



**Developing English Curricula in Higher Education:  
A Case of Kathmandu University**

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***Abstract:** In this autoethnographic account, I critically reflect on my experience of the curriculum development process for the Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) in English Language Education (ELE) program at Kathmandu University about a decade ago. It expresses our philosophical and ideological stance in formulating graduate attributes, determining the areas of concentration, selecting the content, implementing the curriculum and evaluating the achievements. I noted three major insights in the process. First, the market determines the formulation of graduate attributes, not the knowledge and insights acquired in universities. Second, in this part of the world, the western cultural values of scholarship determine the area of concentration and content selection. Third, we can implicitly integrate the values envisioned by policy documents because the discipline discourse surfaces explicitly. The paper contributes to the discourse of framing curriculum in English language education in the South Asian context.*

**Key words:** Autoethnography, ELE, Discourse, Curriculum

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**Introduction:** I understand a curriculum is a set of planned activities that curriculum developers aim to achieve the goals of an educational program. Developing a curriculum, for me, is to answer the questions: 'why', 'what' and 'how'. The question 'why' determines graduate attributes;

'what', the area of concentration and content selection; and 'how' operationalizes the curriculum in classroom situations and measures the achievements related to graduate attributes. In this autoethnographic account, I document my experience developing the curricula for M.Phil in English language education (ELE) at the School of Education, Kathmandu University.

One of the main objective of an educational program is to make the life of learners easier and more comfortable. I understand education is a political act; our Constitution adopted a multiparty democratic society. Therefore, we expect our curricula to enable our graduates to sustain and quality life by instilling democratic values envisioned in the Constitution. We must also recognize the discursive practices in the field of study. For me, education does not transmit the body of knowledge from one generation to the other but also fosters the graduates to be intelligent and critical to face possible challenges in life. Education aims at instilling in learners the academic and moral knowledge that a mature adult needs to live a dignified social life (Hearne & Cowels, as cited in Uys & Gwele, 2005). That academic and moral knowledge is not confined to the writings of the western world but available in the local context through careful observation (Evans & Savage, 2015).

I, along with my colleagues, was developing a curriculum for adults who already had a master's degree and had work experience of several years. In such a situation, we took that the learner-centred education system developed in the western world would not be advantageous in our context because our scholars' experience and interest determined their careers after graduation. They came to us to acquire research skills and academic writing and develop creative, critical abilities. Though it sounds traditional, it was not its essence. However, we were interested in bringing the workplace experiences of our scholars to generate a body of knowledge enriched with local and contextualized insights. Therefore, the scholars were always at the centre of the learning process.

For me, the curriculum, lest an educational program, was progressive because I understand knowledge is dynamic and learners' interests determine the selection of contents, modes of delivery, and even the evaluation process. Therefore, we agreed to focus on life experiences in the classroom, connecting them with the discursive practices of the discipline. In a sense, it was an outward-looking perspective, i.e., looking at the world from the self of the learners, the 'objective and subjective aspects of human life' (Uys & Gwele, 2005, p. 7)

Richard (cited in Guardado & Light, 2020) states three primary curriculum development approaches: forward, central and backward design. The forward design envisions curriculum linearly, i.e., the input of the content delivered leads to the learning output. This design assumes the selection of a particular theme or a topic, related learning materials for the topic and assurance of the output through an appropriate assessment. The central design does not emphasize learning goals and objectives but focuses on learners' experiences through proper activities meant for them.

On the other hand, the backward design first identifies learning objectives or graduate attributes and proceeds to select the appropriate content and teaching-learning approaches to achieve the targets. Unlike forward and central designs, the backward design puts the learning objectives at the forefront and the educator designs activities to achieve the graduate attributes (Guardado & Light, 2020).

### **The Context**

I joined the School of Education at Kathmandu University in 2011 as a visiting faculty. The Dean assigned me to teach a course on English fiction and coordinate the development of a curriculum for M.Phil in the ELE program. I worked with two of my senior colleagues. Prior to joining Kathmandu University, I worked at the Department of Linguistics at the Universität Konstanz, Germany. Working in Germany, I had a unique experience in terms of curriculum development that I had never experienced in South Asia as a student and teacher. At the Universität Konstanz, the teacher enjoys the freedom to select the contents of a course. For example, the curriculum on Morphology had three parts —I, II and III— spread at undergraduate and graduate levels. In Morphology I, teachers discuss the theoretical aspects of Morphology; in Morphology II, they discuss the morphological processes of one of the major European languages. Morphology III concentrates on the morphological process of non-mainstream European language, and the teacher had extensive research experience. When the Department assigned me to teach Morphology III, I decided to teach Santali morphology. The students were excited as studying an Austroasiatic language was an exotic experience for German students. However, in South Asian universities, the higher education authority determines the objectives and contents of a particular course. In this sense, our curricula are highly centralized, ignoring

our people's linguistic and cultural diversity. However, innovations in developing English curricula at Kathmandu University defy this South Asian trend. We decided to use our autonomy by concentrating on what our prospective scholars wanted to equip themselves with. In the meantime, we also considered the need for industries that expected human resources to work with them.

**Curriculum Development and Policy Documents** : I understand we cannot be neutral in all essence; I agree with Evans and Savage (2015) that every educational reform is always political. Several national and international policies determine the nature of an academic program and the program's curriculum development process. In this section, I discuss national and international policy documents that influence the curriculum development process for M.Phil in ELE program at Kathmandu University.

The 1990 People's Movement curtailed the power of the Nepali monarch and established a multiparty democratic form of governance. The people of Nepal promulgated a new Constitution to integrate the achievements of the Movement. Article 18 of the Constitution guarantees the right to impart education in a child's mother tongue (Government of Nepal, 1991). Following the Constitution, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Social Welfare formed a committee to recommend the language of education in schools. The committee submitted its reports in 1994. It recommended the Government provide bilingual education, i.e., the learners' mother tongue and the language of the nation (Ministry of Education, Culture and Social Welfare, 1994)

Nepal faced an uprising in April 2006; this Movement overthrew the monarchy system and promulgated an interim Constitution in 2007. This interim Constitution mandated to elect of a Constituent Assembly through a general election to write the Constitution. As a result, Nepal promulgated her Constitution in 2015. Article 31.5 guarantees the right to education in learners' mother tongues. Each community residing in Nepal has the right to open and operate educational institutes to protect the indigenous knowledge system, including cultural practices. However, affluent parents always preferred to send their children to English medium schools ignoring the right to education in children's mother tongue. The Government passed the act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education in 2018. This act further intensified the inconsistency in Article 31.5 spirit and practice. Clause 26.1 of the Act allowed schools to use English or children's mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

Consequently, many schools converted the medium of instruction from indigenous languages to English because parents connect English proficiency with quality education. This act violated the Constitutional provision and fundamental linguistic human rights (Awasthi, Turin, & Yadava, 2023). The forces of globalization, neoliberal free-market models, the symbolic socio-economic capital of English, and the reluctance of the Government's commitment to implement mother-tongue education interfered with children's right to get education in their mother tongues. The act served the interest of 'Anglophile elites' (to use Awasthi, Turin and Yadava's 2023 term), ignoring the constitutional provision.

Several international policy documents guided us in developing the curriculum process. United Nations (2000) millennium declaration provided us with some foundational principles we would like to inculcate in our graduates. The Declaration states that the states should not deny an individual the opportunity for personal development. We also envision our graduates would respect our multicultural, multiracial and multilinguistic social heritage, ensuring equal rights for women and other marginalized communities.

The Declaration envisions equal respect and dignity for every individual. We were aware that our graduates would respect the diversity of belief systems of our society, cherishing this asset of humanity of being different so that we can promote a community of peace and dialogue.

The UN Declaration ensured equal access to all levels of education. The Declaration took gender equality and women's empowerment to be instrumental in fighting against poverty, hunger and disease and stimulate sustainable development. The member countries agreed to make policies and implement them to ensure decent jobs and productive work for young people. These policies would strengthen democratic practices and respect for human rights, particularly the rights of minority communities.

The UN Declaration encourages combatting violence and discrimination against women and other marginalized communities. Further, it also ensures the rights of migrants, migrant workers and their families to protect them from the violence of racism and discrimination. It also creates a social environment of greater harmony and tolerance in all cultures. One of the major concerns of the Declaration was to work collectively for more inclusive political processes, allowing genuine participation by all citizens in all our countries. (United Nations, 2000).

### ***A Special Issue on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)***

In September 2000, leaders of 189 countries endorsed the Millennium Declaration committing to create a safer, more prosperous and equitable world. MDG 2 was our concern. I stated that children would universally be able to complete primary education. As we were working for a teacher education program, we committed ourselves to prepare human resources to translate this goal into action. We relied on the data gathered from personal narratives and the working schedules of non-governmental organizations and government agencies. One of the government initiatives was to provide mid-day meals to retain students and help them complete the course of primary education, particularly in rural areas. We understood that we could achieve all these if we inculcated these values in our graduates.

MDG 3 was also crucial for our purpose; it promotes gender equality and women empowerment. Gender discrimination is one of the social stigmas of Nepali society. Everyday stories of violence against women in different forms are common in the media. We felt our course content should include these materials and pedagogical practices to make scholars aware of these issues to transfer these values to the next generation. We also had to consider appropriate delivery methods to activate these ideals in classrooms.

The UN General Assembly in September 2015 adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The target was to achieve these goals by 2030. Of the 17 SDGs, SDGs 4 and 5 were relevant to our purpose. SDG 4 aimed at achieving inclusive and equitable quality education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for every citizen (United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022). Focusing on equitable quality education, SDG 4 targeted to ensure equal access to technical, vocational and university education for all. It also targeted to substantially equip youths with technical and vocational skills required for decent jobs. It concentrated on sustainable development through education to promote human rights, gender equality and the values of global citizens. And it highlighted the need for the training of teachers through international cooperation for sustainable quality education in developing and least-developed countries.

SDG 5 ensured gender equality and every woman and girl's empowerment. SDG 5 targeted to end any discrimination and violence against women and ensure the effective participation of women in public spheres, particularly in decision-making processes. To achieve these goals, we envisioned that higher education programs could play crucial roles.

**The Beginning** : Having discussed my positionality, understanding of theoretical referents and interference with policy documents, let's begin the curriculum development process. It was the first half of 2012; we started our task with a naïve idea of curriculum development. Our team actively participated in local conferences and seminars on ELE. We interacted with English teachers, their employers, people from the ministry of education and non-governmental organizations working in educational sectors in these programs. During our casual conversations during lunch and tea breaks, these professionals discussed the need for an educational program that caters for them and addresses the issues of ELE in Nepal.

In a meeting, we discussed the prospective students and employers of our graduates. We decided to organize a seminar to identify what professionals the market needs. Through personal contacts, we invited English language teachers, their employers, people from professional organizations and non-governmental organizations working in language education, and representatives of the ministry of education. The participants indicated the program should equip the graduates with the theoretical and practical knowledge and skills of material development, classroom delivery, academic writing and research. Further, we studied a few similar regional programs and their curricula.

The literature on curriculum development informed us that the first step in the process was to diagnose the educational program's needs and formulate objectives (Smith, 2000). We preferred the term graduate attributes to objectives. We understood the graduate attributes as the knowledge and skills that the graduates acquire at the end of the program (Barrie, 2006).

Informed with the policy documents, the outcomes of the seminar and insights from the study of similar regional programs, we formulated some of the attributes of our graduates as follows:

- Understanding academic practices in ELE
- Tracing the discourse practice of ELE at local, regional and global levels;
- Reading texts for a critical understanding of the discipline and providing evidence for theories and principles of the discipline;
- Working autonomously on a research undertaking and disseminating the research outcomes to the concerned discourse community;
- Respecting the rights of marginalized communities and the values of the Constitution.

- Preparing the graduates to achieve the MDGs and other international commitments.

**In Action:** The graduate attributes formulated in the previous section enabled us to determine what to include and exclude in the content. The structure of the M.Phil program at the University determines the type of courses we were developing. When we were working on the curriculum in 2012, the M.Phil program at the School of Education, Kathmandu University, had 36+3 credits to be covered in three semesters. One credit consisted of 16 teaching hours. Core courses consisted of 13 credits concentrating on research methodology and academic writing. Discipline-specific concentration courses had 15 credits. Seminars consisted of two credits, and, finally, the scholars wrote a dissertation of six credits. If the scholar did not have an education degree at his/her master's level, he/she had to take a course on the foundation of education. Coursework consisted of 30+3 and six credits for research. The team concentrated on discipline-specific concentration courses.

We had to develop five courses for the discipline-specific concentration areas. Based on the review of similar regional programs, the outcomes of the seminar and policy documents, we decided to work on the five different areas of ELE: trends and issues of ELE, planning and management, teacher education and development, discourse analysis, facets of English studies and world Englishes.

I studied English literature and linguistics in my university courses. Considering my expertise in literature and theoretical and applied linguistics, the team assigned me to work on facets of English studies, discourse analysis and world Englishes. I started the work consulting with the seniors in the Department. First, we had to finalize the title of the courses that I had to work on. After a series of meetings, we agreed on the course titles: Facets of English Studies, Discourse Analysis in Applied Linguistics and World Englishes.

After finalizing the titles of the courses, I began to write the course description for each assigned course. I started with the notes I jotted down during our discussions in meetings. The team finalized the course descriptions for these courses as follows:

### **Facets of English Studies**

The course Facets of English Studies substantively familiarizes students with diverse critical theories of western scholarship. The course covers the major critical theories of



social science, connecting them with literature and language studies from the twentieth century. It focuses on recent interdisciplinary concerns surrounding English education within the domains of humanities and education. The course aims to develop students' critical abilities by familiarizing them with the western scholarship of critical theories in social science and literature.

### **Discourse Analysis in Applied Linguistics**

The course Discourse Analysis in Applied Linguistics encompasses a wide range of critical practices concerning linguistic, social, cultural, historical and political representations in language and language education. The course familiarizes the students with the trend of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to address the issues of marginalized communities, including women. It encourages scholars to advocate and respect the rights of marginalized communities by exposing the ideological power hierarchy in our social structure with special reference to English language education.

### **World Englishes**

The course World Englishes acquaints scholars with the phenomenon of world Englishes. It would train the scholars to document the unique features of English spoken in Nepal, familiarizing them with theoretical and practical aspects of language contact and the emergence of new language varieties. It would promote a variety of oral, analytical, and writing skills through presentations, small-group discussion sessions, workshops and writing assignments

The approval of the course description left me with the enormous task of selecting content and designing the mode of delivery and evaluation. It was one of the most challenging times I had ever had. I had to depend on the western scholarship for the teaching contents for the first two courses. Although for the third course, I could supplement teaching materials from South Asian scholarships with western scholarship, if not from Nepal.

The curriculum development team agreed that the course Facets of English studies must include canonical literary theories from the east and the west. I wanted to be practical because I knew our

prospective students were full-time workers, already working in different spheres of life. They wanted to update with the recent trends in the field and gain some research skills required in academia. I also understood that content reflects the cultural heritage and value system and promotes self-directed education (Madadlou & Gharaaini, 2014). Therefore, I was not very ambitious.

I divided the contents of Facets of English Studies into four modules: Classical Eastern Aesthetic Traditions, Literary Theories, English as Culture, and English as Multiplicity. For the first module, I selected Bhartrhari's Sphota theory and Bharat Muni's Natya Shastra. Similarly, I included Structuralism and Post Structuralist Movements for the second module focusing on Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, and Sigmund Freud. Module three contained Colonialism and Post-Colonialism, concentrating on the writings of Edward Said, Homi K Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. The last module was practical. I asked scholars to read a recent fictional text in their mother tongue and make a presentation applying one of the theories covered in this course. If the fictional text was unavailable in their mother tongues, they could select a text written by Nepali authors in English.

Discourse Analysis in Applied Linguistics had four modules: Conceptualizing Discourse Analysis, Language and Society, Critical Discourse Analysis and Practicum. Module one introduced the conceptual underpinnings of discourse analysis, focusing on discourse as power, social practice, classroom discourse and its interdisciplinary nature. Module two drew concepts for social issues and language. This module discussed the theoretical foundations of ideology, identity, and ethnicity focusing on education as an emancipation. Module three concentrated on Critical Discourse Analysis with special reference to the writings of Tuen van Dijk, Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak. In module four, I asked the scholars to write a paper on the issues of their interest, applying a theory covered in this course.

World Englishes was an elective course. Module one surveyed the historical development of the English language. We concentrated on the theoretical concerns of the emergence of English varieties during the colonial period. Module two discussed the theories of World Englishes based on the writings of Braj Kacharu and Edward Schneider. Module three surveyed South Asian Englishes with particular reference to Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan Englishes. In module

four, the scholars collected data from English in Nepal, analyzed them and developed publishable papers.

**Implementation and Evaluation :** Implementing curriculum, I understand, refers to the activities we perform during the course to achieve the objectives, graduate attributes in our case. In other words, it is translating the graduate attributes into action in a planned manner. One of the challenges of implementing a curriculum is the resistance from the target group (Bediako, 2019). Our prospective scholars were mature and experienced. They wanted something different from their previous courses. Therefore, while planning the implementation aspect, I focused on the engagement of scholars in classroom activities. I assigned two scholars to present to each class. I did not assign the topic for the presentation but asked them to choose from the area. For example, if the topic of discussion was structuralism, they could select either Ferdinand de Saussure, Levi Strauss, Roman Jakobson, or Roland Barthes. Everyone had to read the text before they came to class. After each presentation, the floor was open for discussion.

During our casual conversation at tea time, I often talked to the scholars about how they felt about the classroom procedures. One of them said it gave the feeling of ownership. They read not what the teacher or someone else asked them to read, but they selected what they had to read and present. They kept themselves busy throughout the semester, reading the text, making presentations, reading texts for comments, and building arguments. I felt sorry for some who could not continue and dropped their studies. One of the scholars reported he had never thought he would be able to read and understand original texts. He prepared for his earlier exams with teacher's notes and guidebooks available in the local markets.

When we completed the 12<sup>th</sup> week of the semester, I asked them to prepare a publishable paper. For example, in the course Facets of English Studies, they read a fictional work in their mother tongue or English written by Nepali authors. And they prepared papers applying a theory of their interest to the fictional work. By the 16<sup>th</sup> week, they started submitting the draft; I meticulously commented on their work. They revised and resubmitted. Some of them won the best student awards at national and international conferences. They also informed me of their papers published in journals. Some of them are still publishing their works. This made me feel that we achieved our targets to some extent, but I still feel sorry for some students who complained to me about too much work.

**Conclusion** : In writing this paper, I aimed to reflect critically on the curriculum development process of the master of philosophy (M.Phil) in English language education at Kathmandu University. In this autoethnographic critical reflection, I documented my and my colleagues' experiences of the activities that happened a decade ago. I recounted the experience of my colleagues based on how I perceived them. I understand that reflecting on the experience is an entirely subjective matter. So it could be a completely different experience for them.

In this process, I understood developing a curriculum for a higher education program is a complex phenomenon. Now I realize a curriculum is a living organism, not simply a structured plan to prepare students to address life's challenges. Our plans always did not work, and we adjusted them depending on the context in which we operationalized the curriculum. It is also not always possible to integrate the demands of policy documents because the discipline's discourse determines the content selection. However, we can incorporate these demands and values by implicitly contextualizing them during classroom discussions and preparing scholars for assignments. The more important thing was to develop a sceptical critical mindset in the scholars that keeps asking the right questions.

I understood developing a curriculum is a political activity. I am not yet sure whether the knowledge and skills we acquire in universities determine the market. Or on the other hand, the market determines our curriculum development process. In my case, the market ascertained most of the curriculum development activities. We formulated graduate attributes based on the need of industries and integrated the ethos of policy documents. Today I feel our curriculum is committed to instilling Western cultural values (Yaşar & Aslan, 2021), although we tried to integrate the indigenous experience. I am content that this curriculum shaped scholars' minds and behaviour according to the vision of the Nepali Constitution and international policies like MDGs and SDGs.

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