

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS AT THE CROSSROADS

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Abstract

This article presents a review of the changing status of the English language situation in our context and the changing perspectives revealed through the curriculum, textbooks and the ELT market. In the light of the growing demand for English, the article suggests the classroom teachers as well as the ELT practitioners to prepare themselves for the challenges they have to face in the present ELT scenario.

A teacher, irrespective of the subjects he teaches, finds himself always standing at the crossroads where different facets of reality meet. These are socio-cultural, linguistic, philosophical, pedagogical facets etc. These keep on changing everyday and these together constitute the goal and subject matter and method of teaching.

Take for example, the national goal of teaching English in Nepal until a few decades ago. Professor K. P. Malla had, in the early 70s', suggested to introduce it (English) as late as possible and put it as intensively as possible. His proposal was grade VIII. So did the Davies' Report in the early 80s. (quoted in Bhattarai, 2001)'. Now after three decades, the scenario has changed completely and one can see English medium schools, proliferating by leaps and bounds and have almost outnumbered government (Nepali language medium) schools, have attracted the Nepali parents in such way that they prefer to enrol their children to the English medium schools that cost them much more when compared to free, government schools.

In this context, a teacher of English more than others, needs to be very dynamic in that his teaching (content/method/philosophy) is determined by factors other than he can control. This is mostly the case of a third world country like Nepal where the role of English in national history keeps changing and likewise the attitude towards it.

The only factor that has lured the Nepali society, rich and poor alike is the English language, now as a subject and medium both. The crave for English has grown so much that by now within a span of three decades there are large number of famed publishing houses that produce materials (textbooks) in English, these are prepared mostly by native (Nepali) writers and editors, there are different training institutes and their training centres, different teams of writers, translators, trainers, all for promoting English all engaged in ELT enterprise. English has thus underpinned many different enterprises. The government schools are now, on the demand of the parents, willing to change the usual medium of Nepali into English. (One case for example, is the effort made by Mangal Madhyamik Vidyalaya, a Secondary High School situated at Kirtipur in Kathmandu, for giving its teachers a 30-hour classroom English training to its teacher in order to enable them handle classes through English medium. NELTA had an opportunity to utilize its package designed to teach the use of classroom teaching. This represents the desire for more English in the academic sector of Nepal. Restricted as a medium of higher education and library language earlier, English has now become a more powerful medium of communication especially to the younger generation.

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2/Govinda Raj Bhattarai & Ganga Ram Gautam

There are 8 distinct varieties of World English. These are British, American, Canadian, Australian, Caribbean, African, South Asian and East Asian. The first five are considered standard whereas the last three are labeled standardizing (Crystal 1997:110). Six countries namely, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Burma use South Asian standardizing English. Western writers//linguists are unaware of the fact that Nepal had never been a part of the British colony in the history and write history wrongly thus: In India, the largest of South Asian countries, English plays a special role, the remaining countries which were, like India, also once under British colonial possession, are Pakistan and Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal (Gramley and Paftzold 1994: 324). Except from one historical fact (Nepal was never under colonial possession), other situations that have supported the cause for the introduction and application of English, though to lesser degree than that of India in terms of time span and the gravity of purpose, are similar to those of India.

V.S. Naipaul, the Nobel laureate of 2003, had pointed out way back in 1964 that Indian literature in English language had ceased to exist. By then great writings of Gandhi, Nehru, Radhakrishnan, Mulkraj Ananda, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Nirad C Chaudhary had formed a rich treasure of Indian literature in English. They were the great masters of English writings in India whereas Nepali had no traces of writings in English until then.

Now social critics opine that the most fertile period of Indian writing in English began in the early 1980s; this is true of Nepali academia too. We have now remarkably distinct Nepali variety of English and considerable number of publications (original authoring as well as translation and technical writings are coming up). Similarly, even the Nepali medium educational institutions such as TU and its constituent/affiliated colleges have shown their desire to begin English medium wings in their existing academic programmes of the market. Even the non-technical streams like arts, commerce and education have started opting for English as the medium of instruction in higher education. Realizing the growing attraction towards the English language, the government has also taken a decision 3 years ago to introduce English from grade one. Thus, English in Nepal seems to build on a very strong foundation– the students come to university colleges with a very sound knowledge of English and are closely associated with its culture. This is further supported by their access into the media– both electronic and print. With becoming the signatory of the WTO, Nepal has already entered into the global village where the use of English has become indispensable in every sphere of life. This has also become a goal for young generation in Nepal.

At this juncture stand our English teachers– more than 40,000 in number from primary schools to universities. They had acquired limited knowledge of the subject matter (and the skills) and its methodology compared to the contexts of the present; so naturally their exposure to language and culture had remained quite limited. Perhaps it was fairly enough in a context when the use of English was limited to a foreign language but now the scenario (local as well as global) has completely changed and the status of English at present is gradually moving towards that of becoming a second language.

This situation has posed a great challenge before English teachers who have to cope with different situations both in academic and non-academic settings. In this context, the English teachers have to make a big shift in their professional lives and they have to establish themselves as true professionals. A professional, according to Ur in Richards and Renandya 2002, is someone who

- is primarily occupied in real-time action.
- thinks in order to improve action.
- is interested in finding out what works
- is an immediate agent of real-world change
- is evaluated in the short term by the extent to which he or she brings about valuable change.
- is evaluated in the long term by his or her influence on the thought and action of both academics and professionals.

Bearing the above facts in mind we can draw outlines of professional development applicable to the English teachers in Nepal, they are cent percent non-native speakers (users) of English. However, their use of English mostly confines to the classroom situation. They may not be aware of the changing scenario. For us, English teachers, cultivating professionalism stands for our awareness to the growing socio-cultural values of English. It also means for our preparedness to perceive the new dimensions in ELT epistemology– the kinds of knowledge of information about the materials, to trace the sources of the materials, to decide ways or of using them in their local situation.

Secondly and most importantly, an English teacher should come out of the confined classroom situation and look for professional linkage with the professional network. This maybe within his/her vicinity at the national level or at international level. In the context of Nepal, NELTA is such a national level institution which has a long history of its professional activities. It has expanded its reach to different parts of Nepal through its 15 branches. Thus, NELTA has a prospect of performing as a powerful platform for accelerating professional development. Each of the branches outside the valley has now become a venue for conducting regular activities – interactions, trainings, workshops, mini conferences, etc. through which the teachers can update themselves with the current developments in ELT. Such opportunities are evidently equipping our teachers with new insight into the ELT directions in the global context.

Thirdly, today's English teacher needs to equip himself/herself with the information technology (IT) skills in order to avail the vast treasure of the literature in ELT. In every moment, a huge amount of materials of different kinds are being uploaded on the internet which the English teacher can avail of and use free of cost. Furthermore, the libraries are gradually turning into e-braries where the users can access e-books. This kind facility has been made available in Nepal by the British Council library for its members. Using this kind of facility requires in the users the familiarity with operational skills of IT. Without capturing this treasure, a teacher if he/she solely depends on the prescribed text and the degrees earned long back (in a very different situation) will fail to cope with the pace of time and will remain a great failure.

4/Govinda Raj Bhattarai & Ganga Ram Gautam

To sum up, an English teacher should compare himself/herself with a person standing on a traffic island controlling and receiving the flow of knowledge and information from all directions. One should capture the appropriate materials and utilize/adapt it to be in pace with time and in response to the demand of the consumers (parents, students). He is not alone, nor can he make his own decisions as to what to teach and what not. There is a broad ELT community beyond; at national and mostly international level that decides the kind, quality and type of English that befits the situation. He should look for and seek, therefore, a professional linkage and attachment with the individuals and institutions with whom he can interact and enrich. With these deliberations in mind, we would like to suggest our English language teachers to avail of the following resources and enrich themselves.

1. Famed publishers like Oxford University Press (OUP), Cambridge University Press (CUP), Longman, Sage Publication, and McGraw Hill have produced standard world class ELT *materials every year. Some of them are* also available in the local market in highly subsidized price (low price edition).

Some of the must-read publications available in the market are:

- (a) Burns, A. (2001). *Action Research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge. CUP.
- (b) Doff, A. (1988) *Teach English*. Cambridge. CUP (available in low-priced edition) (Available in low-priced edition).
- (c) Head, K. and P. Taylor (1997) *Readings in Teacher Development*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- (d) Halliday, A. (1994) *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (e) James, P. (2001) *Teachers in Action: Tasks for In-service Language Teacher Education and Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (f) Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. Oxford. OUP (Available in low-priced edition).
- (g) Nunan, D. (2003) *Practical English Language Teaching*. McGraw Hill.
- (h) Richards J. C. & Rogers. T. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge. CUP (Available in low-priced edition).
- (i) Richards J. C. and D. Freeman (Eds) (1996) *Teacher Learning in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (j) Richards, J.C. and Renandya W.A. (2002). *Methodology in Language Teaching*. Cambridge. CUP.
- (k) Ur. P (1996) *A Course in Language Teaching*. Cambridge. CUP. (Available in low-priced edition).
- (l) Wallace, M. J. (1991). *Training Foreign Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (m) Williams, M. and R. L. Burden (1997). *Psychology for Language Teachers: A Social Constructive Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- (n) Woodward, T. (1991) *Models and Metaphors in Language Teacher Training*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Some of the noted Journals of international scale are: ELT Journal, TESOL Quarterly, ELT Forum, Modern English Teacher and English Teaching Professional. American Centre Nepal has kindly provided copies of ELT Forum for NELTA Resource Centres in Nepal. In the context of Nepal, Journal of NELTA is the only journal on ELT produced regularly for the last 12 years. Therefore, NELTA strictly recommends the English language teachers to read these journals and we also encourage the teachers to contribute to the Journal of NELTA by subscribing and sending their articles for publications.
 3. There are different electronic networks of English teachers worldwide which anyone can join free of charge. To name a few, ELTeCS and TESL-L are the ones which have expanded their networks world-wide. By being a member of ELTeCS, for example, one can bid for an ELT project worth £2000 through international partnership. Similarly, they can also participate in the on-line discussions on various topics of interest with their fellow international colleagues. In order to avail such opportunities, please visit the following websites :
ELTeCS : = <http://www.britishcouncil.org/eltecs>
TESL-L : = <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/~tesl-l/>
 4. At present the world has started to materialize libraries without paper. A vast treasure of knowledge is being stored on the web, which can be retrieved by anyone at any corner of the globe. ELT also possesses enormous amount of materials (literature on the web in various aspects ranging from academic articles of theoretical foundations to very practical materials of classroom purpose which a teacher– hard pressed for time- can use immediately and improve his performance. Some of the useful ELT sites you can visit and explore more are :
 - 1) <http://iteslj.org>
 - 2) <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/>
 - 3) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/index.shtml>
 - 4) <http://www.learnenglish.org.uk/>
 - 5) <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/>

ELT has experienced a new paradigm shift. An English teacher should be more energetic, inquisitive, dynamic and aware of the fast changing socio-cultural, and linguistic realities. He should bear in mind that this is possible only through one's commitment for continued professional development.

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