A look into the local pedagogy of an English language classroom in Nepal

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Abstract
English language teaching (ELT) currently occurring in diverse social settings points to the need to locate ELT in its social context. Many researchers have highlighted the need to explore local vernacular practices, in particular ELT practices in peripheral contexts. The present study investigates events in an English language classroom at a Nepalese public college, using ethnographic observations and interviews. The article describes local practices that have emerged to match the contextual particularities of this classroom. Although localized practices are idiosyncratic, they have coherence within the macrocosm of language teacher education. Vernacular practices and local knowledge are under-represented in both ELT theories and language teacher education. The findings of the study will help understand classroom teaching practice and competence of teachers in ‘peripheral’ contexts as well as help raise ‘relevant doubts and questions’ (Bowers, 1986, p. 407) regarding established ELT theories and practices.

Keywords
Centre and periphery, English language teaching, ethnographic research, local pedagogy, peripheral participation, social context, vernacular practices

I Introduction
The global spread of English and English language teaching (ELT) to much of the world has stimulated increased attention to social context, and the need to understand how English is learnt and taught in diverse contexts. Researchers have warned against uncritical transportation of ELT practices from one context to another, calling for the exploration of local vernacular practices, especially ELT practices in ‘peripheral’ contexts (e.g. Pickford, 2005). Over two decades ago, Bowers (1986, p. 407) noted that:
Without a theory of practice based on the empirical study of what works in different contexts and what does not, what do we put into our teacher training programs which will strengthen classroom competence, and what do we put into our teacher education programs which will raise relevant doubts and questions of alternative approach?

Bowers (1986, pp. 407–408) predicted that ‘in 20 years’ time the major advances in our understanding of ELT will in retrospect be seen as coming … from this sociologically inspired sphere of investigation … of what actually and beneficially happens in the classroom.’ Others have since voiced similar concerns, calling for the need to understand appropriate pedagogies in various social contexts (e.g. Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Kumaravadivelu, 2003), or to recognize emergent, contextual pedagogy (Gorodetsky, Keiny, Barak & Weiss, 2003).

The present study investigates what happens in an English language classroom in Nepal, using ethnographic field notes as the main data source. It describes local practices apparent within the contextual conditions and the meaning offered by these to a larger framework of ELT and language teacher education. Although the emergent meaning from a specific context is a particularized meaning, it creates coherence with a larger whole (Van Oers, 1998) and has ‘the potential to enrich’ the knowledge base of language teacher education programmes (Hayes, 2010, p. 537).

II Context and English language teaching

Investigations into diverse ELT contexts and practices involve the notions of ‘centre’ (or ‘core’) and ‘periphery’ (or ‘vernacular’). While some have used these terms in geographical or linguistic senses to describe unequal power relations between different regions of the world – between more developed, well-resourced nations and institutions where English is spoken as a first language and those in less developed nations and communities where English is spoken as a second or foreign language – others have described political divisions within ELT not in geographical but in professional terms. Holliday (2005, p. 2) notes that ‘It is people, not places, who have professions, prejudices and cultures’. Similarly, these terms have often appeared in discussions of the ‘ideological’ struggle between the established, dominant thinking or globally and officially valued norms and the local, legitimate peripheral knowledge generated in daily social practices (e.g. Canagarajah, 2002). In this view, even within a location such as Nepal, the divide can exist between the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’, or between macro-level educational policies and micro-level classroom realities. These geographical and professional/ideological senses are reflected in the present study, which investigates the ‘peripheral’ ELT practices (the local professional culture or micro-level realities) of a classroom in Nepal. Nepal may geographically be labelled as a less-developed ‘peripheral’ South Asian country.

In discussions of diverse professional cultures, the notion of ‘local knowledge’ (also known as ‘peripheral’ or ‘vernacular’ knowledge) has also been widely used to refer to ‘social practices’ and knowledge that members of a small professional group share as a result of participation in daily activities (Canagarajah, 2002). Local knowledge generated in daily social contexts may diverge from established and dominant knowledge valued at the global or official level. In ELT, practices such as communicative language
teaching (CLT), task-based language teaching, and learner-centred pedagogy, which have been promoted globally or officially, have been interpreted locally in accordance with various social contextual particularities.

A growing number of studies have investigated local, peripheral ELT knowledge of English language educators teaching English in peripheral, local contexts (e.g. Chowdhury & Ha, 2008; Hayes, 2009, 2010; Hu, 2005; Muller, Herder, Adamson & Brown, 2012). These studies have confirmed the diversity and complexity of various ELT contexts and the effect that context has on teaching practices. The majority of such studies employed interviews or questionnaires with peripheral teachers as the main instruments. In other words, the focus has been on peripheral voices rather than peripheral practices. The present study examines how the reality and pedagogical strategies are reflected in the actual practice of a teacher, using classroom observation as the main data source to understand local vernacular practices. The findings from the observation are triangulated with peripheral voices collected through interviews and the information gathered from the researcher’s engagement with the wider research context.

Despite the growing interest in ELT practices and voices in Asia, some parts of Asia with easy access to research (e.g. China, Japan) have received more attention than other less developed and more socio-politically unsettled peripheral contexts such as Nepal. The present study attempts to rectify this imbalance by selecting a relatively neglected Asian peripheral context (‘peripheral’ in the geographical sense). It attempts to describe and understand the local, peripheral practice generated in the reality of a classroom in Nepal (‘peripheral’ in the professional sense). Following Holliday (2005), investigations of peripheral ELT practices can fall into two categories: correction vs. understanding. In the former, a researcher is interested in investigating the local with a desire to change or make improvements. In the latter, the view adopted in this study, the focus is on ‘understanding’ rather than ‘correction’, acknowledging that local, peripheral or vernacular forms of participation and practices, though divergent from global established norms, have their validity, legitimacy and currency.

III Status of English and ELT in Nepal

Nepal, a small Himalayan nation in South Asia, is currently undergoing a socio-political transformation from monarchy to democracy. Nepalese society, structured on a caste and/or ethnic system, is multilingual with more than 100 languages (Giri, 2011). But Nepali and English are reported to have enjoyed special status and dominated the practice of all other languages. English in Nepal is considered to be not a colonial language but a language imported by the Nepalese ruling elite as ‘a linguistic edge’ (Giri, 2010). After his historic visit to England in 1851, Jung Bahadur Rana (a founder of the Rana dynasty of Nepal) set up an exclusive English medium school in Kathmandu in which children of the ruling elites received English language education (Stiller, 1993). ‘English soon became the symbol of status, power and privileges, and a means to divide people into the rulers and the ruled’ (Giri, 2010, p. 93). Nowadays, English is a school subject from Grade 1 and is reported to have increased its status as ‘a bridge between the social divide and a means for upward social mobility’ (Giri, 2010, p. 93).
The increased status of English in Nepal is claimed to result from global and local forces. Phyak (2011) notes that the political transformation from monarchy to democracy and the post-1990 privatization policy for education have encouraged the widespread use of English in Nepal. The political transformation in Nepal has brought about crucial changes in the education system (e.g. see Chauhan, 2008; Phyak, 2011). Before 1918 the general public had been denied educational opportunity. After the democratic movement in 1951, there was a dramatic increase in private schools, community-managed schools and colleges. The democratic movement also ushered in various ‘democratic rights’ such as freedom of speech and free access to education (Phyak, 2011). The current education system is divided into two categories: schooling and higher education. After 12 years of schooling, students can enter higher education, and several disciplines are offered at colleges and universities. Public colleges managed by local communities, also known as community-managed colleges, are affiliated with the government university.

Along with the increase in private schools and community-managed colleges, the craze for English has increased. The Ministry of Education has made English ‘a compulsory subject’ from Grade 1 ‘to cater to the immediate needs of children learning English and building a basic foundation for their further studies in and through English’ (Curriculum Development Centre, 2008, p. 154, cited in Phyak, 2011, p. 279). Although the Ministry of Education is also committed to the multilingual language education policy, allowing schools to use ‘local mother tongues’ as the medium of instruction to educate non-Nepali-speaking children at the primary level, parents’ growing desire to educate their children in English-medium schools has led many schools to opt for the use of English as the medium of instruction starting from Grade 1. At the higher education level (i.e. colleges and universities), English is the medium of instruction.

Concerning the English curriculum, the Ministry of Education has introduced communicative language teaching (CLT) in textbooks since 1995 and has also emphasized learner-centredness: ‘English today should be student centred, not teacher centred, and a pupil gets a chance to assert and affirm his genius under democratic condition, not under the galling restraints of regimentation’ (Rai, 2003, p. 114). Nepalese English language teachers are often described as being unprepared, lacking in training, confidence and competence to use CLT and the learner-centred approach (e.g. see Awasthi, 2003; Rai, 2003). English language teaching in Nepal is also described as in tension between two different schools of thought: the ‘literature first’ approach (the old way of teaching that believes that exposure to literature will lead to language development) and the ‘language first’ approach (which emphasizes the need to promote basic English proficiency before literature can be introduced). Giri (2001) notes that after sharp criticism levelled at the removal of literature from the English school syllabus, literature has made its way back into ELT courses in Nepal.

Along with these educational and political changes and the changing status of English, the various tensions within the politics of ELT in Nepal have been the focus of discussions among Nepalese academic scholars (e.g. the divide between the macro-level educational policies and the micro-level realities in terms of the multilingual language education policy (Phyak, 2011), the divide between the officially valued norms and the realities of teachers in terms of CLT and learner-centredness (Rai, 2003) and finally the divide between the literature-based and language-based curricula (Giri, 2001)). Many
studies for understanding ELT in Nepal, often at a national level, employ surveys, interviews or historical data with an intention to ‘improve’ or ‘correct’ the situation (e.g. Awasthi, 2003; Giri, 2010). The present study provides a particular type of empirical evidence through thick description of one particular case to complement existing knowledge. The study emphasizes ‘understanding’ the local realities by taking an ethnographic gaze at actual ELT practices in one particular classroom in a public (community-managed) college located in Kathmandu.

IV The study

1 The approach: Ethnographic research

Many have urged the use of ethnographic research to understand local vernacular practices (e.g. Holliday, 1994; Pickford, 2005). Ethnographers attempt to describe ‘how things are and why they got that way’ (Wolcott, 1988, p. 167) and attempt to learn about, record and portray the ‘way of life’ (Wolcott, 1988, p. 156) of a particular social group by observing or participating in the daily activities of people under investigation. Although a distinction often occurs between participant and non-participant observation, as Mitchell (2004, p.188) notes, ‘it is arguable whether observation can ever take place without participation.’ While the researcher may not participate in the activities, an observation is nevertheless ethnographic if it involves ‘the researcher participating directly in the setting’ (Brewer, 2000, p. 6).

The present study borrows several ethnographic techniques, using ethnographic observations of the ‘ways of life’ in a particular English classroom in Nepal by participating directly in the setting and recording the first-hand account of its reality over three weeks. Although the time spent in the field is relatively short, it is intensive. The researcher observes the English class six days a week for three weeks, taking thick descriptive field notes while observing and elaborating these immediately after the observation. She records classroom events (i.e. what the teacher and students say and do) and also elicits students’ voices and comments on the lesson through interviews.

Field notes constitute important data in ethnographic research. They record not only what happens but also the researcher’s subjective reactions to observations. ‘These reactions and evaluations often form the basis for preliminary analytic categories and constructs’ (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 391). For example, recurrent issues from my field notes concern difficulties regarding time and resources. These subjective reactions along with the recurring patterns that emerge in the field (e.g. the teacher’s repeated comments in class, and students’ comments about time) guide the data analysis. In addition to participating directly in the setting (i.e. the classroom), the researcher engages in an informal process of ‘shagging around’ (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) by meeting with local people and participants, mapping the physical layout of the class, the school and education systems in Nepal, recording not only classroom events but also ‘off-stage’ and ‘in-between moments’ (Scott, 1990, p. 4) such as ‘conversations in hallways, on leaving or entering rooms’ (Mitchell, 2004, p. 188), conversations with local people outside the school, at the residence hall, social gatherings, photocopy shops, and with students while walking through the paddy field.1 These various ethnographic field notes, encounters and
subjective reactions inform the ‘portrayal’ of the research context, participants and data analysis in the subsequent sections.

2 Research context: Contextual particularities of the classroom and the college

The researcher has visited Nepal twice between 2007 and 2010 before the present (2011) study. During those visits, she has heard about many difficulties teachers encountered, and has also established contact with Nepalese tertiary level teachers. The college in the present study is recruited with help from a local teacher and selected because of its local appeal (i.e. it is taught and run by Nepalese people without input from a foreign institute or sponsor) and its growing popularity in the district. Mr A, a senior teacher of 14 years’ experience at the college, volunteers, allowing the researcher to participate in one of his English classes. The class observed (Class A) is a ‘compulsory English’ class offered to first year Bachelor in Business Administration students. I observe Mr A teach Class A six days a week from Sunday to Friday over three weeks. Students describe the college as ‘affordable for poor people’ as well as ‘quite good’ or ‘good for my money’, and ‘the teachers are friendly and experienced.’ The college is a public morning college in a district of Kathmandu City. Students’ admission fees and monthly fees comprise the primary income source. Public colleges are self-administered, recruiting their own teachers, but their curriculum is centrally state controlled. English is not only taught as a school subject but is also the medium of instruction in colleges. Public colleges in Kathmandu are quite popular as their courses are taught in the morning, starting at 6am and finishing at 10am, allowing students to work after school hours.

The college observed has full enrolment. There are about 3,000 students and 100 staff, including administrative staff. The school compound is small. Classes are conducted in two four-storey blocks. Facing these buildings is the college’s playground which is also a parking space for staff motorbikes. About 55 classes run concurrently, each class having about 40 or 45 students squeezed into a compact space. Once students are seated there is hardly any empty space. Space is also limited for teachers, with only about three offices for teachers to share. However, teachers spend most of their time in class anyway. From 6am to 10am students attend five 45 minute courses per day. Most teachers teach four classes per day, leaving only about one 45 minute non-teaching slot. Students stay in one room but teachers move around classes at the signal of the school bell. Although each class lasts 45 minutes, the actual teaching time is between 25 and 35 minutes as teachers take 5 to 10 minutes to move between classrooms. In winter, with shorter days, the class time is reduced to 35 minutes, leaving only about 20 to 25 minutes of actual teaching. The only break for teachers and students is 10 minutes after the first three classes. The college’s open playground becomes the gathering area for both staff and students. This is where most students seek out teachers to show their homework. There is no senior common room indoors to accommodate all staff. Thus during break, the open outdoor area is packed with teachers and students. Staff gather in small groups, catching up with each other and occasionally discussing serious matters.
When the last class finishes at 9:50am, both teachers and students leave the compound and college, which becomes a day-time nursery school. Another group of teachers and pre-school children occupy the classes and fill the school compound. Thus, there is no out-of-class time for student–teacher interaction. Teachers have another day-time school to go and teach at. Teachers and many others in Nepal commonly have two offices or two jobs in order to survive and support their family. Schools and offices in Nepal open six days a week with Saturday (not Sunday!) the only day off. Most teachers use their own motorbikes to commute from one school to another.

Physical proximity is an important feature of Class A, making it impossible for students to conceal information and not to see what other students write in their notebooks. The seating arrangement in Class A has three columns and each column has about six rows. Each row has a narrow bench and a narrow desk occupied by three students. Limited space and time allow for little group or pair work. The teacher conducts whole class activities rather than group work. When group work is used, the teacher views each column as one group rather than dividing it into smaller groups. However, with limited time and much to cover, the teacher normally rushes, and the group work is ended within about two or three minutes, before students have properly begun. The classroom with plenty of empty space and time, typical of a classroom often found in the ‘centre’, is far removed from the reality of Class A. This lack of space and time greatly affects what happens in Class A.

3 Research participants: Students and the Class A teacher

The teacher (Mr A) is a senior staff member at the college. He obtained a master’s degree in education from a university in Nepal. There are about 40 students (24 males and 16 females) in Class A. In terms of ethnicity, the majority are Hindus (about 40%) and Brahmans (about 30%). Students at the higher education level are considered to be proficient in English. However, there is a division in English proficiency between students who have studied at the English-medium private schools and those who have studied at Nepali-medium public schools. The medium of instruction in Class A is English with some use of Nepali. Students however use Nepali and local languages when communicating with each other outside the class hours.

Students in Class A, aged between 17 and 22, are in their first year of a three-year Bachelor degree programme majoring in Business Administration. English is taught as a compulsory subject in the first year and is also the medium of instruction in their other courses. Concerning their future plan, they would like to become a ‘good bank manager’, ‘a good manager for the country’, a ‘good job holder’ in a good organization, in a government sector, etc. Concerning their reasons for studying English, the view of English as a language of social mobility is a recurrent theme reflected in students’ responses given in the background questionnaire (e.g. ‘to improve knowledge, skill and personal status’, ‘to get opportunity’, ‘to be ensured for getting good job’, ‘having good knowledge in English is high status in society of Nepal’, ‘English has become a popular language nowadays in business, at college, in hospital, in organization everywhere’).
4 Data collection and analysis

The main data are field notes (about 36,000 words) taken during observations of Mr A’s class. Mr A was observed for a period of three weeks and the total number of classes observed was 15, in two of which the researcher was requested to teach the class (once in the second week and then at the end of the third week). After each observation, the handwritten notes taken while observing were immediately typed and elaborated with further details. In addition to classroom episodes, notes were also taken about interviews conducted with students, and about episodes during the researcher’s engagement with the wider context outside the classroom, such as informal talk with Mr A, other teachers, students, and locals.

To obtain a general profile of students in Class A, in the first week, students were provided with a background questionnaire which elicited information about their personal details such as age, ethnicity, future plans and reasons for studying English. To get students’ views of what happened in Class A, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher in English with selected students – four females (S1, S2, S3, S4) and five males (S5, S6, S7, S8, S9) – after two weeks of observation. During the interviews, students were invited to comment on the lessons, materials and activities in Class A. Issues arising from the background questionnaire, and field notes were also followed up. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher.

The various data types were read and analysed by the researcher. Major themes that emerged concerning ‘the way of life’ in Class A were triangulated and supported with data from ethnographic field notes and interviews. In qualitative ethnographic research, data analysis and data collection go side by side. For example, the reading and interpretation of the field notes was an ongoing process while collecting data. The detailed descriptions recorded and typed were repeatedly read while entering new field notes, i.e. transferring handwritten notes into a more elaborated electronic version. While the handwritten notes tried to capture the way of life in Class A in details as it unfolded, the typed electronic version enabled me to reflect on the way of life in Class A in a more interpretative way. Personal interpretations and comments were added when typing the handwritten notes after each observation and interview. These initial interpretations were summarized using broad categories or questions and guided further data collections, helping me to record similar issues in subsequent observations and follow them up in student interviews. Although there was a possibility of the initial themes interfering with subsequent data collection, during each observation I tried to capture what happened in details. This detailed recording of ‘what happens’ in each class led me to new themes as the field work continued.

Finally, using these themes that emerged through repeated reading and analysis, the ‘way of life’ in Class A is described under six categories:

1. The daily routines;
2. The prescribed textbooks;
3. What happens in Class A?
4. How does Mr A use the textbooks?
5. What is the role of class work vs. homework?; and
6. What is an English class?
While Category 1 portrays the daily context beyond the classroom walls, Category 2 describes the nature of the materials used in Class A. Categories 3 and 4 look more closely at what happens in Class A in terms of how those prescribed materials are used and what activities occur in accordance with contextual conditions. Category 5 takes us again beyond the classroom, trying to understand Class A’s reality with reference to what happens at home. Category 6 returns to the overall picture of Class A, raising questions and doubts concerning the nature of an English class with reference to what happens in Class A. Using these categories, the next section addresses the aim of the study, i.e. to describe and understand the reality of an English language classroom in Nepal and the local pedagogical strategies that have emerged in accordance with the social contextual conditions. To understand the way of life in Class A, the description at times needs to go beyond the classroom.

V Findings

1 The daily routines of the teacher and students

The teacher (Mr A) wakes up at about 4am to prepare for morning college which is from 6am to 10am. Immediately after this finishes he rides his motorbike to his daytime school elsewhere in Kathmandu, where he has a high senior position. After day school is over at about 5pm, he takes evening MPhil courses at a government university in Kathmandu from 5:30pm to 8pm. Finally he returns home at about 9pm. This is Mr A’s routine for 6 days a week and a typical routine for many teachers. Students also wake up at 4am and come to college either by small minibus or walking. Some students take about an hour to get to college. The parents of many students are uneducated farmers. Many have financial difficulties: ‘My mum is sick. I have to support my family’, ‘There is problem in our family, nobody has a job’, ‘We have economic difficulty to feed ourselves’ are some common stories from students regarding their family background. Students have household chores on returning home and some have day-time jobs after morning college.

Daily power cuts, each lasting seven hours, render the night time study hours of students and teachers unreliable. Power is on for about six hours daily, broken into two shifts varying from two to four hours each. The schedule of power cuts appears in local newspapers. As the time is rotated, the time power is on varies. It is impractical for teachers to prepare extra handouts or photocopy supplementary teaching materials as these would require extensive preparation and management of time, which they hardly have. When asked ‘how do you normally study at home?’, a student describes at length what happens after school:

It takes about one hour and fifteen minutes to go to my home after school. Then after 10, 15 minutes, the bus arrives. The bus has no fixed time. And at 11:30, 11:45am, I reach home. Then after that, I have hair dressing and hand wash. Then I have my meal. After having meal, I help my little sister’s daughter at home. I play with her and I do help for her in my home. I have some work at home also. I have to support my family as well. The day finishes and the night comes and if the light is there, I do my work, I do study. If the light is not there, then I study for some time but lighting the candle affects my eyes and so I don’t study longer in the candle light.
Then I sleep. Then at four o’clock, I wake up and get ready for college. At 4:45 am, I have to get the bus. I arrive at the college. (S1)

To sum up, the daily reality of both students and teacher in Class A is distant from the ‘ideal’ picture of teachers and students in resource-rich ‘centre’ contexts with plentiful opportunities and resources taken for granted such as ‘electricity’, ‘time’ and ‘extra-curriculum materials’. This daily reality is important to understand the way of life in Class A.

2 The prescribed textbooks: Activity-driven vs. content-driven textbooks

The ‘compulsory English’ course for first year students comprises two prescribed textbooks selected by the state:

1. *Reasons to write*: a global academic writing skills coursebook, focusing on a communicative process approach (Colonna & Gilbert, 2006);

The units in *Reasons to write* follow various themes. Each unit divides into five sections:

1. Fluency practice: Free writing;
2. Reading for writing;
3. Prewriting focus;
4. Structured writing focus;
5. Additional writing opportunities.

Each section includes many activities, with each activity requiring substantial class time. Writing, in the prescribed book, follows a process approach, taking students through various writing stages such as generating ideas, writing drafts, peer evaluation, editing and revising drafts. While *Reasons to write* is driven by tasks, *Flax-golden tales* is content driven. The book divides into 14 units. Each unit has several texts (stories and non-fiction). Each unit concludes with questions and activities related to the texts, encouraging student interaction with text at four levels:

1. literal comprehension;
2. interpretation;
3. critical thinking; and
4. assimilation.

The ‘compulsory English’ course reflects both schools of thought claimed to be prevalent in English courses in Nepal: the literature-based curriculum and the language-based, communicative curriculum. While *Flax-golden tales* uses literary texts to promote both language and literary appreciation, *Reasons to write* follows a communicative process approach, developing communicative competence. The two books also differ in terms of
language skills focus. While the focus of *Reasons to write* is on writing skills, *Flax-golden tales* is for reading skills. However, after one week of observations I write in my field notes: ‘So far I have observed writing class and reading class. But I have not seen any writing or reading in class. The actual act of writing and reading is assigned to students as homework.’ So, what actually happens in Class A? How does Mr A use the two prescribed textbooks? What is the role of ‘class work’ vs. ‘homework’ in Class A? What is an English class? What contextual particularities have led to such pedagogic practices?

3 What happens in Class A?: Utilizing class time when ‘time doesn’t favour us’

As one class follows another without a break, Mr A has to come to Class A immediately after his previous class in another building. It takes him about 5 or 10 minutes to arrive and during that time, students talk noisily together, often talking about the previous lesson. However, as soon as Mr A enters, the class becomes quiet without the teacher having to waste time controlling the noise. Mr A names a student from the register, saying ‘the honour of speech goes to [name of the student].’ The student stands in front of the class and delivers a speech in English on any topic of his or her choice for about three to five minutes without written notes. More confident students take it as a challenge, asking either the class or the teacher to nominate the topic. The popular topics relate to nation-building and moral responsibilities of youths such as ‘drug addicts’, ‘respect for the teacher’, ‘role of youths in developing the country’, ‘people leaving Nepal for abroad’, etc. Although Mr A listens to the speech and gives general comments, there is little interference with or feedback on the language of the speech.

The ‘free speech’ activity serves a dual function. On one hand, it gives students opportunity to practise speaking in front of their classmates. Students note its benefits such as gaining confidence to ‘stand in front of the mass even if the student doesn’t have much to say or can’t say any word’ (S1), making them ‘go and search’ ideas and words before the class, giving them ‘a chance to flesh out and search new words’ (S5). On the other hand, the activity gives Mr A some breathing space to plan his lesson for Class A. Often, during my observations of Class A, while the student is talking, Mr A is busy checking the textbook or writing on the white board issues that he will later refer to during the lesson.

After the speech, the teacher starts the lesson from the prescribed textbook. Content and teacher talk rather than activity and student talk fill that part of the textbook-related lesson, which lasts between 15 and 20 minutes. Class time involves teacher talk delivering as much content as possible. Not every student has or owns the prescribed textbook, which is quite expensive. There are no other resources such as cassette recorders or TV, and even if they existed regular long power cuts would have made them useless for much of the time. Thus teacher talk becomes an important source of reliable input for all students during class time. Students listen to the teacher speaking, often copying from the board into their notebook, which they later copy and elaborate at home in another notebook: ‘I pick up the main points teacher says in class in the rough notebook and copy it and write it longer in a separate notebook when I get back home. I show my notes weekly to the teacher’ (S6).
Listening to teacher talk and copying from the board and from what the teacher says are the main textbook activities. Mr A explains most of the textbook content and with such limited space and time this seems to be an economical, sensible pedagogy as reflected in students’ comments: ‘Sir provides the main points from the story. It is good. We listen. Then we like to know what is there in that point from the book. So we go home and study’ (S1). Students value the listening in class: ‘We just concentrate on what the teacher is saying. It means we are excited to learn English. If we don’t have desire, if we are not excited, we don’t have desire to listen to our teacher’ (S7). Questioned about other students in class, a student replies: ‘I concentrate on teacher. I am not looking at other students’ (S2).

Students also emphasize the importance of copying and remembering what the teacher says in class. The notes they jot down are later elaborated at home in a separate book. Through copying this process, students come to remember the content and the language:

I remember first of all, what I learn in the class, what the teacher explains about the text. I go to my home and try to remember it once again, twice, thrice, you know. I just want to remember what my teacher has taught us. Remembering it three times I can easily have the knowledge in my mind. I try to write in the rough copy and then if I forget any word, I try to memorize. If I can memorize, then I write. If I cannot remember, I try to write it myself in my own words. (S7)

Although the teacher asks questions related to the text in class, student responses are rare. The teacher answers most of his questions and rushes through the text before time is up, often saying ‘time doesn’t favour us’ and ‘due to [lack of] time’. Lack of responses from students, however, does not indicate passivity or lack of motivation but reflects paucity of information or time constraints. Many students lack time to read the text in advance and many have no copy to refer to in class. However, students are unstoppable when giving a free speech at the beginning of the class or when the task relates to information outside the text, such as talking about family members or personal interests.

At the end of each lesson, Mr A normally assigns homework, asking students to read the text, or to do the writing or the remaining tasks in the textbook at home. However, Mr A rarely has time to follow up on homework tasks in the next lesson. Students cannot do the homework in time before the next class due to ‘some other work at home’ and ‘the electricity’, although they will do it eventually when they have time. Many do it proudly: ‘if the teacher provides us the homework, I will do it very easily and very proudly’ (S3).

Sometimes, at the end of the class, there are a few ‘left-over’ minutes (3 or 5 minutes), which are too few to attempt the next text or task in the textbook. Such time is aptly used by Mr A, telling a joke in English to the class before the bell rings. On Friday, the last day of the teaching week, Mr A uses the last 10 or 15 minutes of class for special student-led entertaining activities. Students can use either Nepali or English here. They eagerly perform various activities. For example, one Friday a student sang a song which he had written in Nepali at home, followed by a brief translation of the song into English. Another student told a joke in English, while another read out a love poem in Nepali. Such activities are valued by students as ‘refreshing and unburdening their burdened mind after a long week of study’ (S7), ‘motivating and making the mind ready for
learning again’ (S4), and ‘empowering even those students who are poor in English, to express their idea and entertainment power’ (S3) as the teacher allows both English and Nepali.

The Nepalese teaching culture is often criticized for heavily relying on ‘an oral tradition, lectures, seminars, and discussion as the main, or only, means of knowledge transmission’ (Rennie & Mason, 2007, p. 7). However, Mr A’s method of teaching is not ‘simple transmission of superior knowledge but utilizes considerable interaction in a mutually accepting social context’ (Watkins, 2007, p. 310). Mr A uses his limited class time efficiently, maximizing learning opportunities, sandwiching his teacher talk within student talk, varying textbook and non-textbook content, rationing teacher-led instruction and student-led activities. Student talk gives students confidence in speaking and allows the teacher some breathing space and time for the main lesson. While teacher talk mostly delivers content from the prescribed text, student talk mostly involves content outside the text, generated by students themselves.

Students in Nepal are often criticized for demonstrating learning styles ‘conditioned to perpetuate the role of passive learners rather than critical thinkers seeking to apply their acquired knowledge in new ways’ with a heavy reliance on the teacher or ‘the content knowledge of the expert’ (Rennie & Mason, 2007, p. 4). However, Class A students participate in various legitimate ways: listening attentively, taking notes, copying, elaborating and re-copying at home, and remembering the teacher’s talk and the notes. The copying, repetition and memorization by students can be described as what Watkins (2007, p. 309) calls ‘repetitive learning, i.e. learning in order to enhance future recall alongside understanding’ and differs from ‘mechanical rote learning’, i.e. memorizing without thought or understanding.

4 How does Mr A use the two prescribed textbooks?: Utilizing teacher talk and the white board

a Flax-golden tales: The reading class without the text to read. With time I understand why I see so little reading in the reading class. In my field notes I write: ‘I can imagine what it must be like to teach a reading text when more than half of the class don’t have the reading text.’ In this situation, one might suggest the teacher insists on students bringing a copy of the textbook or gives out photocopies of reading materials to students. However, this is like saying to the starving: ‘Why don’t they eat cakes if they have no bread.’ It is impossible to do otherwise than conduct the reading class while most students lack reading texts.

In the story class (Flax-golden tales), Mr A manages time efficiently, utilizing content-rich teacher talk. Every story covers two sessions. In the first, instead of having students read the story or initiating responses from students about the story, the teacher tells it from the text. He first writes up only the names of main characters (while a student is speaking to the class), then tells the main events in the story in English, emphasizing interesting events. Students listen attentively. The teacher does not refer to specific pages of the text or ask students to read it as many do not have the book. Students sometimes request explanation in Nepali, and the teacher summarizes the gist of the story in Nepali after explaining it in English.
The next day the teacher summarizes the story in English, repeating the main events. This time he uses the whiteboard more, writing up the gist and main events, which students copy in their note book. This retelling introduces an analysis of the story: its theme and moral lesson. Thus, Mr A repeats the story in different modes: orally in the first session and then through a mixture of oral and written modes in the second session. Since students are exposed repeatedly to key phrases during the retellings, they remember both the story and the key phrases by the end of the second session. Students frequently use those phrases when commenting about the lesson, elaborating what they learn from it in English. Students further elaborate their notes in their home exercise books. The sneak preview of main events encourages students, who ‘sometimes couldn’t study and normally didn’t read the story before the lesson’ (S1), to read the story, using either their own text or a library copy to explore more detail.

Sometimes Mr A asks students who have the book to read paragraphs aloud, or he refers students to specific pages when summarizing and analysing the story. Such specific textbook references relinquish the attention of most students without books as they cannot hear or understand what their classmates read aloud. This reaction differs from when Mr A tells the story without referring to specific pages, and without asking students to read the text. In such cases, students are absorbed in listening.

Thus, Mr A turns the reading into a story telling class, leaving students to do the actual reading at home. Although this does not guarantee that all students will read the text at home, some interested students do read it after listening to the teacher. This method also guarantees that all students, including those without books, have equal learning opportunities in class, i.e. listening to the story being told. Valencia Giraldo (2008, pp. 270–271) notes that in EFL contexts,

> the ‘EFL textbook’ is often relied upon to guide classroom-based interactional activities … However, in developing contexts, textbooks may not be readily available to learners who lack economic resources, so teachers rely on alternative ‘texts’.

In this context, Mr A’s alternative ‘text’ is his own talk organized around the textbook content, arousing student interest in the story and motivating them to discover more by reading it outside the class. How Mr A uses the reading text may differ from the dominant thinking of teaching EFL/ESL reading where substantial class time is spent on pre-, while- and post-reading. Although in Class A most class time is spent on the teacher retelling the text, this practice is not simply the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student. The teacher’s retelling the text in various modes (oral and written) is a legitimate peripheral practice, encouraging students to listen, take notes, remember main events and key phrases, igniting their interest in the text and encouraging further reading and elaboration of ideas outside the class.

**b Reasons to write:** *The writing class without the writing task in class.* While *Flax-golden tales* has rich content for Mr A’s retelling, *Reasons to write* is an activity-driven, process approach. However, with such limited time and space where classes seem to end shortly after they have begun, Mr A cannot adequately enact a full cycle of pre-, while-, and post-writing activities. He cannot spend much time organizing class activities either. The
time available mostly involves the teacher explaining and telling the content of the lesson, rushing through various textbook activities, and leaving many for student homework. Although occasionally Mr A assigns group work, time is hardly sufficient for students to produce discussion before he has to end the class. The field notes often doubt the appropriateness of a process approach to teaching writing: ‘It makes one wonder whether process writing is feasible in such a class which has only about 20 minutes of actual teaching time?’

Free writing is one task used by Mr A and welcomed by many students. Like free speech, free writing serves a dual purpose. It not only allows students to express their ideas freely but is also a coping strategy for Mr A to deal with unexpected situations. Very often, Mr A is required to take an impromptu relieving class when another teacher is absent. At other times, Mr A has to leave Class A early due to other administrative duties such as meetings or exam-related matters. In such cases, Mr A assigns the class a topic, asking students to do free writing on it.

The popularity of free speech and free writing in Mr A’s class also seems to fit with the politics of new democratic Nepal, where freedom of speech is increasingly popular. Daily newspapers contain news about political parties, openly criticizing the country’s political situations, water problems, electricity problems, gender discrimination, human rights, etc. In this context, opportunities for students to express themselves freely about any issue are very popular among students. One student eloquently describes it as follows:

The teacher provides us the freedom to write anything ourselves and I like it. We can write our thinking … The teacher provides the great opportunity to provide the speech on the opinion and that is the best idea for improving students to be good in English. So we are so impressed by the teacher. He provides a great opportunity …. Freedom is human right. By the help of the freedom the people can develop their power. They have no obstacle in the way of the future. So freedom is most important. (S3)

Many students, in the interview and background questionnaire data, express the role of youths in nation-building and development, linking learning of English to nation-building: ‘I carry the burden of my country on my shoulders’ (S7), ‘our country faces many problems and I want to create a new idea and make a good, peaceful country’ (S5). Although politics and nation-building may be boring topics for students in other contexts, they are popular among Nepalese teenagers and students at tertiary level. This popularity of political topics was also observed during the researcher’s informal dinner with a group of local teachers who heartily engaged in political issues as small talk and claimed that politics was a popular discussion topic for their students.

Although the abundance of activities in the prescribed textbook for writing and its emphasis on ‘process approach to writing’ could not be fully utilized in Class A, Mr A has employed some elements of the process approach such as ‘free writing’ to ‘facilitate a convenient coexistence’ (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 248) with the contextual reality of Class A. Similarly, rather than seeing the free writing task as fluency practice or a pre-writing task to help with brainstorming and generating ideas, students seem to have reinterpreted the task as part of their democratic right and a way to express their thoughts freely.
What is the role of class work vs. homework?: Home is where the heart of learning is

The field notes often feature questions regarding established practices to do with homework vs. class work: ‘Do we need to challenge our assumptions of “class work” and “homework”, in particular, the assumption that we are supposed to spend the major tasks – i.e. actual writing and actual reading in this instance – in the class?’ This subjective reaction also appears in the teacher’s and students’ words during both class and interviews. Mr A often tells his class ‘time doesn’t favour us’, ‘due to [lack of] time’. Students also comment on shortage of class time, saying that it is not the teacher’s responsibility to explain the text ‘line by line’ in class as ‘students should study the text themselves line by line’ and ‘the course will not complete’ (S6). Students express their own responsibility for reading and writing at home. Home is part of the class and plays an important role for students. Students often attribute their interest in English to their ‘home’ environment rather than to the ‘school’ and ‘class’ environment. For example, when asked what will increase her interest in English, a student replies ‘there need to be best environment in the home to speak English’ (S3).

As my observation continues, I often write: ‘Classes are like starters here. Home is where the heart of learning is.’ Mr A is sometimes late and has to leave early to attend to various administrative duties, shortening the already short class time. As teachers have to teach during most of their working hours, when administrative duties occur class hours must be sacrificed. Consequently, many strategies have developed among some students. They seek learning opportunities elsewhere in their ‘home’ environment and community. One student (S7) eloquently describes various opportunities and activities he initiates at home to improve his English as follows:

I usually look at the dictionary, actually I don’t have a dictionary but I borrow from my friends and I look at the dictionary. If I get any difficult words, I take the help of the dictionary and I also have my teachers and my guiders in my locality and they also help me to make my English good. You can see many difficult words in Reasons to write in the book. There are so many strong English words. I just try to use them in my writing that my teacher gives me. I include those words as well so that the memory of those words will be kept in my mind and I will never forget it. If there is any mistake that I write, you know I try to read it once again. If I get any mistake there I correct it. My sister encourages me to write about something. She often gives me some topics to write and I write. I write whatever I know. I write and she checks and she reads and if it is good she congratulates me. If it’s not good she suggests to me to make it good. Whatever experience I have in the classroom and in this college, I express it in front of my parents when we are having dinner. I usually tell the joke (the teacher tells us in class) when we are having dinner as well and they laugh. They congratulate me.

Similar experiences are reported by other students who seek opportunities to learn English at home: ‘I try to speak English with my brother’ (S8), ‘I study one, two meaning in one day. I try to remember this and if I hear new words, then I search in the dictionary
and in my free time, I will search internet, reading English newspapers, articles and search words, articles and quotations’ (S5).

Thus, students in Class A, far from being ‘passive’, complement class work with continued participation at home. They are ‘attentive listeners’ during the teacher talk in class and ‘active seekers’ of knowledge outside the class, in their community and at home, remembering and elaborating what they learn in class at home and putting their learning to various uses. Their ‘reliance’ on the teacher’s talk and content knowledge in class is not a form of ‘passivity’ but a form of attentiveness, concentration and demonstration of excitement for learning. Through this ‘reliance’ on teacher talk, students build solid foundations for learning continuity at home.

6 What is an English class?: ‘Relevant doubts and questions’

Canagarajah (2005, p. 19) notes the importance of an ‘ongoing conversation with local knowledge’ and that ‘the local will always have a questioning effect on established paradigms’. In my field notes and observations of local practices in Class A, ‘relevant doubts’ and ‘questions’ of established paradigms form recurrent themes. One question raised in my field notes concerns the nature of ‘English’ class itself. I write: ‘What do they mean by “compulsory English”? What is an English lesson?’ I started out assuming that ‘language content’ would be the prioritized ‘real content’ of the class with topics and texts serving as ‘carrier content’. However, in Class A, ‘content’ rather than ‘language’ is central to both teacher and student talk. Mr A uses the English lesson for promoting ideological and moral values, highlighting moral lessons of various texts from the prescribed textbook, such as ‘animal rights’ (in a story about a dog’s strange hobby), ‘ecology’ (in a story about a time travelling machine), ‘poverty’ (in a text about family love). Students centre their own speeches around topics of significance for Nepalese youths and teenagers. Students also emphasize non-linguistic content in addition to linguistic gains when commenting on the textbooks:

In this subject [story book] we need to understand what is in this topic and the moral education attached in this. (S5)

I like Flax-golden tales because there is story and interesting things. We can learn various moral lessons from this. (S9)

The textbook Reasons to write is for writing skill only. But there is no content. There is nothing more than that, only writing skill and vocabulary capacity. I like literature book (Flax-golden tales) because there is story, poem and other famous person. (S1)

Referring to teaching English in difficult circumstances, Maley (2001) proposes that ‘What is more likely to be workable are locally focused efforts of a more broadly educational, rather than narrowly linguistic, nature.’ The teacher and students in Class A seem more occupied with ‘the whole educational experience rather than a narrow, ELT approach’ (Maley, 2001), focusing on important, locally focused content and linking learning of English and ‘English class’ to nation-building and practicing of democratic rights.
VI Conclusions

This study aims to understand the reality of an English language classroom at a public college in Nepal and the local pedagogical strategies and practices that have emerged in accordance with the contextual realities. Understanding what happens in Class A often requires going beyond the classroom. The daily reality of students and teacher and the contextual reality of Class A are far removed from the ‘ideal’ context, which often forms the basis of many ‘centre’ approaches. There is a shortage of time inside the class where lessons seem to be over soon after they have started. There is a lack of resources such as print materials, preparation time, electricity and ‘space’. The daily routines of both teacher and students in Class A are packed with other commitments such as family responsibilities and some other ‘jobs’ at home or at the other office. In accordance with these realities, several legitimate pedagogic practices have emerged, facilitating a coexistence of the old and the new, the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’.

Inside Class A, there is little space for ‘group work’, ‘pair work’, or teacher feedback on student language and homework. However, I witness various forms of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which have emerged to match the contextual reality. The teacher uses limited class time and space effectively, creating opportunities for a convenient coexistence of teacher talk and student talk. While teacher talk is directed at delivering textbook content within the available time, student talk is directed at non-textbook content, communicating ideas and topics initiated by students, serving a dual function for increasing student confidence while giving the teacher some breathing space to prepare the lesson.

Despite lack of student responses to the teacher’s questions during the textbook-oriented talk due to paucity of time and resources, students are definitely not ‘passive’, listening attentively to the teacher, taking notes, copying, re-copying, elaborating notes at home, memorizing what they learn and putting it to various uses. Their ‘reliance’ on the teacher talk is not a sign of ‘passivity’ but a form of ‘concentration’ and ‘excitement’ for learning. The teacher talk which ‘dominates’ where the textbook is concerned is not a simple transfer of knowledge. It serves as a reliable, economical, effective source of input, equally available for students in class, igniting students’ various continued learning activities at home after the class is over. Teacher talk is remembered, elaborated by students at home and shared with others. It encourages many students to read the text and study it in greater detail at home. Teacher talk acts as a solid foundation upon which further learning opportunities are built elsewhere after the class is over. There is a complementary coexistence of class and home work. Students continue to seek learning opportunities in their home environment, using family members, siblings and other guides in their community and demonstrating autonomy “in forms which “we” do not easily recognize” (Holliday, 2005, p. 87).

The centrally controlled prescribed textbooks also show a coexistence of old and new, i.e. the old, previous way of literature-based teaching and the new language-based, communicative curriculum. The reading textbook (Flax-golden tales) is turned into a story telling session led by the teacher, leaving the actual reading for students as homework. The free writing task, which is an element of the process approach to writing featured in the communicative-oriented, process writing book is selectively used by the teacher to
create a convenient coexistence with the contextual reality, whereas students interpret it as a way of exercising their ‘democratic rights’ to express ideas freely rather than as a fluency practice or a pre-writing task to help generate ideas.

Canagarajah (2002, p. 248) proposes that the local is not pure but ‘a relational and fluid construct’ which has been going through ‘many locally initiated and globally enforced changes’. ELT practices in local peripheral contexts represent ‘a fascinating mix of the center and periphery, the new and the old’ (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 248). This can be seen in the ‘way of life’ in Class A where elements of established global practices have been taken over selectively by students and teacher to ‘facilitate a convenient coexistence’ (Canagarajah, 2002: 248) with local, contextual conditions.

Instead of viewing peripheral practices negatively as illegitimate, we need to reconstruct them from the ground up by locating them in their context and by understanding the local meaning and functions they may serve. In language teacher education programmes, more space should be provided for articulating and reconstructing local, peripheral voices and practices. A recurrent theme among many discussions of ELT in Nepal (e.g. Giri, 2010) concerns what Holliday (2005) calls ‘improvement’ or ‘correction’ of teaching and learning practices. However, until we know what really happens between people inside and outside the classroom, curriculum innovation and improvement cannot succeed. Instead of rendering the teaching and learning situation in Nepal as ‘ineffective, traditional, teacher-centred’ (e.g. Regmi & Regmi, 2008), it is important to understand the local reality and the various forms of legitimate peripheral participation which have emerged to match the contextual particularities.

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Notes

1. The researcher is a Burmese and does not speak Nepali. Thus conversations with various participants and locals were conducted in English.
2. There are three types of colleges in Nepal: government, public and private. The private college is the most expensive, targeting the elite group, and offering attractive subjects and degrees such as engineering and science. The public college is cheaper than the private school but slightly more expensive than the government school, aiming mainly at lower middle class.
3. Although I intended to interview the teacher (Mr A) formally, I soon realized the various sacrifices he would have to make to allow this to happen. After two weeks of observation, as a pre-interview social encounter I invited Mr A for lunch, and I witnessed a significant juggling of his busy schedule to ‘honour’ my invitation. I then decided not to impose more formal interview time on Mr A who was at a very busy period of the year. However, I was able to talk
with him informally often before, after and during the lesson, and such informal conversation
was fed into the portrayal of ‘what happens in Class A’.
4. This process approach in the prescribed book is not really what happens in Class A as
explained in the later part of the findings.

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