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Abstract

This research paper explored the significant nexus of language teacher autonomy and professional development. Language teacher autonomy was studied on the basis of teachers' involvement in major decision and policy making of the school, students' evaluation, ethical issues and commitments, and teachers' professional development programs. Findings are based upon the relevant literature review and the analysis of the responses of the participants achieved through semi-structured interview guidelines. Teachers exercised autonomy only for internal evaluation to some extent and they had the positive perception towards language teacher autonomy. The study dug out the ethical issues and commitments, and lack of professionalism of the teachers, and indifference of the school administration to promote autonomy as the major challenges to practice autonomy.

Key words: Language teacher autonomy; professional development; teachers' perception on language teacher autonomy and professional development

Nexus of Language Teacher Autonomy and Professional Development

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Introduction

Many language teachers work in the conditions where they enjoy little freedom in relation to their teaching and professional development. This situation has not been principally and practically changed by now. Students are the focus of observation, and teacher merges with subject matter and methods focusing just to increase the pass percentage of the students.

There are the educational institutions which are functioning as autonomous institutions and have their own autonomous programs. When educational institutions adopt the policy of running autonomous programs, teachers' autonomy cannot be excluded from it.

The development of autonomy is acknowledged as a prominent educational goal in discussions of language education, but it is hardly a reality in many schools and colleges in Nepal. Autonomy is the quality of being self-governing or self-rule. Teacher autonomy is a means of encouraging and strengthening a power of teachers in a personal or a professional arena. Yu-hong & Ting, (2012) state, "Teacher autonomy can be defined as teachers' capacity, freedom, and responsibility to take control of their own teaching and learning both inside and outside classroom" (p. 1048). Teacher Professional Development (TPD) is the body of systematic activities to prepare teachers for their job, including initial training, induction courses, in-service training and continuous professional development within school settings (Pokhrel & Behera, 2016, p. 190).

Language proficiency and managing skills are consistently considered indispensable. Language proficiency and managing skills are fundamental requirements of a language teacher. An autonomous teacher feels more motivated and satisfied in his/her teaching profession and ultimately it enhances his/her performance to work more efficiently. Smith (2000) views teacher autonomy as "the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge, and attitudes for oneself as a teacher in co-operation with others" (P. 89). Teacher autonomy brings several advantages for teachers and schools when it applied into practices in daily activity. Teachers can exercise autonomy in six different aspects of their responsibilities. These can be categorized as curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, student behavior, classroom environment and professional development (Rudolph, 2006, as cited in Eren, 2020, p. 97). Although several researches have been carried out to investigate various cognitive, affective, and personality traits of successful teachers, the roles of language teachers' autonomy and their professional identity have received scant attention.

Teachers' professional development, professional identity and autonomy are viable domains which can play pivot role in language teachers' success in language teaching. The idea of autonomy in language learning is often represented as a radically learner-centered idea. It focuses on the homely school environment and supportive to autonomy supportive. It equally emphasize to think over the concept of learner autonomy globally and act locally adapting the global trends and issues of teaching and learning, and at the same time, addressing the need for learner autonomy thinking contextually and pragmatically (Panta, 2019, p. 220).

Lev Vygotsky supports in the point that children learn much through interaction. So, curricula should be designed to emphasize interaction between learners and learning tasks. As per Lev Vygotsky's perspective implications for learning are: Students will learn best through activity. Students should be encouraged to communicate frequently with self and with teacher. Using a higher level of language will help students to increase their language levels. Assisted problem solving creates learning (Mishra, 2013, p. 27).

The issue of teachers' professional development has not been adequately addressed in Nepal yet. There is a significant impact of English language teachers' English language proficiency and personality characteristics on their teaching practices and professional success. Regarding the significant role teachers play in the field of language learning, their emotions and feelings have been the subject of many studies. One of the main concerns with this is the level of English proficiency of the teachers as Awasthi (2003) state, "The main issue of the English language teaching in Nepal is the lack of adequate English language proficiency of the English teachers teaching from primary level to university level (p.26)". Competence is an integrated form of knowledge, skill, attitude and behavior. Teacher Professional Development programs help to develop teachers' competences (Pokhrel & Behera, 2016, p. 190). Vygotskian perspective on learning and development in a socio-cultural context emphasizes a standard of competence, development of a personal orientation towards teaching, and reflective inquiry. From the Vygotskian perspective, the overall aim of a teacher-education program is best conceived as the development of a professional identity (Huizen, Oers & Wubbels, 2005, p. 275).

Teacher identity has gained considerable attention in educational research and it is a relatively new subject in recent years. Gee (2000) states teacher identity as "an important analytic tool for understanding schools and society" (p. 99). In the context of Nepal, professional development programs are not initiated satisfactorily. Sigdel (2018) writes, "College and university

programs cannot provide the extensive range of learning experiences which is necessary for the graduates to become effective school teachers” (p. 217). As a result, the concept of teachers’ professional development is still unclear for many teachers. Even experienced teachers confront great challenges each year, including changes in subject content, new instructional methods, advances in technology, changed laws and procedures, and student learning needs.

Teacher Professional Development activities should encompass several factors like content-focused training, collaborative relationships, coaching and expert support, feedback, reflection, adequate duration and many others (Howlett & Penner-Williams, 2020, p. 15). Teacher professional development courses can support teachers in building up pedagogical content knowledge and in improving the quality of teaching (Besser, Leiss & Blum, 2020, P. 293). However; teachers are lacking the opportunity to continuing professional development.

Vygotskian socio-cultural theory impacts learning. It has several implications for teaching. Teachers should use interactive methods of teaching such as hands on activities and group work. Similarly, teachers should present students with challenges to increase problem solving abilities. Likewise, teachers should frequently use a high level of language. Moreover, teachers should use scaffolding to increase students' cognitive abilities (Mishra R.K. 2013, p. 27-28). Language teacher autonomy has become a buzz phrase in the twenty first century throughout the globe and Nepal is not exception of it. However, it is the most difficult question to define language teacher autonomy and any answer to it is likely to be subjective (Han, 2017, p. 134). Many previous studies have emphasized and provided a broader understanding of language proficiency for teacher success. Therefore, there is an urgent need for recognition and understanding in the matter of language teachers' autonomy. This study aimed to fill this lacuna by exploring the nexus of language teachers’ autonomy and professional development in order to shed more light on these concepts and their contribution to the teachers’ success and professional identity. Hence, purposes of this study are to dig out the perception of the English language teachers towards language teacher autonomy and to explore how language teachers' autonomy linked to their professional development and vice versa. Thus, it is imperative to understand language teachers’ autonomy in relation to their professional identity and professional development.

Theoretical Lens of the Study

The base of this study is Vygotskian perspective on teacher education. Drawing on Vygotskian theory, a teacher-education environment offers support to trainee teachers for developing a

professional identity. A central element is that trainees explore the practice of teaching for its underlying public meanings and as these meaning relate to their own structures of personal meanings (Huizen, Oers & Wubbels, 2005, p. 267). Vygotsky's theory is known as socio-cultural theory. Vygotsky's theory is based on the idea that learning can lead development, and development can lead learning, and this process takes place through a dynamic interrelationship. The role of self regulation in teacher autonomy is considered very crucial. Mishra (2013) states, "At the core of this theory is Vygotsky's belief that human development-child development as well as the development of all humankind- is the result of interactions between people and their social environment (p.23)". Vygotskian theoretical framework is that professional learning and development are best conceived and conditioned as an aspect of evolving participation in a social practice (Huizen, Oers & Wubbels, 2005, p. 274). When there is language teacher autonomy, teachers can interact more independently with the society they are living in. Teachers and learners' relationship with the society is very important as an individual or his/her mind is not separated from the socio-cultural group. Learning becomes effective when there is interaction and sharing (Liu & Matthews, 2005, p. 392). Vygotsky's ideas are very important for the development of learner autonomy in terms of cognitive development of the learner and the learner autonomy depends on the teacher autonomy.

Methodology

I used qualitative research method attempting to dig out the perception of the ELT teachers towards language teachers' autonomy and to explore how language teachers' autonomy linked to their professional identity and professional development. I used interpretive research design as the foundation of research. So, the ontology of my study is socially constructed, multiple, holistic and contextual (Darby, Fugate & Murray, 2019, p. 8). The epistemology of this paradigm is inter-subjective knowledge construction.

I used semi-structured interview guidelines as the data collection tool. Four secondary level English teachers from two community schools of Rupandehi district of Nepal were chosen as the participants. They were Ms. Deepa Basnet, Ms. Arati Koirala, Mr. Suman Shrestha and Mr. Hari Banjade (Pseudo names). I visited each of the teachers in their school and tried to manage their leisure periods to interview. The ethical issues to be considered in social research are informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation, and consequences for future research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 209). I informed the possible benefit of the research to the participants. I provided complete information of the research and research procedure to the participants. After I built rapport with my

research participants, I interviewed them. I maintained the note of the interview in short form and themes were inferred after analysis. Original names of the participants have been replaced by the pseudo names to maintain their privacy and secrecy. Basing on the relevant literatures, and having the thematic analysis of the collected data the meanings and insights of the study were inferred.

Discussions/Data Analysis and Results

Hurdles for the Practice of Autonomy

Teachers had the less practice of autonomy. They were not involved in major decision and policy making of the school. They exercised autonomy only for internal evaluation to some extent. One participant, Deepa Basnet revealed that although they were instructed to mark and grade the students for internal evaluation, later they saw their given grades and marks were changed by the co-coordinators and the principal. The problem of teachers' autonomy was not properly recognized. Subjectivity of the principal and management committee was prevalent and dominant. Participants agreed in that teachers' lack of competence and professionalism, ethical issues and commitments, and indifference of the school administration to promote autonomy were the major challenges to implement and practice ELT teacher's autonomy in school.

The sufficient interaction among the teachers, administration and stakeholders of the institutions are to be increased to facilitate the language teachers to exercise the expected autonomy. Although autonomy is decision making independent of outside control, delegating authority for the language teachers for the successful implementation of it is still antithetical in our current practices (Massie, 2016, p. 134). Thus proper practice of autonomy for the language teachers can be a new vista in teaching learning of today's context.

Language Teachers' Perception on Autonomy

Participants had positive perception towards language teacher autonomy in relation to professional development and vice versa. One of the participants, Arati Koirala viewed, "We, teachers need autonomy in fact because it makes our self esteem high and promotes the teachers' morale". There was supremacy of the school administration and school management committee indeed. Another participant, Suman Shrestha responded, "We are just compelled to obey the authority. There is a hardly any evident of two-way communication between the teachers and school administration". They revealed that autonomy of the teachers was not accepted in the school.

Constructivism believes that knowledge is not mechanically acquired. But it is constructed and acquired by offering the learning environment within social effective interaction and good

relation between teachers and students (Liu & Matthews, 2005, p. 387). Roles of social environment, competence of language and effective communication are very important for the effective teaching and learning. Teachers can maintain these things when they can exercise autonomy.

Language Teachers Autonomy and Professional Development

Quality education and professional development of the teachers were found not satisfactory due to lack of exercising autonomy. Participants viewed autonomy helps to improve critical thinking skills, create high self-esteem, and make them reflective in their approach.

All the four participants viz. Mr. Suman Shrestha, Ms. Arati Koirala, Ms. Deepa Basnet and Mr. Hari Banjade agreed the qualities like high self esteem; reflective practices, etc. help to promote their professionalism. Participants also exposed that they did not have adequate exposure for the development of their professionalism. In addition, finding also revealed that external factors (such as curriculum, classroom environment and salary), and internal factors (such as self-evaluation and the joy of teaching) were linked to the levels of teacher autonomy and professional development.

Vygotsky also focuses on teachers' professional development by encouraging and supporting the teachers to participate in learning, develop professional identity and create the pedagogy that supports for the professional development (Huizen, Oers & Wubbels; 2005, p. 285). This is possible by exercising teacher autonomy. Hence, it clarifies that there is positive nexus of language teachers' autonomy and their professional development.

Conclusion

There was less practice of the language teacher autonomy and this issue was still a new issue for the teachers, school administration, and school management committee. Dissatisfaction and demotivation of the teachers had negative impact on their professional development. Teachers had the positive perceptions for practicing the teacher autonomy and they agreed it helps to improve their language proficiency and teaching competency. Teachers agreed that they needed to update timely by involving in professional development programs to develop their professionalism. The implementation of Language teacher autonomy and professional development of the teachers were required urgently in both schools. However, teachers' teaching competence, language proficiency level, ethical issues to be considered by the teachers and lack of professional development programs for the language teachers were found as the existing problems in exercising autonomy in both schools. As a result, the quality of education was not maintained as required.

Teachers' professional role such as teaching, managing classroom, evaluating students and developing curriculum should be assured for promoting autonomy. Teachers' autonomy and professional identity play a crucial role in their level of success. School administration, management committee and stakeholders should accept and transfer the autonomy to the language teachers and start professional development programs. Ongoing job-embedded training, sharing ideas among the peers and self initiative learning through different learning platforms are necessary for developing English language proficiency and their professional development. This study can be informative and useful for English language teachers in specific, and teacher teaching other subjects, school administration and school management committee in general.

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