Collaborative Practices of English Teachers for Improving their Classroom Pedagogy

Abstract: This study aims to explore secondary level English teachers’ collaborative practices and their perceptions on it. It was carried out within the theoretical framework of social constructivism. I employed phenomenological approach, and qualitative research design as a research method. Three secondary level English teachers teaching at three community schools of Butwal Sub-Metropolitan city in Rupandehi district, Nepal were purposively selected as research participants. Out of three participants, two were males and one was female who had been practicing collaborative teaching in their classrooms for more than four years. The research participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview technique to collect relevant information for the purpose. The study reveals that English teachers have positive views towards collaborative practices and undertaking different collaborative activities such as sharing lessons, exchanging answer sheets, team teaching and so on for improving their classroom pedagogy and professional development. The findings also expose the benefits that English teachers have from collaborative practices, and the challenges they have faced while adopting these practices inside the classroom and the beyond.

Keywords: collaboration, collaborative practices, professional development, classroom pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

In the past, teaching was considered as an occupation pursued largely in isolation from one’s colleagues. In this context, Freeman (1998) described it as an ‘egg-box profession’ in which each of us is carefully kept separate from our fellow teachers. Collaborative practice both within or beyond the classroom is a crucial component to overcome this isolation. The practical effects of collaborative work have been effective in teaching and learning environment.

Collaborative practices, in English language teaching, are the activities undertaken by the teachers in small groups with the inclusion of fellow teachers, students, researchers, teacher educators, supervisors or parents, and so on to help them improve their own professional development and learning in their classroom. These activities include co-teaching, planning lessons jointly, peer observation, exchanging examination papers, examining answer sheet together and so on. Edge (1992) states “self-development needs other people… by cooperating with others; we can come to understand better our own experiences and opinions”. Thus, teachers can only learn professionally in sustained and meaningful ways when they are able to do something together.

Collaboration among English teachers is one of the effective strategies in English language teaching. While working collaboratively teachers have the opportunity to assess and differentiate instruction for students more readily. Teacher collaboration positively influences the teacher professional development and classroom pedagogy. Regarding this, Puchner and Taylor (2006) state collaborative practices among teachers assist them to improve self-efficacy, teaching effectiveness and expertise, and improvement of instructional quality.

Moreover, they can learn new instructional techniques from one another to expand their teaching repertoire. Collaborative activities also provide mutual support and assistance for planning and implementing lessons, assessing students’ progress, sharing professional concerns, and addressing students’ learning needs. Most importantly, collaborative work in teaching allows more opportunities for teachers for improving their classroom pedagogy and on the part of students, it helps them understand the content clearly and maximize individual learning potential.

Teacher collaboration helps teachers reflect on their teaching practices, and evaluate their activities, and reinforce their actions and behaviors in the classroom (Reeves, Pun & Chung, 2017). In the same context, the empirical study carried out by Svendsen (2016) in three schools in Norway over a single year, showed that through collaboration...
practices, teachers were able to adopt a new teaching form called ‘inquiry-based science teaching.’ which in turn allowed teachers to gain confidence, think critically and reflect about their teaching practices. In the same line, Schwab (2017) increase the feelings of worth, renewal, partnership, and creativity (Gately & Gately, 2001, p.40). Collaborative practice is taken as an effective strategy for teacher professional development (Luo, 2014). As Nunan (1992) claims, teachers collaborate for a number of reasons such as wishing to experiment with alternative ways of organizing teaching, to promote a philosophy of cooperation rather than competition, to create an environment in which they teach and learn from each other.

Even though collaborative practices are essential in the field of English language teaching and learning, there are various problems and challenges for employing collaborative practices inside and outside the classroom. The most frequently mentioned problem is lack of sufficient common preparation and planning time (Carless, 2006; and Park, 2014). In this context, Wilson (2016) states that colleagues do not have enough time to appropriately and effectively pre-plan every aspect of their lessons. Moreover, difficulties arise due to the lack of administrative support (Friend, 2008). In the same vein, York-Barr, Ghere, and Sommerness (2007) report some challenges such as decreased flexibility and creativity, confusion about how to share instructional time and how to share responsibilities, loss of instructional and decision-making autonomy.

Likewise, Benoit and Haugh (2001) state teachers are ‘solitary creatures’ who are not willing to share the limelight or refuse to ‘be observed’ by a colleague. Nunan (1992) claims that three conditions are essential for collaborative teaching to be successful. First, teachers should possess and be supported to develop appropriate skills. Second, they should have time to plan their programs and opportunities to review their teaching. Third, they should receive appropriate administrative or managerial support with the pedagogical innovation.

Similarly, Jeon (2010) discusses four elements of successful collaboration: common goal, shared beliefs, harmonious interaction, and cooperative process. Sharing similar teaching philosophies or beliefs may help to have a smooth and effective collaboration. Moreover, teachers who participate in collaborative activities need to foster their social interaction like conflict management and creative problem solving. That is to say, cooperative process, which involves such elements as co-planned lessons, mutual problem solving, shared classroom responsibilities, equal work distribution, is an important factor in promoting collaboration.

Several researches have been carried out regarding collaborative and cooperative learning to investigate the activities adopted by students. Those

Collaborative practice is highly developed and inclusive joint work where teachers discuss in a small group, share ideas, and combine their expertise with other individuals to develop their teaching and learning repertoire. During the past decades, collaboration in the arena of ELT has gained increasing attention from both the research and the practice fields. In this regard, Nayan, Shafie, Mansor, Maesin, and Osman (2010) state that collaborative practice is inevitable in teaching and learning process as it enables students to be actively involved in the process of learning. They can better understand certain concepts or retain knowledge in their long-term memory. According to Brown (2004) learning experience can be enhanced when there is collaboration among learners. As mentioned by Williamson and Blackburn (2013), there are five strategies of collaborative practices: book studies, looking at student work, learning walks, lesson studies, and developing consistent expectations. These activities offer new ways for staff members to work collaboratively and gain the knowledge and skills necessary to positively impact student learning.

In the similar vein, Brown (2008) opines that if students are engaged in collaborative activities, they promote their linguistic ability, problem solving skills, and learning motivation. To talk about how collaborative practice plays role on the part of students, Wentzel and Wakins (2002) mention students can carry out more positive learning outcomes while the teachers use collaborative language teaching strategy. In collaborative teaching and learning environment teachers are more flexible are cooperative. They give open platform to the students to interact with them and their peers. In the same context, Bernaus and Gardner (2008) claim that the more controlling the teacher seem to the students, the less autonomy they feel.

In addition to students, successful collaborative practice also plays a vital role on the part of teachers. A mentioned by Mandel and Eisarman (2016), collaborative practice promotes teacher growth by creating an opportunity for teachers to learn from another professional on a regular basis. The collaborative practice provides teachers with a partner to help them in the process of setting goals, making plans, delivering lessons and evaluating the outcomes. It also provides them with a person whom they can gain inspiration from and who can offer constructive feedback on their teaching (Benoit & Haugh, 2001). Teachers participating in collaborative practices...
researches mainly explored student collaboration employing quantitative research design. However, there is still little research that investigates collaborative practices undertaken by English teachers. As teacher collaboration holds a vital role in improving professional development, classroom pedagogy and self-efficacy of teachers, it is worthy to explore the collaborative practices of English teachers in the context of community schools in Nepal. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore collaborative practices undertaken by English teachers and their perceptions on it. In order to achieve the purpose, I sought to answer the following questions from my participants.

a. What is the understanding of English teachers about collaborative teaching?
b. In what ways do they engage in collaboration?

In English teaching and learning process, a teacher voluntarily collaborates with others involved in the teaching process in which teacher development is a prime purpose. While talking who collaborates with whom, the teacher is obviously at the centre. As mentioned by Johnston (2003, as cited in Burns & Richards, 2009) there are four forms of collaboration. 

**Teacher - teacher collaboration**
Teachers can collaborate with their fellow teachers or other language teachers who are peers. Collaborations among language teachers may well focus on instructional issues such as materials exploitation, classroom management, classroom language use, and so on. This collaboration may point them to common concerns and interests.

**Teacher - researcher collaboration**
This collaboration is between teachers and university researchers. Researchers are expected to have access to greater resources and to have a bigger interest in the horization. As researchers are theoretically and methodologically strong, they are in need for the teachers to be collaborated. Collaborating with them, teachers can get practical and theoretical knowledge for their professional development.

**Teacher - student collaboration**
Teachers can collaborate with their students. This collaboration fascinates possibilities of learning in depth inside the classroom. This collaboration empowers both the teachers and learners for learning. Teachers become familiar with the desires of the students that help them to mold their lesson plans and teaching strategies.

**Teacher - other collaboration**
Teachers can collaborate with others involved in teaching and learning – administrators, supervisors, parents, material developers, and so on. Collaborating with others, teachers can better understand their teaching context. In this line, Winston and Soltman (2002) state that they work with the families of the international students in order to understand their teaching context better. Thus, it clarifies that involvement of other people in English language teaching can assist teachers for their professional development.

As a theoretical basis for my study, I adopted sociocultural constructivism theory developed by Vygotsky in 1978. Vygotsky (1978) in the theory stated that learning often occurs in social and cultural contexts by sharing of multiple perspectives through interaction with peers and teachers. He further viewed learning as a profoundly social process, and emphasized the importance of the learner-instructor and learner-learner dialogue in order to help the learner progress through their zone of proximal development. This theory claims that dialogue with others is more important than just exposing the learner to new material through provision of resources or lectures. It also believes that learners learn in a better and effective way if there is peer support in their learning process (Keshavarz, Shahrokhi, & Nejad, 2014; Li, 2009). Based on this theory, Woolfolk (1998) states language learners develop their language proficiency when they collaborate and interact with more advanced learners. As my participants are also engaged in collaborative activities for their professional development and for improving classroom pedagogy, Vygotsky’s sociocultural constructivism is apt as a theoretical basis for my study.

**METHODS**
Since this study focused on the lived experiences of English teachers about the collaborative practices, I grounding upon the phenomenological research approach, adopted a qualitative research design. For the selection of research participants, first I piloted my interview questions on six secondary level English teachers in Rupandehi district, Nepal, and purposively selected three of them for my research because they had been practicing collaborative activities in their classrooms and beyond for more than four years, and they also agreed to share their lived experiences regarding collaborative activities in their classrooms and beyond for more than four years, and they also agreed to share their lived experiences. I selected them from three community schools (one teacher from each school) of Butwal Sub-Metropolitan city of Rupandehi district, Province- 5, Nepal. Their teaching experiences ranged from ten to fifteen years. A conversational interview was used as a research technique to elicit the data for the study. The data collected from face-to-face individual interviews were coded and categorized under themes. I appreciated the responses during the study to ensure confidentiality, and transcribed and analyzed descriptively as the nature of the study was qualitative.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**
On the basis of the information collected from the participants, I have drawn some findings or themes of the study. The findings of the qualitative analysis are reported in three themes: English language teachers’ perception toward collaborative practices, benefits of collaborative practices and challenges of collaborative practices.

Perception on Collaborative Practices

Perceptions and beliefs have tremendous effects on the process of teaching and learning. It is necessary to have better insights into teachers’ beliefs because they have clearly been seen as one of the crucial factors that affect teachers and their teaching activities (Thu, 2009).

Regarding collaborative practices, all three participants showed positive attitudes. In response to the question ‘What is your view towards collaborative practices?’ Participant 1 (names are not used for their privacy) opined:

Collaborative practice among teachers is very important activity in teaching and learning field. In teacher collaboration, we work together, share the same purpose, share a class and learn from each other. By collaborating, we can get lots of information, see our deficiencies and improve ourselves.

This expression clearly indicates that the EFL teachers have belief on collaborative practice and they perceive it in a positive way. This expression is in line of Johnson and Johnson’s social interdependence theory which believes that learners learn best in cooperation rather than competition.

Similarly, while answering the same question, Participant 2 stated:

Collaborative practice is not only beneficial on the part of learners, but also on the part of teachers as it helps teachers for their professional development. While collaborating with each other, we get more ideas about planning the lesson, designing task, delivering instruction into the class and assessing the performance. Such practice makes the teachers more active and responsible for their profession.

This response clarifies that collaborative practice is an integral part in English language teaching. In collaboration the teachers share their knowledge, pinpoint areas to be improved and take action accordingly in the context of the lesson.

Regarding the same question, Participant 3 opined:

To work together is a great fun. When I share my problems and weaknesses with other people in the peer, I feel that I am getting help from them. Because of collaborative practices such as co teaching, peer work, exchanging examination question paper and teaching materials enhance teachers in their professional development too. I am now sharing my problems without any hesitation in the group. I feel much better when my co-teacher is with me in the class.

This expression indicates that collaborative practices create fun to teach and learn. Teachers become more open to share their ideas and materials. They find the presence of the peer and co-teacher in the classroom supportive.

Thus, all three participants gave much more focus on collaborative practices. They believed that when they learned in collaboration sharing the lessons, materials and ideas, they improved their professional development and classroom pedagogy. Also, in Puchner and Taylor (2006) stated that teacher collaboration, such as team teaching helps teachers improve their teaching effectiveness, expertise, and instructional quality. The literature discussed above in this study also depicts that collaboration among English teachers is very crucial for developing their self-efficacy, critical thinking and changing classroom teaching strategies.

Activities Undertaken for Collaborative Practice

There are several collaborative practices in teaching English as a second or foreign language. Co-teaching, peer work, group work, working together for planning and designing lesson, assessment are some of the practices adopted by teachers. In this line, Williamson and Blackburn (2013) mentioned five collaborative activities to gain knowledge and skills necessary to positively impact student learning and their own successful professional development. These activities include: book studies, looking at student work, learning walks, lesson studies, and developing consistent expectations.

While the participants were asked the question ‘In what way are you undertaking collaborative practices?’ they gave different opinions. They were adopting different collaborative activities inside the classroom and the beyond.

Regarding the question, Participant 1 opined:

I mostly collaborate with my fellow teachers for sharing the lesson plan. I sit with him or her together to set the objectives of the lesson. I sometimes collaborate with the supervisor and research scholars too. When I am asked to set a question paper for the examination, I always collaborate with the other teachers and do accordingly. I also assess the answer sheets in collaboration.

The expression of Participant1 revealed that he adopts the activities like sharing plans, examining answer sheets, setting goals of the lesson in collaboration.

While responding the same question, Participant 2 quoted:

I sometimes undertake team teaching. Once, I requested an M Phil scholar of ELE to collaborate with me in team teaching. She agreed, and we planned the lesson
together. The lesson was ‘The Lamentation of the old Pensioner’ of class twelve. When we collaboratively presented the lesson, the teaching became really effective. I also got some new ideas about making plans and designing the task for teaching and learning.

He further reported, "Next day, I asked my students to write a summary of lesson working in collaboration. I assessed their answers sharing with my fellow teachers, and found that they were doing better than before." The expression revealed that the students prefer working with peers to learn and share the task. They feel more comfortable and free from anxiety while collaborating with one another.

Hence, his expression clearly showed that he used different activities of collaboration in his teaching and learning field. Some of his activities included team teaching, exchanging answer papers, collaborating with research scholars and student and student collaboration. The views also depicted that teacher-teacher collaboration is essential for teacher professional development and for enhancing learners' performance. In student-student collaboration, students feel supportive, and free from worries and mental tension of not being able to find the solution to the problems.

Similarly, Participant 3 regarding the question above quoted:
I am undertaking collaborative practices mostly with the students inside the classroom. Besides this, I sometimes ask senior and more experienced teachers to share the lesson, ways of teaching, designing task and evaluating students’ performance.

Thus, the above responses of the three participants revealed that they were practicing collaborative activities inside or outside the classroom for improving their own classroom pedagogy and professional development. Besides, the views showed that the collaborative activities helped their students develop their proficiency and performance in the task. It equally assisted students to be active, cooperative and motivated in learning.

Benefits of Collaborative Practices
There are many benefits of collaborative practice. It not only helps the students in their better and long lasting learning, but also on the part of teachers for their professional development. In this context, Mandel and Eisarman (2016) stated that professional growth of instructors is promoted by being a part of collaboration, sometimes showing itself as adding to each other’s knowledge about technology by making them aware of that tool, or sometimes as grasping the opportunity to incorporate something new into your instruction.

When the participants were asked the question ‘Do you perceive any benefits of collaborative practices?’ they to some extent had the same opinions. Regarding the question, Participant 1 explained:

Collaboration is a wonderful activity. Teachers have the opportunity to assess and differentiate instruction for students more readily and they can learn new instructional techniques from one another to expand their teaching repertoire. This practice also provides mutual support and assistance for planning and implementing lessons, assessing students’ progress, sharing professional concerns, and addressing students’ learning needs.

His expression revealed the benefits of collaborative practices. By collaborating with others, teachers can learn new teaching techniques as well as get mutual support and help from the peers for planning, designing lessons and sharing professional concerns.

While the question was asked to Participant 2, he stated:
Collaborative practices have also some benefits for teachers such as reducing their workload, learning from their colleagues, and designing better lessons.

Below is an example of how Participant 2 was benefited from collaboration:
I am not very good at using technology. And one of my fellow teachers is really good at using technology in teaching English. When I was collaborating with him in an English class, I had an opportunity to learn how to download, what and how. The lesson was vocabulary teaching. The students felt like playing a game, not like an English course for them.

The responses of Participant 2 showed that while collaborating with fellow teacher, he knew how to use technology in classroom for their pedagogical improvement.

Similarly, Participant 3 in response to the above question revealed:
I was not so perfect in designing and using materials for the lesson while working on my own. But when started collaboration with my colleagues, I learned how to prepare lessons, tasks, project work, materials and so on. Collaborative practices are really inevitable for the teachers to enhance their classroom pedagogy.

The opinion of Participant 3 clarified that collaborative practices helped her for developing classroom teaching activities.

Challenges of Collaborative Practices
Though collaborative practice has benefits for the EFL teachers to promote their professionalism and classroom pedagogy, it is equally challenging at the same time. In this context, Welch and Sheridan (1995) divide the challenges into four categories: (i) conceptual
barriers referring to differences in teachers’ perceptions of their roles; (ii) pragmatic barriers of problems related to finding time and resources to work collaboratively; (iii) attitudinal barriers as teachers’ negative attitudes like fear of trying something; (iv) professional barriers caused by lack of preparation to collaborate (as cited in Luo, 2014).

When the participants were asked the question ‘Are there any challenges that you face during collaborative practices?’ they revealed various challenges.

Regarding the challenges of collaborative practice, Participant 1 explained:
Collaborative practices are sometimes annoying, especially peer or team teaching. The students sometimes compare the teaching styles of teachers, and they complain the teacher ‘X’ teaches this part better than the teacher ‘Y’ by doing this or that. It is sometimes difficult to change teaching styles on the spot as students’ desire without preplan. They compare teachers with co-teachers in many respects, for example looks, speaking style or behaviour with them. They expect everybody to be the same. So, sometimes it is quite complicated and distressing.

Regarding the question related to the challenges of collaborative practices, Participant 2 stated:
I expect to be free while teaching because I have my own style of teaching certain topics. However, when I make plans with another person, my role is sometimes pre-determined and it may not be flexible. I have my own educational background and while working together with other co-teacher, some are less experienced than others, and they do not share the same beliefs and understandings. This results in dissatisfaction and more workload for the experienced ones.

He gave an example for this situation by narrating his experience during the lesson preparation that there was a misunderstanding for a reading activity because of teachers’ lack of knowledge of about project work based teaching.

The expression of Participant 2 showed that teachers have to face problems while working in collaboration due to the different linguistic background, knowledge on the subject matter and experiences. Regarding the similar question, Participant 3 opined:
Sometimes we lack of time for planning lesson, designing materials. Besides, teachers are different in the personality and attitudes. There is not always the full support of administration. There lies the fear of criticism or judgment by colleagues.

The views of the participants were in harmony with Harmer’s (2005) words that stated people in collaborative activities might not have equal participation. One may dominate, while others stay silent. In addition, the views were also supported by the view of Slavin (1995) who argued “cooperative task can allow for the free rider effect, in which some group members do all or most of the work, while others go along for the ride” (p. 19).

From the above perspectives and experiences given by the participants, it is clear that collaborative practices, though very crucial in English language teaching and learning, are not beyond the challenges. Time management, diverse perspectives on the subject and teaching styles, linguistic and educational background, less support of the administration are the key challenges in undertaking collaborative practices.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore collaborative practice of EFL teachers. The analysis suggests that English language teachers are engaged in collaborative practices for evaluation, material development, team teaching, lesson planning and setting question papers. From the opinions of the participant, it is evident that observing each other’s classes, assisting their professional development, and decreasing the workload are among the benefits collaborative practices. However, it is needed to mention that collaboration is not without challenges. Personality differences, power relations, irresponsibility of colleagues, and lack of time, less support by the administration are some of the challenges in collaborative practices. It is further suggested that an ideal collaborative partner should be flexible, open to communication, tolerant, respectful, honest, energetic, supportive, and willing to create a positive atmosphere for collaboration. In addition to these, collaborative practices should be strengthened by having more meetings, assigning different skills to different teachers, and benefiting from more experienced colleagues. Besides, when English language teachers are engaged in working collaboratively, they can expand their logical thinking, social network and communicative skills.

The study has great pedagogical implications for the English language teachers for implementing collaborative practices in their language classrooms. The collaboration can be not only among English teachers but also among students for improving teaching and learning activities. Collaborative practice is essential because it promotes teacher professional development and classroom pedagogy. In this study, I have just explored the perceptions of English teachers, and collaborative practices undertaken by them. How students, in-service and pre-service teacher educators view and undertake collaborative activities, and the challenges faced by them in implementing collaborative teaching and learning in English classrooms in the context of Nepal can be other areas for further research.
This study had some limitations that the further research studies may consider to address. First, this was a small scale study with only two participants and both of them belonged to the same department. Incorporating large sample randomly selected from different contexts may improve external validity of the findings. Second, this study used only interview as a research tool/ technique to explore the understanding of the secondary level English teachers towards the phenomenon of collaborative practices. Incorporating different types of research techniques such as questionnaires and observation following quantitative research design would be worth considering for the further research.

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