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Inadequate Grammatical Proficiency of B. Ed. English Majors: Claims and Confessions

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Abstract

Subjective critiques can often be heard about the quality of English language teaching and learning in higher education in Nepal — both as being deteriorated and upgraded. This study stemming from the major finding of a previous one — low grammatical proficiency of B. Ed. English majors studying at a community campus in Nepal — was an attempt, as a case study, to explore the reasons perceived by the English majors themselves and their teachers as the participants. Focus group discussions were conducted separately with the different groups of participants. Discussed thematically in this article, the major reasons for this as perceived by the participants were the decreased sense of responsibility and misconceptions about the essence of the practical examinations, inappropriate instructional techniques — specifically excessive lectures — and students' poor English-base and absenteeism as a tendency. Likewise, some other reasons were students' insufficient exposure to English, their hesitation to produce English and a lack of professional development opportunities for the teachers. Low grammatical competence of the students and less favorable learning environment were also identified as being attributable to the problem. Finally we suggest that some common efforts of the students, the teachers and the institution are required to improve the situation.

Keywords: Curriculum, English Majors, Performance, Proficiency

1. Introduction

1.1 Setting the Context

As an ELT teacher at Kanakai Multiple Campus Jhapa, Nepal, I (Author 2) was always troubled with the low English language proficiency of the B. Ed. English majors — then in the fourth, or the last, year of the entire course duration. I had practically observed among them such discrepancies as low participation, low performance in English-related activities and low pass rates in English. These discrepancies inspired me to assess their English language proficiency. Meantime, I had an opportunity provided by the campus to conduct a mini-research study mentored by Author 1 (principal author here). In consultation with my mentor, I delimited my study to the B. Ed. English majors' grammar proficiency. Ten grammatical notions, namely, subject-verb agreement, causative verbs,

conditional sentences, infinitive and/or *-ing*, tag questions, reported speech, parts of speech, different types of adverbs, question formation (assertive-imperative transformation), and periphrastic 'Do' were identified as the constructs to be included in the test. Through the predominantly quantitative research, their mean score was found to be 46.94 (Thapa, 2022), which is equivalent to grade 'C' as per the standard of the National Examination Board (NEB). Usually, it is much less than what is expected from them at their level. In other words, the earlier research had revealed that they had insufficient proficiency in different areas of grammar.

Though their level had been determined numerically in the previous study, the 'why' aspect still remained unanswered. Stemming from this problem, I conducted another study, which was again designed and supervised by Author 1 (the principal author). This article sets out to report the results of the latter study.

1.2 The Gap

As stated in the Secondary Education Curriculum of Nepal (CDC, 2076 [2019]) assumes itself as a bridge to tertiary education, which also means that a student who opts to go with an English major at the university level should have studied English as a major subject. Thus, one is already expected to be somehow proficient in English before they enroll in higher education with English as a major/specialization subject. However, my experience as an English teacher at the institution selected for this study suggests that this is not usually the case. We, the concerned teachers, commonly encounter B. Ed. English majors still struggling hard even for simple communication through English. In the course of this study what a student remarked referring to his inability to express himself in the examination is not simply a statement but a representation of the total scenario: "I know the thing [from] within but I can't express it in English". Then one can assume that there is some gap even in the teaching and learning process, too.

A problem generally faced by the English teachers at the campus selected for this study is that even if the students do not possess some basic proficiency in English, they tend to go with it as a major subject. There can be several reasons for this. Philipson (2012) explains that "English has been marketed as the language of development, modernity and scientific and technological advancements" (p.11). Of course, the students fall in the same spell of the marketing of the English language. Gao (2019) considers that the perceived social and economic rewards that come with learning English have continued to motivate all. He notes, "access to quality English language education remains a strategically decisive factor in enabling individuals to realize upward social mobility in many of the contexts" (p.4). Moreover, increased migration, the internationalization of education, the growth of multinational capitalism, globalization, and the development of the Internet and online communication have helped the spread of English around the world (Hall, 2016). This explains why the students of the third world tend to go with English even if they have little aptitude in it.

Cummins, López-Gopar and Sughrua (2019) put forth the concept of the academic language and conversational fluency which the students need to achieve as they learn English in the formal setting. By conversational fluency, they mean the interlocutor's effort to carry on a conversation in a familiar face-to-face environment. The conversation is usually supported by such extra-linguistic characteristics as facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, intonation, and the immediate situation. By contrast, to them, academic language proficiency represents an individual's access to and command of the specialized vocabulary and functions of language. It refers to the students' ability to understand the oral and written language in the academic setting. A student reading English in higher education is naturally expected to have acquired at least some degree of conversational fluency as well as academic proficiency in English.

While some proficiency in academic language is naturally expected from English majors, they are also supposed to have a sound knowledge of even generally less frequent vocabulary and complex grammatical structures. Ur (2012) emphasizes the fluency and accuracy aspects of English, and views that the priority upon them has not been changed very much. They are necessitated to make a delivery with the required fluency and accuracy. At the same time, the lack of any receptive or productive skills is not easily excused to them. Their orthographic presentation

is also anticipated to be neat and clean. However, the English majors under this study considerably lack it; also as evinced by their answer sheets.

A crucial question is that if the English majors themselves are not good in English, on whom will the future generation(s) rely for learning English? One reason why B. Ed. English majors are expected to have the required competence in English is that they are the projected future English teachers. The B. Ed. English majors are required to go through twelve papers in English (including Compulsory English) spreading over four years, in addition to the core subjects. The total duration prescribed for each course is 155 periods, each comprising 55 minutes. The curriculum seems to have attempted to include a diverse range of courses encompassing from Research Methodology to the Foundation of Language and Linguistics; from Academic Writing to Teaching Practice. The general and specific objectives of each course are clearly stated. Upon a closer inspection, one can contemplate that the course aims to produce informed and proficient future English teachers.

However, the observation of the score sheets reveals that the learning achievements of the B. Ed. English majors were below the average. Who is more responsible for this will somehow would be another issue, yet we could objectively argue that many of those English majors were far from the attainment of the objectives of the curriculum. It is natural that B. Ed. graduates are regarded as to-be trained teachers, teacher trainers, educational planners and managers, educational researchers, curriculum designers, and all sorts of human resources needed for the educational sector.

Then some questions often trouble us: What a catastrophe are we heading to, since the going-to-be English teachers themselves are not good in English? Who is to blame for this — the curriculum, the teachers of the English majors, pedagogy, or the students themselves? These are some of the questions eliciting this research. In this article we unfold the reasons for the self-perceived low grammatical proficiency of the English majors and the reasons perceived by the teachers involved in teaching the courses to them.

2. Review of the Literature

As the literature existing in this field indicates, a number of factors are associated with the undesirably low proficiency of English majors in the English language itself. A prominent one is a gap between the actual practice and the class objectives (Alsammari, 2022). As he observed, the major factors causing low proficiency in English among Saudi EFL learners were objectives, learners, teachers, curricula, assessment, and practicality. Similarly, Jaya, Petrus, and Pitaloka, (2022) found that, in the Indonesian context, learners' low proficiency in speaking English was associated with the lack of general knowledge, lack of speaking practice, fear of making mistakes, lack of the knowledge of word usage and grammar practice, low motivation, low participation, reading laziness, shyness, less dictionary usage, nervousness, fear of criticism, and unfamiliar pronunciation.

The proficiency of learners is often regarded to be important. The relevant literature also indicates that there is a significant positive relationship between students' proficiency in English and their overall academic success (Ghenghesh, 2015; Bo, Fu, & Lim, 2022). They established that students' proficiency score significantly predicts their current grade point average (GPA) with their prior academic performance being controlled.

A similar study conducted on difficulties in speaking performance experienced by English majors in the Vietnamese context showed that the difficulties were associated with psychological, rather than linguistic and environmental factors (Dongi, 2022). However, another study carried out with non-English majors in Vietnam observed more linguistic difficulties than the psychological ones (Trinh & Pham, 2021).

Vocabulary is another aspect affecting the performance of language learners. Alharbi's, (2021) study aiming to check the vocabulary knowledge among first-year English majors in Saudi Arabia found that receptive and productive vocabulary was more limited in males than in females, whilst, overall, the students' level of vocabulary knowledge was below the desired vocabulary levels as learners of EFL.

The low performance of university level EFL students goes beyond specific language skills. Salman and Hazem's (2022) study indicated that grammatical competence had some impact on written performance. Their findings revealed various types of errors, the most recurrent ones being the malformation errors characterized by the use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure including omission errors.

In the Omani context, Al-Mahrooqi (2012) found that despite the pouring of large resources into ELT, the outcomes were not as satisfactory as expected. The major factors causing this were ineffective teachers, inadequate curricula and uninterested students, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, unsupportive parents, a poor school system, and peer-group discouragement. In Prapphal's (2014) study in Thailand, the majority of the graduates were found not meeting the standard required to study at the graduate level. As she revealed, the course goals and objectives, materials, tasks and activities, testing and evaluation as well as the roles of teachers and students were the major factors associated with the low proficiency of the English majors.

Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod (2019) also highlighted the low proficiency of English majors in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Despite a lot of reformation in the policies and practice, a majority of the students who graduated from high school did not have the required English language skills to be successful at the post-secondary level in Bahrain and Kuwait. As they observed, those countries had not been able to produce secondary school graduates with ample preparation for tertiary education in English, nor were they able to communicate effectively in English in the workplace. Cooper (2015, as cited in Abou-El-Kheir & MacLeod, 2019) also mentioned that a large percentage of students are graduating from the K-12 system without the skills and abilities, particularly in English, necessary to undertake tertiary education. They also indicate the need for boosting English language proficiency in the learners in the GCC countries.

Hence, owing to the literature mentioned above, it can be concluded that the low English language proficiency of the learners is not only a problem limited to Nepal but is widespread among the countries where English is taught and learned as a foreign language, meaning that they are struggling in a similar way as in Nepal. Then an implication of the review is that resources should be developed and those already available should be utilized towards developing the proficiency of the English majors rather than just getting worried or frustrated about the situation.

3. Methods

The research from which this article stemmed was guided by the qualitative approach and the case study design. B. Ed. English majors from Kanakai Multiple Campus, Jhapa, Nepal and six teachers who taught them were conveniently selected as the sample participants for the study. The primary data were collected using FGD guidelines. The qualitative data obtained thus were analyzed descriptively. The methods followed are elaborated in the text that follows.

3.1 Approach

This study underpinned the qualitative approach. This is to say that words, rather than numbers, were obtained as the data, and descriptive interpretative, rather than statistical calculations, were applied to the analysis of the data.

3.2 Design

The research builds on the case study design involving the study of a group within an institution. Duff and Anderson (2015) clarify the scope of case study research and write, "Case studies permit researchers and readers to gain grounded new understandings of certain issues" (p. 113). It was undertaken to provide a "holistic description of language learning or use within a specific population and setting" (Mackey & Gass, 2022, p. 308), thereby unveiling the reasons for it. The inadequate proficiency of the B. Ed. English majors in the given institution constituted the case for the research.

In this research we focused on exploring the real learning situations leading to the low proficiency of the English majors. Here, the ontological stance is that there must be some factors working on the low proficiency of the students and one can reach those factors by a systematic study of the case.

3.3 Site

The site of this research was Kanakai Multiple Campus, Surunga, Jhapa from which the participants were selected.

3.4 Participants

The participants of the research were B.Ed. English majors (n=22) and English teachers (n=6) representing the entire course duration for B. Ed. (4 years) from Kanakai Multiple Campus, Surunga, Jhapa — all conveniently selected on their willingness-to-participate basis. Table 1 displays the overall picture of the participants.

Table 1: Participant Description

Academic year	Students			Teachers		
	Male	Female	Sub-total	Male	Female	Sub-total
B. Ed. first	3	2	5	1	-	1
B. Ed. second	2	2	4	1	-	1
B. Ed. third	3	3	6	2	-	2
B. Ed. fourth	4	3	7	1	1	2
Total	12	10	22	5	1	6

3.5 Techniques, Tools and the Data

Focus group discussion (FGD) was applied to the collection of the data. Accordingly, two sets of FGD guidelines were developed to administer with the students (English majors) and the teachers as separate cohorts to elicit their opinions, experiences and reflections as the primary data. Likewise, the examination results of the English majors and curricular provisions, specifically the objectives and the instructional techniques, also were used as the secondary data.

3.6 Data Collection Procedures

The primary data were collected from the participants who were selected on the convenience sampling basis, meaning that “those who happen to be available at the time ... captive audiences such as students and teachers” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 216). In this research those relevant individuals present at campus on the day of data collection were selected for FGD — the students (n= 22) and the teachers (n=6) as separate cohorts. Their opinions, experiences, positions and reflections were carefully recorded and noted down.

Moreover, the curricular provisions of B.Ed. major English — the objectives and the instructional techniques — were obtained from the respective syllabuses as the secondary data. Besides, the marks obtained by the English majors were collected from the marks ledger.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedures

The data obtained thus were manually processed and descriptively analyzed under different thematic patterns into which they merged.

4. Results and Discussion

Upon a close observation of the data collected from the B. Ed. English majors and their teachers, this research unveiled the prominent causes of the low grammatical proficiency of the English majors. The low proficiency was found to be the result of multiple factors in crux, so should not be understood in isolation. In this section we advance and discuss them under the respective themes that merged.

4.1 Decreased Sense of Responsibility, Negligence and Misconceptions

Most of the English majors opined that the course was not interesting but tough for them to study on their own. A large majority of them frankly admitted that they possessed no books and other resources prescribed for the courses. The teachers also affirmed it. “The only source of the books for the students is the library”, responded a teacher. When it comes to the practical exams, the students viewed it as a strenuous task to be done after the examination. A student exclaimed that they did not typically prepare for the practical exams in the regular classroom except by reading the theoretical subjects. Both the teachers and students agreed that the course was completed in the prescribed time. However, a student expressed her resentment regarding this hence: “The focus of the teachers is to complete the course but not to get the students to achieve the objectives”. Indeed, it was a question against the teachers’ professional honesty.

However, in the teachers’ eyes, the reasons for the low proficiency primarily rooted in the English majors themselves. According to them, the students’ poor English base, their negligence and lack of rigor, especially in the practical subjects, were the primary reasons for their low proficiency.

The English majors and teachers shared some (mis)concepts and beliefs about learning English and ELT. They both agreed that teaching and learning grammar is the most significant component of developing English language proficiency. They also admitted in common that the students had only struggled for English without sufficient background as the B. Ed. English majors. Likewise, both poles believed that the practical activities were meant for tackling the examination, which is but a misconception!

Hence, far from the essence of the curriculum, negligence seems to have been practiced both on the part of the teacher and the students. Again the students seem to have had the misconceptions that the practical classes were to be treated discretely from the classroom teaching and learning and that they also needed special preparation targeting at passing the examination, rather than developing their linguistic proficiency. Thus, although the course was completed on time, the students’ achievement was not ensured properly. This resulted in the English majors’ low general English proficiency, including proficiency in grammar.

4.2 Inappropriate Instructional Techniques

As the English majors claimed, their teachers’ negligence and the institutional environment were the major reasons for their low grammatical proficiency in English in general and their grammatical proficiency in particular. They accused that the teachers regarded course completion as their only task rather than helping them develop proficiency in English. In doing this, they followed the traditional lecture method excessively without any pair and group work or the use of ICT. In their perception, they never had to use English outside of the classroom.

Each of the courses in the B. Ed. curriculum, including English, specifies suitable instructional techniques. However, the students reported that the teachers excessively used the lecture method for all the courses. “I remember one of our teachers using ICT while teaching,” commented a student but this was only rare. They collectively voiced that they were given no group or pair work in and out of the classroom. In fact, this phenomenon has raised a crucial question to the professional dignity of the teachers.

One of the students, however, reflected that their teacher had once asked them to make some presentations but due to the low participation of the students, it was found ineffective and ceased then and there.

Upon our inquiry with the teachers regarding the students' resentments, they claimed that they tried to use multiple methods suitable for the courses and the students but due to the limited time and the pressure for course completion, they could not follow them properly.

An observation of a teacher is worth mentioning here. She reflected herself back on her B.Ed. first-year class where she had inspired the students for self-study. Surprisingly, the students had quit her class from the next day onwards accusing her to have had insufficient teaching techniques, so leaving her work to them.

Consistent with the students' claims, the teachers also made some confessions. They implicitly admitted that, because of the pressure of the timely course completion, they were not able to use varieties of appropriate and practically oriented teaching techniques which could have been beneficial to a few students only. They confessed that although their instructional techniques were beneficial to a few and less supportive to many they had no option beyond this. They also accepted that they could not motivate and include all their students amply and appropriately.

In summary, the traditionally practiced excessive use of lectures at the cost of some other student-centered ELT methods and techniques can also be attributed to the low English proficiency of the students.

4.3 Students' Poor Background and Absenteeism as a Tendency

The students admitted that their English base was weak and that they did not attend the classes regularly. Seventeen students out of twenty-two informed that they were from Nepali medium public schools and, therefore, were poor at English. All the students except one accepted that they had insufficient knowledge of the use and usage of the English language. Although the Nepali medium at public schools does not mean that one necessarily lacks adequate competence in English, one of the female students complained, "Our teachers [at school] never taught English through English". They agreed that their base was not strong enough as English majors. They also admitted that they did not purchase books and other resources required for the courses. Nevertheless, their reason for struggling with English as the major subject was to improve their English. Apart from that, one student said that she wanted to go abroad and another said he wanted to be an English teacher.

The teachers complained about the students' irregularity in the class. They generalized the students' not attending the classes regularly and not actively participating in the learning process including both curriculum-based and additional practical activities as some indicators of their demotivation. They also had a belief that the campus had enough environment for those students who were intrinsically motivated. They believed that an irregular student could not comprehend what he/she had to but again would frequently remain absent. One of the teachers exposed that only three were ready to take part in the extempore speech competition in English. "Most of the students are demotivated to learning", moaned a teacher, "They come to campus but only they know what for".

Thus, it is natural that the students with admittedly insufficient background knowledge and skills in English cannot perform as desired. On top of that, a good proficiency from English majors cannot be expected unless they are intrinsically motivated. However, this phenomenon is also deeply in crux with other factors, chiefly the institutional environment the English majors find themselves in.

4.4 Inefficient Exposure, Hesitation and Lack of Professional Development Opportunities

Rather a small amount of exposure to English that the English majors received was found to be another problem. The students reported that they did not need to use English except in the English classroom. "We need not speak English anywhere", stated a female student. The Nepali language is so pervasive everywhere inside Nepal that one is not usually required to know another language to communicate at the social/community level. This situation also affects learning other languages including English. As a response to our query, "Do you speak English with and among your friends?" they responded negatively. The reason they had for this was their fear of making [grammatical] mistakes and insufficiency of vocabulary they needed to possess to make others understand what they said. Thus, a lack of confidence was apparent in them.

When we reported the teachers on the students' self-perception, they regarded it as one of the major problems. Some of the apparent responses were: "They are shy and silent"; "Majority of the students tend to answer in Nepali when asked"; "Students who try to speak English are outnumbered."

The teachers were not satisfied with the students' participation in the English-related activities and programs in the campus, either. One of the teachers harshly remarked, "One can drag a horse onto the water but can't make him drink".

Most of the teachers claimed that the campus had never arranged any seminars or conferences to boost ELT. The teachers remarked that they got no any opportunity to take part in national or international conferences. Only a teacher was found to have attended many international conferences and presented papers there. This suggests that even the teachers had a minimum degree of exposure and professional refreshers that an ELT professional requires for professional development.

In sum, arguably, the insufficiency of exposure to the English language skills on the part of the students and professional development opportunities on the part of the teachers must have a good share in the English majors' low proficiency in English.

4.5 Low Grammatical Competence of the Students

The previous study had indicated that the English majors' grammatical competence was equivalent to grade "C" as per the NEB standard (Thapa, 2022). The students showed their consent to this and agreed that they were poor at using grammatical structures correctly. "We have never read the grammatical rules and structures in our classrooms yet," stated a female student. It was apparent from their discussion that the only grammatical input the students received was the teachers' lectures. On the one hand, the students seemed to have made little effort, if any, to improve their level, and on the other, the teachers did not seem much worried about this. "We have prescribed them a lot of grammar books and they are available in the library but they are not serious", a teacher expressed his discontent.

"The students' answer sheets of the internal examination is a sight to see" wondered a teacher. He continued, "They wrote whatever came to their mind without any logical sequence and grammatical coherence." As he perceived, "Systematic teaching and learning of grammar is a necessary condition for good proficiency in the language."

4.6 Learning Environment: Overall Observation

An overall observation revealed that the learning environment of the campus was not very conducive. The classroom size was too large to fit the number of students. The English clubs, which could boost learning English, were almost non-operational. The co-curricular activities were not sufficient enough to include a large number of students. "Even if we did not participate in the program, we were found to the side of the spectators" remarked a student. Yet, the teachers viewed, "There is a lot of space in the campus for those who are intrinsically motivated. They pointed out some individual examples in which their students had achieved success.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the low grammatical proficiency in the B. Ed. English majors seems to have stood on a 'tripod' constituted by the students themselves, the teachers and the institution. The English majors themselves seemed to have struggled for English without sufficient aptitude, background and intrinsic motivation. Rather, it stands out that they were either instrumentally or integratively motivated. This explains why the students exercised absenteeism and low participation in the classroom activities. This further indicates that some kind of entrance test should be administered to ensure that the students opting to be English majors have at least a tolerable degree of aptitude and intrinsic motivation for English. Likewise, equating their profession to completing the course and

preparing the students ultimately for examinations are the teachers' misconceptions. They should understand that every profession including teaching has some challenges which the professional is required to cope with. Similarly, it is not very genuine of the campus to remain indifferent toward providing the ELT teachers with some kind of professional development opportunities, and creating a favorable learning environment for the students. We recommend that each part of the 'tripod' should honestly and sincerely bear their responsibilities to get the situation better.

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