aims to expose students to the vast treasure of knowledge available in both written and spoken English. Competencies and learning outcomes appropriate to level and grade, language functions, the learning facilitation process and assessment procedures are systematically organised in the curriculum.* (Curriculum Development Centre, 2021b:40)

4.2.2 Textbooks

All English language textbooks developed by the CDC purport to follow a communicative approach and include the language functions and activities related to the four language skills as outlined in the school curriculum for each level. The only resources readily available to learn English at school level are these textbooks. Community schools use the textbooks developed by the CDC whereas institutional schools prescribe additional textbooks from private publishers.

The CDC follows a set of procedures to develop the textbooks. Based on the curricular guidelines, the CDC issues a public notice to submit a sample book chapter. Once the samples are received, they are reviewed by experts of English language education based on pre-defined criteria. Once the sample chapter is selected, the task of writing the book is awarded to the individual(s) writer responsible. During the textbook writing phase, there are a series of discussions and feedback sessions between the Subject Committee and textbook writers at the CDC. Once the English language textbooks are developed, they are piloted in a few schools for a year and finalised for the nationwide implementation.

The CDC instructs the textbooks writers to follow the curriculum guidelines while writing the textbooks. This means the textbook should be written to address the language functions, topics/themes and the grammar points given in the curriculum. A cursory review at school level shows that English language textbooks of Grade 1–5 have one structure in which the unit starts with a 'listen and say' activity followed by reading, grammar, writing and some fun activities. In Grades 6 and 7, the unit starts with conversational activities followed by reading, grammar and writing activities. From Grade 8 onward, the unit usually starts with reading followed by grammar, conversation, writing and additional exercises. Our key informant teachers mentioned that the textbooks are mostly loaded with the reading texts and reading comprehension exercises but lack adequate listening and speaking activities and resources (e.g. audio files). As far as developing writing skills is concerned, teachers find it difficult to teach writing from the textbook content. According to them, writing activities as a process is not adequately covered with an emphasis only on writing as a product.

The textbooks used in institutional schools are published by private commercial publishers. In Nepal, there are two types of English textbooks in institutional schools: a) textbook series published by international publishing companies such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, and b) textbook series published by local publishers and written by local authors. These local authors are also English teachers from universities and schools. These privately published textbooks have to be approved and endorsed by the CDC as the additional materials before they are implemented in schools. Our key informant official from the Ministry of Education believed that the locally published textbooks do not undergo the same level of scrutiny and development as the CDC textbooks.

One of the comments made by the teachers during the key informant interview was that both the CDC textbooks and privately developed textbooks may lack authentic language learning activities, despite the intention to be 'communicative' in approach. They are filled with the reading texts and mechanical grammar exercises rather than engaging activities for students to learn English. Also, due to the highly structured exam, which is often based on the reading texts in the textbooks, there is a very little space for teachers to develop students' language learning experience outside of the textbooks.

4.2.3 ICT use in English lessons

The use of ICT as a resource in ELT in Nepal is still at the basic level in community schools. The School Sector Development Plan 2016/17–2022/23 aimed to use ICT in education 'to improve classroom delivery; increase access to learning materials; and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of educational governance and management' (Ministry of Education, 2016:61). It aimed to use ICT specifically to facilitate teaching and learning maths, science and English. However, this plan mentions the introduction of ICT in selected schools only and the use is limited to administrative purposes rather than teaching and learning. This means there is little use of ICT in ELT, although the potential application and value of mobile technologies in ELT has long been highlighted in Nepal (Shrestha, 2011) as in neighbouring Bangladesh (Eyres et al., 2019; Shrestha, 2012). The new Education Sector Plan 2021–30 (MoEST, 2021a) aims to address the gaps in ICT use in school education, the success of which is yet to be examined.

The pandemic certainly forced teachers and students to use some mobile devices in a limited way (see section on Covid-19). However, in general only a few teachers use mobile devices and computers to find online resources because the ICT infrastructure for education in community schools is almost non-existent and teachers and students cannot afford to use their own personal equipment. During the key informant interviews, the teachers we spoke to could not provide any examples from their observations where English teachers have used ICT and online resources

for students while teaching English in their classes. Although everyone in Nepal talks about the integration of ICT in education, including in English classes, teachers are still far away from regular, integrated use of ICT to teach English in Nepal. Of course, institutional schools which are well-funded tend to use ICT in ELT to some extent. During the pandemic, their ICT facilities put these schools in an advantageous position.

As far as the use of ICT by students is concerned, our key informant teachers said that only very few students have access to the internet, mobile devices and laptops. According to them, during the pandemic, only about 60 per cent of students from urban schools attended online classes whereas our interviewee teachers from rural schools said that only about ten per cent of students had access to these through their parents' mobile devices. Access to a laptop was virtually non-existent. However, most of the students did have access to the lessons broadcast on TV and radio during the pandemic, but the monitoring of their learning progress and support system to facilitate their learning was weak. As a result, the use of technology for learning has been very limited in the rural areas. Despite these challenges, the role and importance of ICT was realised during the pandemic. Parents who would be reluctant to provide mobile devices and internet facilities to their children due to fear of their misuse in the pre-pandemic phase realised that these ICT tools could greatly contribute to the learning process.

4.3 English language pedagogy

The report authors often visit schools for teacher training and research in different parts of the country. During discussion with the teachers, headteachers and the officials in the Ministry of Education, it is often reported that English is not taught as a language in schools. This is a general observation about English classes, and this anecdote from the Ministry of Education official nicely illustrates the pedagogy of an English language class in the schools of Nepal:

Recently, I think last week, I went to a school to talk to the English teachers about the curriculum and textbook that we are planning to develop next year. There I got a chance to observe one of the teacher's English language class in Grade 6. She was teaching reading through a text in the textbook and the topic was Rara Lake. So, what she was doing was that she was just reading the lines of the text and explaining the facts about travelling to Rara throughout the class. No students got a chance to read the text. She read the text, she explained it, she explained the words in Nepali and sometimes she was explaining that text wrongly as well. So, she was teaching that reading text as content not as a language or as a tool to enhance the students' reading. After the class, I talked to her and asked her why she was doing

what she was doing. I found that she knows all the principles of teaching English as a language but she was not using any of them in class. This means there's something wrong with the pedagogy, so the students are not able to read the text. She was quite correct in explanation, but during the implementation she was doing wrongly.

I have observed several teachers. One teacher was teaching grammar and he was again explaining the rules. Why use 'are', 'am' and so on. Similarly, he was saying 'is' is used with 'he' and it is singular, 'am' is used with 'I' and it is singular, 'are' is used with 'they' and it is plural and so on. We included grammar as 'study the examples' and we expect the students to look at them and find similar examples of their own. But during observation, students didn't get the task to read and think about the verbs used in there. So, the principles of teaching English are not implemented in class.

Although this is just one example, the interviewee teachers also narrated similar experiences of their own and their colleagues. They believed that many teachers follow a 'wrong way of teaching English' because of the lack of practical experience in their pre-service and in-service teacher preparation and training programmes. Some of them also pointed out that they have a fear of losing their authority in class if they involve their students in activities. The class might be too noisy and might go out of control if students are scattered around for language learning activities. Furthermore, teachers tend to focus on reading and writing rather than listening and speaking in their lessons because they may feel more confident about the former and those skills are prioritised in external assessment (see Assessment).

Based on the observations of the report authors and the key informant interview data, there is no difference between language (English) teaching and content teaching. One of the research participants who teaches social studies through English and the subject of English in a school said that s/he teaches the reading texts of both the subjects in almost exactly the same way. S/he explains the texts in Nepali in both the classes followed by the discussion on the textual comprehension questions. The only difference s/he mentioned between social studies and English is that English lessons follow some grammar and vocabulary exercises, which often do not exploit the English language skills. As the participants mentioned, this is a general trend of teaching English in most of the community schools across Nepal.

In private (institutional) schools, too, English teachers do translate the texts in Nepali but there are at least two English textbooks in addition to the English textbook prescribed by the government. The other textbooks are called the 'extra-English textbooks' often

produced by the private commercial publishers, both local and international. Some well-funded schools prescribe textbooks from internationally popular book series, which come in a package including a student's book, workbook, teacher's book and audio-visual resources. Because of these richer resources, students' English language proficiency potentially has a greater chance of being enhanced, assuming the teaching quality is also improved.

4.4 Assessment

The formal assessment of school students' English language proficiency started with the first School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination in English at the end of Grade 10 in 1934 (Mathema and Bista, 2006; Shrestha, 2018; Wood, 1965). The SLC (now called Secondary Education Examination (SEE)) is managed by the Office of the Controller of Examinations (OCE) under the Ministry of Education, based in Sanothimi, Bhaktapur. It conducts the SEE examination of more than 300,000 students each year. In 2016, a new examination body, the National Examinations Board, replaced the SLC Board. It conducts the national examinations for Grades 10, 11 and 12.

English language assessment, especially SLC, has played a pivotal role in the education system of Nepal. It is seen as an 'iron gate' in Nepalese society (Budhathoki et al., 2014; Mathema and Bista, 2006) because passing the SLC opens up a host of opportunities, including higher education and employment, and without it an individual's dreams of further study and employment can be shattered. However, the SLC English examination has long been criticised for not assessing students' communicative competence and relying on memorisation and grammar (Mathema and Bista, 2006). While marks (numbers) were originally used to record an individual student's performance in the SLC/SEE, a letter grading system (A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D, E and N; A+ being the highest) was introduced in 2016. We will primarily focus on this examination and briefly review the other formal school assessment systems for English.

The SLC/SEE has undergone various changes in its history of over 85 years. Originally, the subject of English language had two papers worth 200 marks until 1971. It later included only one compulsory English paper, which has continued to date. In terms of the focus of the examination, the SLC/SEE English examination has historically been biased towards reading and writing, but started assessing students' oral communicative competence in English (25 per cent mark allocation) in 1998 (Shrestha, 2018). However, oral competence is assessed internally by the school, while reading and writing components are externally assessed in SEE by the National Examination Board. The listening test consists of listening to sound files and answering questions (e.g. multiple choice and

matching) and the speaking test includes three types of tasks: a brief interview, picture description and speech on a given topic. There is no published information about how well both listening and speaking tests are conducted in schools. The reading and writing paper is worth 75 marks out of 100 (including 11 marks for grammar) and is a timed examination lasting a maximum of two hours and 15 minutes in a controlled local centre. Reading is allocated 40 marks and writing 24 marks, indicating a bias towards reading. There is a separate equivalent version of the SEE English paper in each province.

As English is a foreign language (a third language for many) and is less accessible to students in the rural areas, the SLC/SEE English examination is extremely challenging to them and they often fail to achieve the required threshold score (i.e. 32 per cent required until recently) (Budhathoki et al., 2014). As an example, about 70 per cent of students passed in English overall (with an average score of 33 per cent), with about 52 per cent of students from the Far-Western province passing while over 80 per cent of students did so in regions with more urban areas (e.g. Bagmati and Gandaki provinces with big cities such as Kathmandu and Pokhara) in 2015¹⁶. The lack of qualified English teachers and language learning opportunities in community schools are two of the key reasons for student failure. However, students from the institutional (private) schools continue to excel in English. As students from both community schools and institutional schools sit the same SEE English examination, inevitably students from the latter perform better in English, and thus social and educational inequalities continue in higher education.

In addition to the end-of-Grade 10 SEE, Grade 8 has an external examination in English, including all other subjects at the local level. The local government is responsible for managing and administering the Grade 8 external examination. Students have to pass this examination to enrol in Grade 9. Besides the external examinations, all schools conduct terminal and annual examinations to certify progression and continuous formative assessment to track student progress in each grade. However, the implementation of continuous assessment in all subjects including English has not been successful, although it was introduced in 2009, because teachers have found the process confusing and cumbersome (Ministry of Education, 2016). This means the assessment of students' English language skills has essentially been limited to school tests and external examinations. Such a form of assessment often leads to 'teaching to the test', resulting in negative washback¹⁷ effects of the test on teaching

¹⁶ See: <http://soce.gov.np/publications>

¹⁷ Washback refers to direct and indirect effects of a language test on how a teacher teaches language to their students as a result of the demand of the language test that their students need to sit. These effects can be both positive and negative.

and learning English. The negative impact of tests on teaching and learning English in Nepal has long been reported (Khaniya, 1990; Shrestha, 2018) and the situation seems to be continuing.

4.5 English language teachers: pre-service and in-service teacher development

4.5.1 Teacher qualifications

Schoolteachers (Grades 1–10) are recruited by the Teachers' Service Commission (TSC) through an open competition whereas pre-primary teachers (kindergarten) are employed by the School Management Committee locally. The TSC also conducts teaching licence exams periodically and candidates wishing to apply for teaching positions from Grades 1–10 in community schools are required to have a valid teaching licence in place. However, the teaching licence requirement is not mandatory for pre-primary (Kindergarten) and Grade 11 and 12. Although the government also encourages institutional schools to employ teachers with this qualification, it is not often seen in practice due to the less stringent system of recruitment.

The teacher qualification required to teach at Grades 1–5 is SEE or SLC pass and ten months' in-service training. As in many other Asian countries, primary school teachers are not English language subject specialists. Their English language proficiency also may not be very high. Our key informant teachers pointed out that the English language proficiency of primary English teachers is below the required level and many of them lack basic communication skills in English. For example, Hayes (2014:02) argues that a primary teacher needs to have 'at least B2 but preferably C1' level on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). These teachers studied English as a subject and, due to the lecture-based pedagogy of English, they did not have opportunities to use English in their education. One of the teacher participants said: 'We are supposed to teach both content and language skills while teaching English but we only focus on the content both while teaching and assessing. This is the main reason why their English proficiency is poor.' In rural areas, teachers are reluctant to teach English subjects, particularly at primary level, due to a lack of adequate knowledge and skills in English. Agreeing with the teachers' observations, the Ministry of Education official shared a view that only ten teachers out of 100 primary English teachers had B1 level English language proficiency in CEFR with others below B1, which can restrict significantly how they teach and communicate with their students.

Teachers teaching English from Grades 6–10 are required to have English as a specialisation subject in their university degree to qualify for the job. However, the English language proficiency of these teachers has not been assessed. There is no provision to check the English language proficiency of school teachers

during their recruitment. There is simply an assumption that they might possess the required level of English language proficiency as they meet the requirement through the degree they obtained from the teacher education programme of their university. During the key informant interviews, both the official from the Ministry of Education and the practising teachers said that the English language proficiency of English teachers is 'not up to the mark', demonstrated by the excessive use of translation in their English classes.

4.5.2 Pre-service training

Currently, there are two modes of English teacher preparation and development in Nepal. Universities run the pre-service teacher education programmes, and a teacher training wing of the Ministry of Education runs the in-service teacher training programmes. The pre-service teacher education programmes include a BEd (four years) and MEd (four semesters of six months each) in English education. Both BEd and MEd programmes have one month of practicum at the end of the coursework. As mentioned earlier, primary teachers are not required to have an English major to teach English but teachers teaching from Grades 6–10 need a degree with an English major to apply for their teaching position. However, the pre-service teacher education programmes run by universities have been criticised for being isolated and decontextualised from reality and unable to address the real-world classroom issues facing teachers. Narrating the experience of his life as a student on an English language teacher education programme in a university, Gautam (2018) refers to the 'talking pedagogy' in which students (future English teachers) were barely engaged in any activities in the ELT Methodology course. He describes his entire teacher education programme as requiring only a passive listener and existing away from the real classroom context. The practicum component of the BEd programme was also reported to be a ritual rather than a learning experience. Our key informants also confirmed this and all of them shared similar experiences in their BEd and MEd English education.

In addition to universities, there are many teacher training colleges across the country and many of them run a BEd in English education targeting the in-service teachers who have been teaching English with Grade 12 education and teaching in Grades 6–8. These teachers are motivated to upgrade their academic qualifications so that they can gain promotions from lower secondary level to secondary level and teach English in Grades 9 and 10. They join BEd programmes but they are not able to attend regular classes due to the heavy workload and other family/social obligations. Thus, they attend only a very few classes in the campus and sit the examination based on their self-study. While doing so, they lack the opportunities to develop their linguistic and pedagogical skills but can pass the examination through the written test. Therefore, these teachers are often not able to enhance their English

language proficiency even though they have the required academic degree.

4.5.3 In-service training

Once teachers are recruited, they are required to attend some ongoing training. As they enter the teaching position, they receive induction training of about seven or eight days. Such training is delivered by the district Education Co-ordination Units. This kind of introductory training is very short and teachers are not provided with any specific content knowledge; rather it focuses on their jobs and includes information about their leave, school rules, administrative and managerial issues. This training does not have any component focused on specific English language pedagogy.

After that, within five years of their employment, they will have the opportunity to attend one month of Teacher Professional Development (TPD) training delivered in two blocks of 15 days each. This is subject-specific training for secondary-level English teachers in which they learn about ELT pedagogy. In this TPD training, they are also engaged in practical tasks of implementing the teaching techniques in their English classrooms and reflect on their experience. The TPD course is mandatory for all teachers and is offered to teachers in every subsequent five years of their teaching in school.

In 2018, the National Centre for Educational Development (a training division established for human resource development within the Ministry of Education in 1993) developed the in-service training curriculum for English teachers teaching Grades 6–8 (National Centre for Educational Development, 2018a, 2018b). It is divided into two phases: English language proficiency (Phase 1) and ELT pedagogy (Phase 2). Phase 1 'focuses on developing the listening, reading, writing, speaking, grammar and vocabulary skills of English language teachers' (National Centre for Educational Development, 2018a:2). This phase of the curriculum aims to train English teachers to achieve an A2/B1 on the CEFR levels in English. The duration of the training is 15 days including a five-day, school-based Continuing Professional Development (CPD) project. Phase 2 covers the content areas which include 'understanding of context and content of English Language Teaching (ELT), managing lessons, use of contemporary technology and teaching practices as well as teaching and assessing language skills and aspects' (National Centre for Educational Development, 2018b:01). Like Phase 1, it is of 15 days' duration, which includes a five-day, school-based project. Although this TPD curriculum is limited to providing much-needed TPD only to teachers teaching in Grades 6–8, it is a welcome development in the right direction. At the time of writing this report, there was no information as to how much the training was accessed by teachers or

about its success. There is a strong need for a similar TPD provision for all English teachers.

4.6 Other organisations providing support with teacher education in Nepal

In addition to the government provision, there are several organisations working on the development and enhancement of English language teaching and learning in Nepal. The British Council, the Regional English Language Office (RELO) of the US Embassy and the Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) are the major actors that have made significant contributions to the ELT space in Nepal over many years.

4.6.1 The British Council

The British Council has been a key player in the establishment of the English language teacher education programme (master's degree programme) in Tribhuvan University and the development of English language textbooks at school level. With the support of the British Council, Professor Alan Davies from the University of Edinburgh served as the Head of English Department in Tribhuvan University and trained the university-level English teachers in 1969. Professor Davies also contributed to designing pre-service and in-service English teacher training programmes with a focus both on English language proficiency and ELT pedagogy. Since then, the British Council has been instrumental in carrying out various educational reform programmes in curriculum, pedagogy, teacher education and assessment of English.

With the support of the British Council, the first ELT Survey of Nepal was carried out in 1983. This was the first of its kind, which described the status of ELT in Nepal then and made recommendations for better English language provision (e.g. starting English as late as Grade 8 (Phyak, 2016)). Teacher training programmes, including the English for Teaching and Teaching for English (ETTE) and ETTE+ by the British Council, were well received by the teachers of English in different parts of the country in the past. A current British Council initiative, the English Language – Teacher Education Project (EL-TEP), is a two-year pilot implemented by the Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) and the British Council for teachers of Grades 6–8. It aims to provide both English language content knowledge and skills and ELT pedagogy in the context of mother tongue-based multilingual education.¹⁸ The British Council has also been a significant contributor to the establishment and development of teacher networks through NELTA by offering it financial and human resource support for teacher development events and conferences. Finally, the British Council has made substantial contributions to the professional development of English teachers

18 See project details: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/np/english-language-teacher-education-programme-eltep>

in Nepal by reforming the in-service teacher training curriculum and building the capacity of teacher educators.

4.6.2 Other organisations

The RELO and the US Embassy in Kathmandu have also been very supportive of the promotion and enhancement of ELT through teacher training, exposure visits for English teachers and an out-of-school English language programme for students called English Access Micro-scholarship, popularly known as the Access programme.

NELTA as a professional association of English teachers at all levels of education has contributed to the enhancement of ELT since 1992 through its professional development activities such as teacher training, issue-based workshops, seminars, teacher research, materials and resources dissemination, teacher networking and collaboration.

In addition to these key organisations, there are many private language institutes and coaching centres spread across big cities in Nepal that offer English language support to teachers who can afford to pay fees. For example, a well-known educational information website in Nepal called Edusanjal listed about 80 such institutions called ‘the best institutes to learn the English language in Nepal’ in July 2021.¹⁹ These private institutes can be expensive but partially cater for the growing demand for English language learning.

4.7 Gaps between practice and policy

The implementation of any language in education policy is often complex due to so many stakeholders and factors involved. In the context of Nepal, one could argue that past language in education policies have been successfully implemented at the school level, especially the introduction of English medium education during the Rana period and the Nepali-only policy during the Panchayat regime, although these policies were fundamentally against ‘education for all’ and multilingualism. Considering the current situation in Nepal, recent language in education policies have come a long way in the last 30 years. However, there are a number of gaps between policy and practice.

While basic education has been made compulsory and secondary education free to all in community schools, in practice there are still many out-of-school school-age children in Nepal. For example, there are still 770,000 children²⁰ aged 5–12 (14.3 per cent) out of school and considered hard to reach despite the policy commitment to ‘education for all’ in 2001 (Ministry of Education et al., 2016). Additionally, only about 74 per cent of children who start primary school remain up to Grade 8. Various factors contribute to children being out of school and dropping out. One main reason is

parents’ critically low socio-economic status. However, aspects related to languages in education policy and practice gaps have played a part too, as outlined below.

The constitution and the education policy have long advocated primary education (Grades 1–3) in the child’s mother tongue. However, in practice, this does not happen because of the lack of qualified teachers and learning materials in the local language and also possibly how the local education authority and the school management committee implement the policy. As almost half of the population does not speak Nepali as their first language, children who start their basic education are highly likely to drop out due to the insufficient language and literacy support in their first language and Nepali (Seel et al., 2017). In the most recent language education policies (i.e. Ministry of Education, 2016; MoEST, 2019), bilingualism (first language and Nepali or Nepali and English), trilingualism (first language, Nepali and English) and the use of translanguaging (any of the three languages) have been proposed at various school levels. However, in practice, the continuous lack of teachers well-versed in the local languages and a paucity of learning materials means the dream of children receiving primary education in their first language remains unfulfilled, reflecting the tradition of a top-down approach to language in education policy (Phyak, 2021). Only some ethnolinguistic communities, such as Newars, have been able to adopt these policies in practice when language activism, community engagement and cultural-historical identities of an ethnolinguistic community play an active role in policy implementation (Phyak, 2021; Pradhan, 2019).

Another gap is related to English language teaching classroom practices in spite of the curriculum advocating an emphasis on communication and meaning. Many teachers in community schools continue to follow traditional language teaching practices by focusing on memorisation and grammar rather than communication. This could be due to their own low level of English language proficiency and lack of resources in the school. Many community schools lack fully qualified English language teachers, unlike in institutional schools. Furthermore, these traditional practices are highly influenced by the exam-oriented school education in the country. The washback effect of the high-stakes secondary-level assessment (SEE) can hardly be exaggerated. This is also reflected in schools prioritising term and annual examinations over continuous assessment. The traditional classroom teaching practice is further exacerbated by the school textbooks not reaching students in the rural areas in good time.²¹ Finally, there is a continuous tendency to prioritise reading and writing over listening and speaking, which are vital for higher studies and employment (Shrestha, 2018).

¹⁹ <https://edusanjal.com/blog/english-language-training-institute-nepal/>

²⁰ See UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/education>

²¹ See news report: <https://kathmandupost.com/miscellaneous/2018/06/25/textbook-shortage-in-rural-achham>



5 Opportunities, challenges and future trends

The ongoing state of English language teaching in Nepal presents both opportunities and challenges to English language education.

5.1 Challenges facing ELT in Nepal

Policy confusion: Though English is officially recognised as a compulsory subject and is allowed to be used as a medium of instruction in schools depending on the surrounding linguistic ecology, further clarity on the role, position and official status of the English language is not stated in the national policy document. The status of English in Nepal is a debatable subject at the moment. Some consider it as a ‘killer language’, while others advocate for its status as a second language to work as a bridge among the several other languages. There is an urgent need to strengthen dialogue between policy makers, ELT researchers and practitioners regarding the official status of English in Nepal, which in turn will impact positively on the teaching and learning of English within the school education system.

Teacher preparation: A major challenge to ELT in Nepal is the lack of fully qualified and trained English language teachers in community schools. Even if they have a degree in English language education, they tend to follow traditional teaching practices (Hayes, 2018; Ranabhat et al., 2018). While secondary school English language teachers are subject specialists and thus may have both ELT pedagogical knowledge and required language proficiency to teach, primary school English language teachers are not subject specialists and so require extensive in-service professional development in ELT, which is lacking in community schools. Worst of all, the community schools adopting English medium education across the curriculum do not have sufficiently well-prepared subject teachers with appropriate English language proficiency. This results in extremely poor student experiences and outcomes. On the other hand, most institutional schools have reasonably qualified and trained English language teachers and teachers teaching other subjects through English. Institutional schools regularly offer in-house training to their English teachers to enhance their professional development, unlike community schools. This continues to perpetuate the divide between community schools and institutional schools, creating social inequalities.

Our key informants confirmed that community school English teachers lack both English language proficiency and pedagogical skills. Therefore, they suggested that teacher preparation and training programmes should integrate both language proficiency development and ELT pedagogy components with a strong practical

experience in schools. Only the combination of both content knowledge of English and their pedagogical skills can prepare English language teachers for the reality of their ELT classrooms, which is the direction taken in the new curriculum for Grades 6–8 English teachers’ TPD (National Centre for Educational Development, 2018a, 2018b).

Use of teaching materials: All community schools use the government-prescribed textbooks for ELT. Although some innovative English teachers might use additional language teaching resources, there are no other teaching materials such as English reading books and magazines available in community schools. Teachers use the textbooks following a traditional method despite a communicative approach adopted in the book structure. In contrast, most institutional schools prescribe the English textbooks published by private publishing houses, tend to use additional learning materials in their English lessons and provide other reading materials in libraries.

Teacher tendency to focus on traditional teaching: Many community school English teachers follow traditional English teaching practices, as consistently reported (Hayes, 2018). They focus on grammar and memorisation rather than communication. This goes against the provision for a more communicative ELT approach advocated in the national curriculum and the textbooks. The reason for adopting such a traditional approach was eloquently explained by our key informants. They said that teachers are not ready to take a leap in shifting from their practice of lecturing to more engaged pedagogy in their classes. They lack confidence and have a fear of failure in case something goes wrong while conducting the language learning activities. Also, since they have not experienced the practical skills themselves, they are not able to design and implement language learning activities connected to the textbook materials. Another issue the English teachers pointed out about following the traditional way of teaching was the lack of adequate English language proficiency. If teachers design and implement activities in English language classes they need a lot of classroom English to give instructions to the students, manage the classroom activities and engage students in various tasks. Since they are not confident about their own English language proficiency, they prefer to follow the textbook as a safety-net so that they do not need to go outside what is written in the textbooks. Although a similar situation may exist in the ‘budget’ private schools, English teachers in more reputed private schools adopt a much more communicative approach to teaching English. However, this benefits only the children from the elite families.

Training and its transfer in the classroom: Every year hundreds of teachers are trained with a hope that the training will positively impact their classroom practices. Unfortunately, the evidence (Gautam, 2018) shows that teachers hardly implement what they learn. Our key informant teachers also indicated that training classes are often more theoretical, talking about lofty ideas without considering the real classroom issues in ELT. The training does not provide space for the teachers to build on their classroom experience and thus they find the training disconnected from reality. This means that rather than one-off training events, it is crucial to build a CPD programme for teachers that is school-based, peer-supported and reflective, as such programmes have been successful in other countries (Hayes, 2014; Walsh et al., 2015).

Examination system and washback effects: As in many Asian countries, Nepal has an exam-oriented school education system, which applies to English too. This means a significant amount of resources and time are dedicated to formal examinations. They include term, annual and external examinations for Grades 8 (district-level examination) and 10 (SEE). Classroom teaching focuses on the questions asked in these external examinations and loses sight of teaching students valuable communicative language skills in English relevant to their future studies and employment. There is an education market that exploits this washback effect through publishing SEE question papers, private coaching classes and tuition centres. Students from both community and institutional schools attend private tuition, depending on their needs for the exam preparation and parents' affordability. Unless the examination system is drastically reformed for schools both at policy and practice levels by considering the local educational and socio-cultural context (Shrestha, 2018) and building assessment literacy among teachers so they know how to use formative/continuous assessment effectively to help them plan their lessons (Levi and Inbar-Lourie, 2020; Shrestha, 2018), both these effects of examinations on students and teachers will continue.

Divide between community and institutional schools: There is a distinct divide between community and institutional schools, as highlighted throughout this report. The main challenge for ELT is how it can address the social inequalities created by these two types of schools in terms of providing effective English language education to students from all kinds of socio-economic strata. The English SEE/SLC examination results consistently show that the students from private schools outperform those from community schools, which is often reported in the media. As a result, students from private schools tend to secure more places than those from community schools in university programmes that have limited quotas as the entrance examination is held in English (e.g. medicine, sciences).

Decentralisation of education: The government's recent move towards decentralising school education comes with challenges too. For example, it becomes hard for country-wide initiatives to be undertaken by the government and/or international organisations such as the British Council, as they may struggle to deal with 700+ individual municipalities. Also, while it can be beneficial to locally contextualise education, the decentralisation may result in some children in some municipalities receiving very different and possibly superior/inferior educational and ELT opportunities, compared to others.

Textbook supply in remote areas: Providing English textbooks to students in remote areas has frequently posed a challenge, although this is not necessarily limited to the subject of English. Additionally, there is a divide in access to additional resources such as online materials or access via smartphones, which are more readily available in urban than rural areas. This means that students from rural areas may not have sufficient opportunities to learn English and can lead to lower achievements by rural students. For example, a recent NASA report for Grade 10 showed a significantly lower English language proficiency level for those students without textbooks and those from the provinces (which have many rural schools, e.g. Far-Western) (Acharya et al., 2019).

Lack of research into ELT and language in education to make more informed decisions: The education policy and languages in education decisions are often made without much research evidence in Nepal, but instead are based on political and international influences. Within the field of ELT, there is a considerably small amount of research in the context of Nepal. As a result, the implementation of the policy meets with many difficulties. Starting English from Grade 1 and allowing to switch from Nepali-medium to English-medium education in community schools are the two prime examples currently implemented in Nepal without any research evidence. Our key informant from the Ministry of Education agrees that decisions regarding ELT lack evidence and that we are still ill-informed about very pertinent issues such as the proficiency of the English teachers, relevance of the curriculum and textbooks, modality of teacher training and impact of the English language teacher education programmes.

Impact of Covid-19 on English language teaching: Covid-19 paralysed the school education system in Nepal as in other countries. At the time of writing this report (December 2021), Nepal was still suffering the impact of the pandemic. Due to the national lockdown, the Nepali government decided to close all schools from 23 March 2020 and, three months later, published guidelines for teaching and learning via online, radio, television and print media (Moktan and Uprety, 2021). During the remote teaching or home-

schooling phase, school textbooks did not reach the students of community schools on time. There was not sufficient time for planning all this and, inevitably, this sudden change of teaching mode adversely affected all students, teachers and those involved in schools. The impact was much worse on community schools than institutional schools because remote teaching involved the use of technologies to which community schoolteachers not only had limited access but also little experience of using them for teaching (ibid.). The pandemic further widened the social inequality through education, as families who sent their children to private schools were able to continue their children's education with fewer disruptions while the working class and poor families could not afford to have mobile devices or the internet for their children's education in addition to three months with no schooling at all (ibid.).

The impact of the pandemic on English language learning is similar to the impact on other subjects, but English is likely to have suffered more due to the nature of language learning. Language learning requires real-time interactions and abundant practice opportunities and remote teaching offers such opportunities scarcely. Our key informant interview data suggests that the community school children suffered the most and listening and speaking skills were further de-prioritised while reading and writing were the foci because of the heavy weighting given to these two skills in assessment. As almost all teachers were new to remote teaching, they were not prepared and, therefore, most teachers including English teachers struggled with the basics of distance education (ibid.). They were able to create few opportunities for meaningful interactions in English. The assessment was conducted by teachers and external examinations such as SEE relied on teacher assessment as in many other countries. All teachers including English teachers experienced high levels of stress, anxiety and nervousness while preparing to teach during the pandemic.

Our key informant English teachers from the rural schools said that girls suffered the most during the pandemic, as many of them did not have access to devices for online classes. They reported that many parents in rural communities did not provide mobile devices to girls because they thought they might use them to establish communication with boys for romantic conversations rather than focusing on their lessons during the online classes. In rural contexts, not many classes were happening during the pandemic and everyone suffered. Our key informant teachers in the urban areas said that students did participate in the online classes but the turnout was very low. Even those who were present did not have opportunities to practise listening and speaking during the online classes. As a result, the English classes were also heavily lecture-based and teachers talked throughout the class, explaining the lessons.

5.2 The future of the teaching and learning of English in Nepal

The popularity of the English language in Nepal has grown significantly year by year. People see the language as an essential tool for better education, opportunities and economic benefits. Many community schools are expected to switch to using English across the curriculum (EME) due to changes in education policy allowing this (e.g. Ministry of Education, 2016) and competition with parents choosing to send their children to EME institutional schools. This means all other subject teachers need to learn English.

English is increasingly used in many spheres of life beyond tourism and education. There is a growing tendency among middle class and rich families to send their children overseas for higher education after they complete school, which usually requires sitting international English tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. To prepare students for these tests, there are many private language institutes and centres in big cities such as Kathmandu. Due to the constantly increasing popularity of English in Nepal, it is even predicted that the government may soon make English an official language (Pandey, 2020). The widespread use of English in Nepal seems unstoppable in the foreseeable future.

Our key informant official in the Ministry of Education sees a bright future for English in Nepal due to the strong desire of everyone to learn English. S/he added that it is going to be more popular than before but the teaching of English has to be improved. Similarly, a teacher said, 'life without English will be paralysed'.

5.3 Opportunities to support the further development of English in Nepal

There are many opportunities to support the further development of English in Nepal. Many of these result from the challenges highlighted earlier:

- **Documenting the use of English:** A sociolinguistic study covering a wide spectrum of sectors and socio-cultural contexts is required. To date this is only sparsely reported except in obvious places such as education and tourism. A large-scale survey of the use of English is overdue in Nepal.
- **Research within the field of ELT and EME:** Only a limited amount of research is reported, and Nepal presents as a unique multilingual and multi-ethnic research context that can provide valuable insights into ELT pedagogy sensitive to local linguistic ecology.
- **Improving teacher skills:** As more community schools opt for EME, more teachers need to learn English language and have knowledge of a pedagogy of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

(CLIL). Thus, short courses could be developed to meet this need, delivered through a distance mode using the online platforms developed by the universities during the pandemic.

- **Needs-based CPD opportunities:** These can be created for both English teachers and other subject teachers working through English, focused at the school level and done collaboratively with private schools and NELTA.
- **Contribution to Nepal's languages in education policy by English in education experts:** This is necessary to narrow gaps between policy and practice by drawing on research-based evidence.
- **Improving assessment of English proficiency skills of teachers:** Many teachers lack the required language proficiency in English, which seems to be linked with the ineffective teacher recruitment process adopted by the Teacher Service Commission that simply uses similar test questions to those asked in BEd examinations and does not assess language proficiency. Therefore, the English teacher recruitment process could be improved by designing it in a way that integrates teachers' English language assessment.
- **Exploring the development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses:** Currently, there is no record of any provision of ESP courses, although the growing demand in various sectors is reported. There is a big opportunity to develop ESP courses sensitive to local needs.
- **Reforming the English language assessment system:** Tests such as SEE need further reform so that both productive and receptive skills are given equal importance in assessment. This reform will help address the negative washback effects of assessment. Some work on this is already underway with the Education Review Office and as part of the SSDP programme work.
- **Developing an English language curriculum and textbooks that are sensitive to local needs:** For many students in Nepal, English is either a second or a third language and learning English in the urban context is not the same as that in rural areas, as highlighted in this report. More contextualised curricula and textbooks could be more effective than the current 'one curriculum/textbook for all' approach.

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This report provides an overview of how English language teaching, learning and assessment are currently situated within school-level education in Nepal. The report provides up-to-date contextual information, exploring policies and practices. The authors draw on policy documentation, research studies and a small number of interviews and focus groups to provide an overall picture of the current scenario. They provide commentary on the status of English within the curriculum, classroom practices, how teachers are supported to develop their skills and knowledge and the opportunities, challenges and future trends that the authors have extrapolated from their research.

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