

UNDERSTANDING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES
OF LEARNERS WITH PARTIAL VISION-RELATED DISABILITIES: A
QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

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AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of Sujit Maharjan entitled, *Understanding the English Language Learning Experiences of Learners with Partial Vision Related Disabilities: A Qualitative Inquiry* submitted for the degree of Master of Education in English Language Teaching has been approved on March 31, 2022.

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This study explored the English language learning experiences of learners with partial vision-related disabilities. It particularly focused on partially sighted English language learners as they are often overlooked in teaching and learning activities. Furthermore, studies highlighting and exploring their learning experiences are scarce.

Language is learned through communication and social interactions. We learn language collaboratively that is why this study is supported by collaborative learning theory. Moreover, since we are dealing with the stories and experiences of learners, I found narrative inquiry as the perfect research method to guide the study. It is a qualitative study where the interview was used as the major data collection technique. Participants were purposefully selected and semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to generate data. Those data and information generated through recorded and transcribed interviews were then coded systematically to generate themes which were later analyzed in light of the theory.

After the analysis of data, key insights were drawn. One of the major insights gained from the study was that friends played a major role in the learning process of

partially sighted learners. This insight embodied the essence of collaborative learning and revealed that friends helped in more ways than one and impacted the learning process significantly.

Moreover, the study contributes to the discourse on the English language learning experiences of learners with vision-related disabilities in the context of Nepal where the education system and available infrastructure are not disability friendly. This study, for the first time, documents the struggles, hopes and disappointments of the English language learning experiences of learners with vision-related disabilities by integrating the researcher's experiences.

March 31, 2022

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work and it has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree at any other university.

March 31, 2022

Sujit Maharjan

Degree Candidate

DEDICATION

To,

My Family

(Aama ji, Daddy and Didi)

To,

The one, who inspired the research

To,

My Gurus and Guru Aamas

And, some, of my Friends...

To the Chances we take...

This dissertation titled *Understanding the English Language Learning Experiences of Learners with Partial Vision-Related Disabilities: A Qualitative Inquiry* was presented by Sujit Maharjan for the degree of Master of Education in English Language Teaching on March 31, 2022.

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Kathmandu University Library. My signature below authorizes the release of my dissertation to any reader upon request for scholarly purposes.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

A.D.	:	Anno Domini
B.S.	:	Bikram Sambat
BBC	:	British Broadcasting Corporation
BYAN	:	Blind Youth Association Nepal
CD	:	Compact Disc
CRPD	:	Convention for the Right of Persons with Disabilities
DAISY	:	Digital Accessible Information system
DVD	:	Digital Video Disc or Digital Versatile Disc
EFA	:	Education for All
EFL	:	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	:	English Language Teaching
FVE	:	Functional Vision Evaluation
ICD 11	:	International Classification of Diseases 11
ICEVI	:	International Council for the Education of People with Visual Impairment
ICT	:	Information and Communications Technology
IELTS	:	International English Language Testing System
IEP	:	Individualized Education Program
IOS	:	iPhone Operating System
IYDP	:	International Year of Disabled Persons
JAWS	:	Job Access with Speech
LAD	:	Language Acquisition Device
LMA	:	Learning Media Assessment

MKO	:	More Knowledgeable Others
MSVI	:	Moderate to Severe Visual Impairment
NAB	:	Nepal Association of the Blind
NABP	:	Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted
NBS	:	Nepal Blindness Survey
NGO	:	Non-governmental organizations
NICHCY	:	National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities
NVDA	:	Non Visual Desktop Access
SDGs	:	Sustainable Development Goals
SLC	:	School Leaving Certificate
TFN	:	Teach For Nepal
TV	:	Television
UNICEF	:	United Nations Children Fund
USA	:	United States of America
VA	:	Visual Acuity
VCD	:	Video CD
WCEFA	:	World Conference on Education for All
WHO	:	World Health Organization
ZPD	:	Zone of Proximal Development

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets the context for the study. It begins with my inspiration behind the study. The incident that triggered the study was followed by my why: why does this study matter and how is it going to contribute to the English Language Teaching (ELT) and disability community? Three major research questions follow next to guide and explore the issue. Finally, it delimits my study all with the aim of understanding and exploring the English language learning experiences of learners with partial vision-related disabilities.

Inspiration behind the Research

हातका मैला सुनका थैला, के गर्नु धनले ?

सागर र सिसु खाएको बेस आनन्दी मनले ।

(Purses of gold are like the dirt on your hands, what can be done with wealth?)

Better to eat only nettles and greens with happiness in your heart)

मेरो छ घर एक कोस पर, तिमी ता मर्दैन,

म बोकी लान्छ, हुन्छ कि हुन्न ? फरक पर्दैन ।

(My home is a mile away, you will not die,

I will carry and take you, is it alright? It will not matter.)

भोटेले भन्छ, मौकाले पायो त्यो गुन लाउन,

गुनको सट्टा लिंदैन हामी, सम्झेर जाऊ न,

(Bhote says, it's by chance we get to help,

We do not take anything in return for favors, just remember us,)

I would like to start one of my longest projects with a touch of pure love, creativity, genius and greatness by borrowing the words of arguably one of the greatest literary works to have ever been written by one of the greatest writers to have ever lived, Mahakabi Laxmi Prasad Devkota. This is storytelling at its finest. Devkota was inspired by ‘Ji Waya La Lachhi Maduni’, a folklore that had been told and retold verbally in *Jhyaure bhaka*, an indigenous poetic form for generations that became the source for *Muna Madan*: the masterpiece. The point is that stories are special, and they live on through generations influencing and touching lives. The stories resonate because of the context, the society, the experiences and due to the lives it touched.

The story of Devkota himself resonates and has been retold through generations. Legend has it that once when Devkota was sleeping goddess Saraswati herself came in his dreams and told him to write to which Devkota replied, “I do not know how to write.” And, Saraswati said, “...you just write and it will come to you.” And so he did and the rest is history. This story might be true, it might not be true but it has been told and retold many times throughout generations and it has become a legend. This is the beauty of stories, it moves people; it touches them and inspires them to do wonderful things.

Stories are indeed fascinating, they make us wonder, think and just sweep us away into a different world. As Tyrion Lannister on one of the episodes of Game of Thrones written by George R. R. Martin famously quoted, “What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories: There is nothing in the world more powerful than a good story.” They indeed have the power to change the world and here is one of mine: The inspiration.

It was a Monday evening on 24th June 2019, the second day of our second semester Master’s exam. The paper that we were writing was, “EDEL 503 Pragmatics

and Discourse Analysis.” That exam indeed was special. That might have been the best exam paper I ever wrote. Why? Because for the first time in my sixteen years of educational journey the teacher gave me a question paper in bigger fonts. For sixteen years no one had ever given me a question paper in bigger fonts. No one!

That day, I remember a girl was sitting beside me. I think I liked her. But, that was not why my heart was racing and giving me this amazing feeling. It was the exam question paper. I still have that question paper: I will treasure it for life. As the clock struck 4:30 pm, the teacher gave me the question paper and I instantly noticed the large fonts. He did it especially for me. And, I will not lie, I wrote a love letter back to him in those answers. I knew the answers to every question and I wrote them with feelings.

He gave the question paper to me and said, “Thick cha ne? (Is it alright?) I made it bigger.” I smiled and replied, “Yes Sir.” It was a special moment for me. For my heart was once again touched forever. Again, because he never failed to amaze me.

The bigger font size question paper, it does not seem much, right? It seems like a tiny thing. But, it means the world to the right person. It was special to me. It made my life easier. This is the kind of support and adjustment people with visual impairment and other disabilities seek for. We do not need to reinvent the wheel but, if we could just adjust it then others with additional support needs could also have an equal chance.

The larger font size question paper did wonders for me. I could read it properly and easily. This is one of my lived experiences, I have several such experiences but, not all of them are good and positive. Nonetheless, I believe these

experiences and incidents can become a knowledge system that will benefit the coming generation.

I am just a single person, and all my lived experiences and stories might not be universal and practical. There are many partially impaired learners like me who go through various circumstances and situations. They too have numerous such tales to share and collectively such experiences can become a good source of knowledge that will benefit the coming generation of learners and educators along with partially impaired personnel. In order to explore such experiences, good moments that not only touched and moved them but also encouraged and helped them and bad moments that almost discouraged them along with various challenges that came their way and how they overcome them I decided to undertake this research.

Moreover, I think I have lived a special life. I have been lucky enough to be born in the family that I am in, to be surrounded by such amazing people and to have had the experiences that I have had. Despite my visual impairment and challenges, I have come this far but, not everyone is as lucky as me. I have been blessed with good people and friends who have assisted me in my learning but others with visual impairment might not have had similar experiences. So, I would like to explore and understand about their learning processes and experiences. We, people with a partial impairment are in an odd place. We neither are blind nor are fully sighted so the experiences that we go through are rarely explored and looked upon. If someone is blind then people instantly notice it and act and behave in a certain way around them. They tend to be more conscious which sometimes might be good and sometimes might be bad. But, people realize that they need a different kind of support. But, with us who are partially impaired, those things are often overlooked. We do not need much support, we can do many things by ourselves but at some point we require

assistance as well. People usually do not understand that we have limitations and need assistance as well.

The same thing is true in our education system as well. We will do our best but at some point, we require support as well because how much we say we are just as capable as fully sighted person, we do have our limitations. And, this is what inspired me to conduct a research on understanding the English language learning experiences of learners with partial vision-related disabilities. I hope to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on English language learning and disability studies so that the coming generations of learners with disabilities and educators will have some idea on how to approach the situation and the learner.

Rationale of the Study

Studies in the field of visual impairment, especially with partially sighted people are very less. Even in the field of research they are overlooked as we cannot find many studies being done to explore their experiences. So, in order to venture these uncharted waters and map them best to my knowledge, I have undertaken this research.

This research gives back to the English Language Teaching (ELT) community to better understand how learners with visual impairments have been learning so that they can better facilitate them and design a proper support system for them. I believe this study documents the stories of participants who suffer from partial visual disabilities and tries to enhance and accelerate the learning process of learners with similar disabilities. Furthermore, this study informs the ELT community about the various challenges that learners with visual impairment come across and helps them to plan for action. Narratives of visually impaired participants and their real life experiences will be an excellent resource material for those who would like to better

understand about visually impaired learners. It will also benefit the disability community as the education system and the teaching learning system will be better aware of how to help and support them in their learning process. They will no longer have to go through the same problems and obstacles that we went through.

Apart from that, this research and the lived experiences of the participants will hopefully act as a guide and base for upcoming education policies and reforms. Policy makers and planners will have an idea about their policies and its effectiveness. They will know what needs to be changed and how both ELT and disabled community will benefit from their acts, laws and policies. Lastly, I hope to make an impact on material development for learners with vision-related disabilities and make their learning experience smooth and fun at the same time. The findings of this research will help teachers realize the effectiveness of the existing resources and how they should adjust them to support the learning needs of students with vision-related disabilities.

Problem Statement

Our education system is evolving; we saw this in the recent pandemic as well. COVID-19 has indeed changed the entire world. But the question is how adaptive is our system and how well does it cater to the needs of learners with disabilities? Was the system adequate before COVID? Is the system adequate now? I think we all can agree that except for a few elite schools which could afford to get their hands on the latest technological tools and gadgets, others had a really hard time adapting to the situation.

Furthermore, we often do not hear about the learning experiences of learners with vision-related disabilities. According to Nepal Blindness Survey (NBS) conducted in 1981 they make up 2.5% of the entire population of Nepal. Moreover,

World Health Organization [WHO] (2019b) reports that around 2.2 billion people in the world are visually impaired. And rarely do their stories come out in public.

Despite various government laws, acts and policies on education of visually impaired learners it is still a big problem. So, who is going to share their stories and document their experiences so that our system can change for the better?

We often hear that we should push ourselves and change and strive for success but, when things and situations are not under our control, I think it should be the other way around. We should have an appropriate support system and management to help us grow, learn and function normally. We have heard some stories of how learners with disabilities have faced various problems during their educational journey. Sometimes the educational institute does not accept them, sometimes, the teachers are unaware of how to teach them and sometimes their friends are not cooperative and so on. One of such stories that many people have read, seen and heard about is of Sristi KC's, the founder of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) named Blind Rocks. She lost her sight at an early age and faced numerous challenges, which she bravely overcame and now she is an inspiration to us all.

But, today let me share my own experience. I have had encouraging moments and I have had discouraging ones. Some moments are uplifting and others are disappointing. One of such incidents happened while I was taking an undergraduate course in a private college. I know the teacher but I cannot quite remember the course he taught. Was it a theoretical subject? Or a subject called Critical Thinking? I think he came in a leisure period and was giving us notes for some other subject. This is how meaningless his class was, I do not remember a thing but I will never forget how he made me feel that day. So, he was giving us notes and writing them on the board. He asked everyone to write them down. Some of us were writing and some of us were

pretending to write. I was not writing as I could not see what was written on the board and he ordered me to write. I could not see what he wrote so I told him, “Sir, I will write later and copy them from someone later.” He went on and kept filling the board with his notes and after 5 minutes he came back to me and saw that I was not writing and he completely lost it. That day I was not sitting with a friend that I normally sit with and it was not even his class. So, he scolded me for how I was not following his orders and how I was not doing my work. I think his exact words were, “Everyone else is doing it, what is wrong with you? Are you the King?” Something like that, I do not remember well. And, he had been teaching me for three years. A teacher teaches for three years and does not even know his students. I kept quiet and tried copying from a friend on my bench. I did not tell him about my condition because I thought he would not understand it. She sat on my right and it is very difficult for me to copy from my right side since my right eye is even weaker than my left. For me to copy someone’s answers the person has to be on my left and really close to me or else it is very difficult. But, I tried and faked writing and the class was over.

He was a bachelor’s level teacher who had been teaching for many years and he had no idea of how to facilitate learners with a visual impairment, let alone the right attitude. So, this is us and this is our educational system. People do not have the faintest idea of how to support and accelerate the learning process of learners with visual impairment. In the same scenario what would have been better? Maybe a handout or if the teacher had pronounced the notes and dictated it, that would have been great but, unfortunately, I do not think he had a clue.

So, here is a flaw in our education system that we must fix. And, in order to do so, we must learn about the stories, experiences, struggles and problems faced by differently-abled people and take their suggestions and advice for its solutions. The

educational experts design the system, policy, materials and techniques to counter such problems but it is only learners who know if all this is working or not and how should we go about solving them? For we know learners' experiences and strategies matter more than the teaching methods (Oxford, 2003). And, researches show that there is a significant lack of literature that informs about the learning experiences and stories of partially sighted EFL learners. There are few studies in this area such as Thapa (2017), which focused on English language teaching practices for visually impaired learners, Thapaliya (2016), which presented an overview of disability in Nepal and several studies by Lamichhane i.e. Lamichhane (2013), which discussed about disability and barriers to education, Lamichhane (2015), which explored social inclusion of people with disabilities and Lamichhane (2017), which talked about teaching students with visual impairments in an inclusive educational setting. But, none of these studies talked about partially impaired learners and their experiences of learning. Moreover, the experiences, struggles and stories of learners were never explored and documented. As a result, the ELT community was never informed and aware regarding how they should treat and facilitate learners with partial visual impairment. And, this is where this study makes its contribution as it documents and explores various experiences, challenges and struggles faced by partially impaired learners during the process of learning the English language and how they overcame them.

Another reason why the study focuses on partial visual impairment is because I believe they are the ones who are overlooked and overshadowed the most. An institution instantly recognizes if someone is fully visually impaired and tries their best to help them. But I believe it is the partially impaired who go through a tough time. They can walk around and see if the things are really close to them but cannot

see far. In this case, people normally do not pay much attention to them because they are carrying themselves around well. They are walking, going places, travelling by public transport and so on. And their problems and the challenges they face are overlooked. It is really difficult for them to explain how their eyesight works. They can see but that does not help much in the class. They can see the board but cannot read a thing written there. Some of them can read books whereas others cannot. And these are just a handful of problems I am sharing from my own experiences. So, I believe we should explore the stories of learners with partial visual impairment in order to help our education system create a proper support system for them. And, with this research, I have tried to bring out their genuine stories so that it helps to improve our learning system.

Every learner has a different way of learning which we term as learner differences (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). And, everyone needs a different support system. If we learn about these learning needs, then we can better support the learners. With this study, I hope to bring out the stories of learners with partial visual impairment, their learning needs, challenges and struggles so that our system and people in the system will be better equipped to support them and help them with their learning process.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to explore the English language learning experiences of learners with partial vision-related disabilities.

Research Questions

In order to explore and understand their experiences and to guide this study, I have set three research questions which are as follows.

- How do learners with partial vision-related disabilities share their experiences of learning the English language?
- How do they narrate their experiences of facilitations and hindrances in their process of learning the English language?
- How do they narrate their experiences of support and assistance in their process of learning the English language?

Delimitations

My study is the exploration of the English language learners from Nepal, who have visual disabilities. My study is limited to the stories of struggles and achievements of my partially visually impaired participants. This study showcases their lived experiences, stories, challenges and how they overcame them.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I set out my research journey with the discussion on my inspiration, context behind the study elaborating my rationale of the study. The event that actually inspired me to conduct the study. After that, I have showcased my problem statement where I talk about why this particular issue is important and should be researched. Furthermore, the chapter highlighted the purpose behind the study and introduced the three major research questions that guided it. Lastly, it touched upon the significance of the study and how it is going to contribute to the existing body of knowledge along with the delimitation of the study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter concentrates on the study of literature which comprises of past studies, policy documents, artifacts, thematic clarification and theoretical review. Thematically it clarifies basic terminologies used in this study related with visual impairment and English language learning. It also explores the educational status of visually impaired learners along with various policies, acts and laws put in place by national and international agencies. Furthermore, it brings to light the theory of collaborative learning and how it affects the learning experiences of learners with visual impairment. After these studies, I present the gap in light with the literature along with my conceptual framework.

Visual Impairment

Before talking about visual impairment, we must first address disability and get a basic understanding of what disability really is. In simple terms, it is basically a condition that weakens a person's ability to carry out a certain task. They just need to adapt a different way of doing the task. However, the term, "disability" and its definition is always a matter of debate. Some agree with the notion whereas some don't. Many activists have tried to change the perspective towards the word "disabled" just by changing it into "differently-abled." This just takes away the negative connotation of the word and makes it sound more positive. For our study let's take the explanation by World Health Organization (WHO) into consideration. It believes that disability is a condition because it is possible that everyone can experience disability at some point in their life which could be long-term or

temporary (World Health Organization, 2011). It further adds that it is actually the environment and the barriers that it creates that actually make a person disabled.

There are numerous health conditions that force someone to be labeled disabled such as, autism, Down Syndrome, paralysis and many others. And, Visual Impairment is one of those conditions.

Visual impairment can simply be defined as damaged vision or vision that is not functioning normally. As Oxford Learner's Dictionary also affirms impairment as damaged or not functioning normally. Furthermore, WHO has embraced the definition of International Classification of Diseases 11 (ICD 11), i.e.:

A person is said to be visually impaired if the presenting Visual Acuity (VA) in the better eye is worse than 3/60. In this revised definition, near vision impairment is also included; it is defined as presenting near VA worse than N6 with existing correction (Vaishali & Vijayalakshmi, 2020).

Talking about visual impairment and understanding the concept is not that simple as there are various layers around it. Visual impairment itself is of various types and are caused due to various reasons. Some of them are curable whereas some are not. Some develop later in life and some are by birth. Simply, all these vision-related problems that cause some kind of difficulty in our everyday life fall under visual impairment. Let's take the reference of classification done by WHO and ICD 11 for a better understanding of the condition. A normal person has 6/6 or 20/20 vision which means, if a person can see up to the distance of 6 meters or 20 feet clearly, then his/her vision is perfectly alright. Whereas if a person has VA worse than 6/12-6/18 then he/she falls under mild visual impairment. Similarly, VA between 6/18-6/60 is considered moderate, 6/60-3/60 severe and VA worse than 3/60 is

considered as blindness. Lastly, visual acuity worse than N6 or M.08 at 40 cm falls under near visual impairment (World Health Organization, 2019b).

In this study, only participants were people with partial visual disabilities i.e., my participants were not totally blind but also did not have a normal vision. Partial vision or low vision simply means that they can see to a certain extent but, they are not capable of seeing everything as a normal person can. As National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities [NICHCY] (2004), also elaborated that ‘low vision’ or ‘partial impairment’ refers to a severe visual disability, not necessarily limited to distance vision. In other words, people with visual disabilities are individuals who cannot read normal texts at a normal viewing distance. Even the eyeglasses cannot help them to read like normal people. There are various causes of partial impairment or low vision. A report by World Health Organization, (2019b) estimated that around 2.2 billion people worldwide have a near or distant vision impairment. But, it also believes that almost half of the cases could have been averted or are yet to be addressed. The other half i.e. approximately one billion people either have moderate or severe distance vision impairment or blindness due to unaddressed refractive error (88.4 million), cataract (94 million), glaucoma (7.7 million), corneal opacities (4.2 million), diabetic retinopathy (3.9 million), and trachoma (2 million), as well as near vision impairment caused by unaddressed presbyopia (826 million) (World Health Organization, 2019b).

Like the data suggests, these are a few of the major conditions of visual impairment that the experts have categorized but, it also suggests that there are several other types that are yet to be discovered. Let us familiarize ourselves with some of these conditions and terminology.

Cataract is a condition caused due to clouding of the lens of the eye or of its surrounding transparent membrane that blocks the passage of light resulting in loss of vision. Cataracts single-handedly are responsible for most visual impairment cases in the world and in Nepal. A study by Pesudovs et al. (2021) shows that in 2020, worldwide approximately 15.2 million people aged 50+ years were blind, and a further 78.8 million had Moderate to Severe Visual Impairment (MSVI) due to cataract. Similarly, Nepal Blindness Survey (NBS) conducted in 1981 suggests that around 2.5% of the total population were blind and of that 2.5%, 66.8% was due to cataract (Brilliant et al., 1985). Likewise, another study done by Nepal Netra Jyoti Sangh (2012) suggested that compared to NBS conducted in 1981 the prevalence of blindness in all ages has reduced from 0.84 to an estimated 0.35 in 2011, a decrease of 58%. The number of blind persons has decreased from 117,600 in 1981 to an estimated 93,400 persons in 2010, 20.6% less. But, it was not a full-fledged survey and did not measure every category. Still, cataract stood as the major cause of visual impairment with the weighted average of 62.2%. However, an interesting finding of this survey compared with 1981 survey was that the proportion of blind eyes due to cataract and trachoma had declined whereas blind eyes due to non-trachomatous scarring and phthisis, glaucoma and other posterior segment diseases had inclined. I am sure the numbers have changed in the past 20 years as the world has made drastic advancements in medical sciences but no such studies have been conducted since then as I am not aware of such recent studies. Hence, we can make an assumption by taking the surveys as a reference.

Refractive error is another major cause of visual impairment that makes it hard to see clearly. According to World Health Organization (2013), refractive error occurs when the eye cannot clearly focus the images from the outside environment. As a

result it blurs our vision, which is sometimes so severe that it causes visual impairment. Similarly, glaucoma is another major reason for visual impairment. It damages the optic nerve a prerequisite for good vision. An abnormal high blood pressure in the eye often causes the damage. The discussion so far indicates multiple reasons for visual disabilities.

Educational Policies and Visual Impairment

Education means different things for different people. Everyone has their own definition and understanding of education. I feel learning as a life-long process and we never stop learning in our life, it goes on. Similarly, people also believe that education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school. People have their own interpretations and perceptions of education. But, here we shall talk about formal education: the one we get in our formal education system and its relation with learners with vision-related disabilities.

School and learning are important and play a vital role in a person's life but, when we take learners with vision-related disabilities into consideration then we must always ask, how accessible the learning environment is, how supportive it is, if it addresses their needs, it is inclusive, the teachers are well trained and informed regarding the needs of visually impaired learners and everything is what has been mentioned in policies and documents been followed. Because education is an integral part of a person's life, no one should be deprived of it. But educating and facilitating learners with visual impairment in itself is a challenge.

If we look at the statistics, of Nepal Association of Blind/Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted [NAB/NABP] (2009) as cited in Thapa (2017), there are about 200,000 visually impaired people in Nepal and among them 40,000 visually impaired students are of school-going age. Only 10% or 4,000

children receive education in special or integrated schools. Every year, 70 to 80 visually impaired students pass their School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination. We can see that this number is very less than the total number of students who appear for the SLC examination. In order to support learners with disabilities and visual impairment and help them in their learning process government of Nepal has developed various policies and rules but, they are actually not being that effective and properly implemented.

Nepal government and international umbrella organizations like United Nations (UN) are trying their best to improve the conditions of learners with disabilities and addressing their needs. Nepal government introduced the Special Education Policy in 1996 to better address the needs of learners with disabilities by generating awareness and fostering the concept of inclusive education. Moreover, following World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and Dakar forum in 2000 Nepal government launched a campaign, “Education for All (EFA)” 2001-2015 with the goal of educating everyone and not leaving any child behind trying to incorporate everyone with and without disability (UNESCO, 1990).

Furthermore, the government of Nepal incorporated policies in favor of learners with disabilities in the Constitution of Nepal 2015 as well. It was a significant step to support and help learners with disabilities. With quality education in mind the constitution highlighted that “the physically impaired and economically poor shall have the right to free higher education, as provided for in law” (Government of Nepal, 2015, p. 11). Although this has not been implemented effectively throughout the country, there are scholarship provisions and fee waivers depending upon the institutions and scholarship programs. The constitution also stated that “the visually

impaired shall have the right to free education with the assistance of braille script” (Government of Nepal, 2015, p. 11). The same is true here as well, given that only a few institutions and organizations working in the sector of disability and visual impairment have the capacity of obtaining and producing materials in braille. The policies are there but, only on paper, we have yet to see full-fledged actions and implementations based on the policies.

Internationally we must always consider the UN while talking about disability and education. It is continuously working towards equality, inclusion and for the betterment of humankind. UN Convention 1989 was the first international understanding and commitment towards inclusive education. Article 23 of the Convention states that mentally or physically disabled children have the right to enjoy a full life with respect to education, social inclusion and individual development (Thapaliya, 2016). Additionally, the UN general assembly in 1976 declared 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) and it called for a plan of action at the national, regional and international levels, emphasizing equal opportunities, rehabilitation and prevention of disabilities. Furthermore, the general assembly proclaimed 1983-1992 the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons to provide a time frame for the governments and organizations to implement the activities recommended in the World Program of Action. The general assembly in 1992 proclaimed 3rd December as International Day of Person with Disability that marked the end of a decade of disabled persons. The simple purpose of it was to create awareness about people with disabilities and their needs.

In addition, the UN Convention for the Right of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) 2006, further endorsed the provision that disabled persons are to be included in the general education system despite their disabilities. And, now when we talk

about education, inclusion and disability we should not forget the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2015 the world came together and agreed upon 17 Global Goals officially known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to create a better world by 2030, by putting an end to poverty, fighting inequality and addressing the urgency of climate change (United Nations, 2015). Among those 17 goals, goal number 4 is entirely dedicated towards 'Quality Education.' It was agreed to guarantee inclusive and equitable quality education and promote opportunities for lifelong learning. This incorporates everyone, including learners with disabilities and talks about free, inclusive and equal access to education for all.

All these policies, goals and ambitions are in place and the international and national governing bodies and organizations are continuously working for the betterment of learners with disabilities and their education. But, the progress is slow and we lack behind on action. A study conducted by United Nations Children Fund [UNICEF] (2003) evaluated that the educational system in Nepal is not disability friendly as it does not meet the learning requirements of diverse learners. The existing school physical infrastructure, the teaching-learning practices, the shortage of trained and motivated human resources, and the lack of assistive devices and learning materials are responsible for this. A lot has changed and improved since the document was produced but, we still lack behind. One of our national disability policies (as cited in Thapaliya, 2016), talks about accessibility: Every public establishment and place, for example, hospitals, schools, campuses, buses, etc. should be friendly for differently-abled population. But, sadly we are far from the reality. Majority of these important places are not disability friendly. The situation is not much different with the majority of educational institutions as they do not have proper wheelchair access, sign boards and yellow paths. One gets lost while visiting government offices,

hospitals, educational institutions and other public places. So, the policies are there and they are great but we have never been able to implement them properly and making education accessible and inclusive for learners with visual impairment and other disabilities is a far cry.

English Language Learning and Visual Impairment

English language learning is a vital part of our education system now. It is not only the international language of the world but also the medium of instruction at schools these days as most of the subjects are taught in English. Before there used to be one English language subject and others used to be taught in the Nepali language but, now it is exactly opposite. We can generally see that in majority of the institutions Nepali is the only subject taught in the Nepali language, everything else is taught in the English language. So, the need for the English language is greater now. From educational institutions to job markets to international exposure, skill of the English language is a must.

How learners exactly learn the language is a mystery that the experts are still trying to solve. But, we at least know this, when we talk about language learning we must always consider the major skills of language i.e. Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking along with Vocabulary and Grammar. All of these areas are vital for a learner to learn and use the language effectively.

Reading can simply be defined as one of the four language skills that involves making sense of the text through the act of reading itself. Writing on the other hand is using those texts to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form. Similarly, listening involves hearing the sounds and utterances of the language and making sense of them with context. And, speaking is another productive skill like writing that involves using speech to express and communicate. They are all correlated with each

other and vital for language learning. As also mentioned in Al-Eiadeh, Al-Sobh, Al-Zoubi, and Al-Khasawneh (2016), among the four skills reading and listening are regarded as the two receptive skills whereas writing and speaking are productive skills necessary for effective communication. But, we must not forget that reading has a connection with writing and listening with speaking and vice versa (Graham & Hebert as cited in Miller, McCardle, & Long, 2012). As they share common features, students will make the most of any activities if reading and writing go hand in hand and supplement each other (Juriati, Ariyanti, & Fitriana, 2018). Similarly, same is the case with listening and speaking. Demir (2017) explains that speaking is for expression and listening for comprehension, but speaking and listening are inseparable activities that complete the communication process. And when we bring all of them together, language learning begins.

In case of learners with visual impairment, they also start with the same four skills. Since, eyes are weak so they rely on other sense organs more. Listening and speaking play a dominant role in their language learning process. They actively learn reading and writing as well but, listening and speaking have more significant impact on their language learning since most of their input and output takes place through listening and speaking (Tran & Pho, 2020).

The process also varies depending upon the severity of visual impairment. If the partially sighted learner can read printed books and write by themselves then the learning process is somewhat similar to that of a fully sighted person but, if he/she cannot read printed books then there are so far two ways of reading. One is through feeling or sensing the letters written in braille with the help of fingers. And other is through listening to the texts. In the first method, learners use the sense of touch as a way of knowledge consumption. They feel the words and information written in

braille with the help of their fingers and intake the information. Braille is a form of written language especially designed for blind people in which characters are expressed by patterns of raised dots and the person has to feel them with the fingertips (Kavalgeri, Chakraborty, Naz, & Chaitanya, 2019). As Sherman and Richards (as cited in Thapa, 2017), also quoted learning and gaining the knowledge by using senses is one of the ways of learning for visually impaired learners.

The second method by which visually impaired learners read text is by listening. With the advancement of technology, software and applications now they read by listening. There are software and applications in our smartphones and computers that read the text for us in case we cannot read it. And, this is changing the reading behavior of learners with visual impairment. Furthermore, many reading materials are now produced as audiobooks as well to facilitate the needs of visually impaired learners. This is also why listening and speaking plays a major role in their language learning process. They receive mostly through listening and produce through speaking.

In terms of learning and producing writing there are two mediums as well. Luckily due to the advancement of technology nowadays, people feel easy to type digitally on their laptops, computers or smartphones. They write digitally with the help of these mediums but they write physically in braille as well with the help of slate and stylus. Slate and stylus are basically physical tools used by visually impaired learners to write raised letters in braille which they can easily feel and read by themselves without any assistance. So, interestingly, they read either through touch or through listening and produce writing either in braille or digitally. Hence, listening and speaking play a dominant role in their language learning and application process.

Evaluation and Assessment of Learners with Visual Impairment

Regular evaluation and assessment is a major part of our education system. It is one of the ways to access the learning of our learners. We conduct various assessment and evaluation activities in order to measure the learning achievement of our learners. We often perform these assessments in the form of regular exams, project works, group works, research, internships, workshops, trainings, etc. Learners with visual impairment also take part in various evaluation and assessment activities, but, we often overlook its disabled friendliness and if these assessments and evaluations are actually evaluating the real capacity of learners with visual impairment?

Before going into all this, first let's get a basic understanding of the concept of evaluation and assessment. Many get confused and cannot tell the difference between the both. They are somewhat similar but still have their differences. Assessment is simply the process of obtaining, reviewing and using information about someone or something with the intention of making improvements where necessary whereas, evaluation concentrates more on measuring or observing someone or something systematically and objectively, with an aim of drawing conclusions and making a judgment, using various criteria, usually governed by a set of standards or by making a comparison. In this study, I take assessment as appraisal and evaluation as a process of estimating or determining the value of something. We can see they are closely related but are actually different.

But both of them are widely used in our education system to access the capacity, skill and level of the learners with the sole intention of helping them get better. According to Brown (as cited in Yambi, 2020), assessment refers to a series of procedures used to determine complex qualities of an individual or group of

individuals. This involves accumulation and interpreting information about student's level of attainment of learning goals. Another objective of assessment is to identify strengths and weaknesses of the learner so that the teacher can provide effective feedback to support and improve his/her learning. Likewise, Kizlik (2012), believes that assessment is a process by which information is gathered relative to some known objective or goal. One major feature of assessment is that it is an ongoing and continuous process (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Kizlik also mentions that testing is an important part of assessment. Various tests are conducted in the process of assessment. A test is simply a method of measuring a person's ability, knowledge or performance in a given discipline (Brown, 2004). However, we must be clear that, all tests are assessments but not all assessments are tests (Kizlik, 2012).

When we talk about assessment, we must also consider various types of assessments. There are varieties of assessments like formative and summative, formal and informal, final and continuous, product and process and convergent and divergent according to (McAlpine, 2002). But, let's get a basic understanding of some key assessment practices that are in application in our education system.

Formative and summative assessments are two of the most practiced and implemented assessment system in our country. Formative assessment focuses on continuous assessment and feedback to improve the learning experience of a learner whereas summative assessment evaluates learners at the end of a certain program or course and compares it with certain standards or benchmarks. According to McAlpine (2002), formative assessment is designed to support the learning process by providing feedback to the learner that highlights the areas for improvement to enhance future performance. Whereas summative assessment is for progression and external purposes given at the end of a course designed to judge the student's overall performance.

Similarly, another assessment in practice is formal and informal. Formal assessments are usually data-driven and the students are mindful that the task they are doing is for assessment purposes. On the other hand, informal assessments are driven by content and performance rather than data and the judgments are integrated along with the tasks (McAlpine, 2002). There are other assessment systems as well but these two models are the most practiced ones and form the basis for all other models and ways of assessment.

Evaluation, on the other hand, is a process to judge something on the basis of specific requirements. Kizlik (2012) believes evaluation is a process of giving value and when we evaluate, in terms of value, we participate in some cycles intended to give data so that we assist the process to reach a judgment about a given phenomenon. Furthermore, Weir and Roberts (as cited in Yambi, 2020), also believes that evaluation determines the value of something. So, more specifically, in educational sector, evaluation means measuring or observing the process to evaluate or to ascertain the learners' achievements by comparing with others or some kind of a benchmark. Lastly, the emphasis of evaluation is on grades and the final product rather than the quality and the process. Here, the grades determine the quality and its process.

Sadly, most of our educational practices fall under summative assessment and evaluation. We look at grades and the final product rather than the process, its quality and the journey of the learner. When we look at evaluation and assessment of learners with a visual impairment I think this is where we fall short. We always emphasize on the final outcome and the judgment rather than the process and experience. We admire those who score higher grades and think that they are the ones with the most

value. But, in return, we have done very little to facilitate and make the evaluation and assessment process of visually impaired learners easy and accessible.

They go through the same evaluation system as mainstream learners with the same resources, materials and with the same support and in return, we expect the same outcome which is rather irrational. The examination and assessment criteria and the process are the same for mainstream regular learners and visually impaired learners. They both get the same printed question papers and both of them are required to write the answers in answer sheets. There is no provision of providing large printed questions to help partially impaired learners or questions in braille to help blind learners. Before attending the exam, the examination committee does not ask a disabled learner his/her requirement or support that he/she might need. Furthermore, majority of institutions do not provide supportive learning materials for visually impaired learners and most are unaware of their learning needs.

Yes, visually impaired learners do get extra time in exams conducted by the government and they do get to keep a writer to help them in writing their papers but, they have to go through a hectic procedure to have this privilege. It is great that extra time and support of a writer is available for visually impaired learners but, I think we should move towards making them independent writers who can write their own papers by themselves. As much as possible Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should be developed to assist the learners with visual impairment. Functional Vision Evaluation (FVE) should be conducted first, in order to ascertain to what extent do the learners see and Learning Media Assessment (LMA) should be done to know about suitable literacy media for a visually disabled learner because only then we will know systematically the appropriate learning and literacy media required to support them (Koenig & Holbrook, 1995). These two assessments should be conducted first to learn

about the learner's needs before the exam and provide them with the required supportive assistance whether it be a writer or question in large print or in braille or in audio. Moreover, with the advance in technology, digital exams using modern Information Communications Technology (ICT) tools could be a viable solution. Not only about assessment and evaluation, but we should also pay attention to learning materials and resources along with trained teachers and the right environment. Only then I think we will be able to support learners with visual impairment in the right manner.

Assistive Technology and Visual Impairment

We live in the age of technology. Throughout known human history, we have never been as technically advanced and sound as we are at present. We cannot imagine a life without technology. We need it in every step of the day. From our, everyday life to transportation to medical science to education, everything is governed and affected by technology and its advancement. In this study, I conceptualize technology as the use of different tools, for example the use of science in industry, engineering, etc., to invent things or solve our problems of daily life more efficiently. In the case of learners with vision-related disabilities, technology functions as a means to solve problems.

Visually impaired people depend heavily on technology, probably more than normal people. Their everyday activity, professional engagement and everything including the learning process are significantly technology dependent. These modern technologies and gadgets have made their life and learning process much easier, accessible and usable. These technologies that they use are termed as assistive technologies and the gadgets and devices that they use in this process are termed as assistive devices. A recent study by World Health Organization (2019a) on assistive

technology has defined it as the technology that enables and promotes inclusion and participation of persons with disability, aging populations, and people with non-communicable diseases by maintaining or improving an individual's functioning and independence, thereby promoting their well-being. It provides people better opportunities for healthy, productive, independent and dignified lives, and to participate in education, the labor market and civic life. In other words, Brassai, Bako, and Losonczy (2011) believe that assistive technology simply blends technology, equipment, devices, appliances, services, systems, processes and environmental change by older people or those with disabilities in their everyday life to overcome social, infrastructural barriers, and enables them to actively participate in society and to perform activities easily and safely. So, basically it is just a support system that people with disabilities rely on to make their life easy, accessible and comfortable.

When we talk about assistive technologies, we almost always assume that it is mostly used by people with disabilities. But that actually is not the case, a study done by World Health Organization (2019a) believes that more than one billion people around the world need some sort of assistive assistance for their regular and proper functioning. This one billion includes old aged population, people with disabilities, people with mental health conditions like dementia and autism and those with gradual function decline. So, many use it but not everyone is aware about it. Furthermore, assistive technologies play an important role to ensure that SDGs are met. Without them, it is difficult to meet agendas related to education, health and employment which will automatically affect every other aspect.

Wheelchairs, hearing aids, spectacles, pill organizers, artificial limbs, memory aids, specialized computer hardware and software, customized telephones and many others are some of the examples of assistive technologies, devices and products. But,

here we will touch upon those that are used by learners with visual impairment. The devices and products that they use include computers, smartphones, talking watches, magnifiers, braille printers, screen readers, digital recorders, scanners, etc. Among numerous such devices, nowadays most used ones are computers and smartphones. Yes, scanner, printers, recorders along with everything is used but the major influence and effect we can see are of computer and smartphone.

Not only visually impaired learners but, everyone else is dependent on these two devices too. But, to a visually impaired computer and smartphone has literally been third eyes. Every other activity such as scanning, printing, magnifying, recording and all other activities come back to computers and smartphones. They are able to do everything from travelling to communicating to learning with the help of these devices.

Many wonder on how a person with a visual impairment uses a computer. People do not know that the normal computer that we are using actually talks as well. There are varieties of ways to make a computer talk. The one most used by visually impaired people is with the help of screen reading software called Job Access with Speech (JAWS) and Non Visual Desktop Access (NVDA). Besides these, there are other ways of making a computer read every activity that we do. Windows has an inbuilt system called narrator and Mac has Voice Over that reads everything we point our cursor to. Furthermore, there are various Add-ons in modern browsers such as Read Aloud, Read & Write and many others that will read aloud the webpage to us making it accessible for visually impaired learners. Lastly, many software that are used frequently in academic context such as Microsoft Word, Adobe Reader, Microsoft Edge and so on come with their own in-built read aloud feature to cater to the needs of visually impaired learners.

Similarly, same is the case with smartphones. Smartphones do not have as many options as in a computer and the software does not fully support all the accessibility features as in computer but it has its own in-built feature called Talk Back in android and Voice Over in iPhone Operating System (IOS). Talk Back and Voice Over are basically in-built screen reading mechanisms that make it possible for a visually impaired person to use the devices like everyone else. This feature enables the smartphone to read everything on the screen. Apart from this, there are other features like text to speech/voice recognition, select to speak, voice input keyboards and magnifiers that make it possible for a visually impaired learner to use these devices (Senjam, Manna, & Bascaran, 2021). Furthermore, there are numerous book reading software, navigating applications and a community of people providing various support through the medium of internet to make the world more accessible and adaptable for learners with visual impairment.

Apart from computers and smartphones, magnifiers are another important tool that visually impaired learners use in their everyday life. There are various forms of magnifiers that they use. They use physical magnifying glass to magnify documents and other things around them so that it becomes visible to them. There are digital magnifiers and detectors that help them to identify various things like money, photograph, document, etc. Moreover, there are in-built magnifiers in computers and smartphones that help partially sighted people to use those devices. Lastly, there is a magnifying system in present-day browsers as well that helps partially sighted person to zoom in on the screen and use it like a normal person. All these accessibility tools make learning and living life easier for a visually impaired person.

Along with these advanced computers, smartphones, magnifiers, software and applications we have scanners, printers, braille systems and other various materials to

assist and help learners with visual impairment. All these accessibility tools and assistive technologies have not only made their learning easier but their life as well.

Visual Impairment and Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning basically is the art of learning collaboratively. In this process, everyone works together by understanding each other's needs and requirements and support them to accelerate the learning experience. Collaborative teaching and learning is a teaching approach that involves groups of students who are engaged in solving a common problem, complete a task or create a product (MacGregor, 1990). For Henry Ford, a collaborative approach refers to coming together is the beginning, keeping together is progress and working together is success. This notion is applicable in all situations where people come together in groups to achieve a certain goal or task (Chandra, 2015). And, for a learner with vision-related disabilities, this is one of the central ways of learning as they often require assistance and support of others to accelerate their learning process.

Many scholars have come up with their theories and notions of collaborative learning and how it affects our learning. In a way they all are right but for this study, Lev Vygotsky's notion of collaborative learning has been considered. Since, he believes that learning takes place through social interactions where the community and surrounding that we live in plays a central role in our learning. As Vygotsky (2012) stated, learning happens through interaction and communication. In his sociocultural theory, he states that learning happens as students interact with their peers, teachers and experts. He terms this as interaction with More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). All these factors and variables create a learning environment where collaborative learning flourishes.

Besides his sociocultural theory, another concept Vygotsky is known for is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and More Knowledgeable Other (MKO).

MKO as the word suggests denotes to someone with a superior knowledge or a higher ability than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept (McLeod, 2018). Teacher or someone older generally fits the mold but it is not necessarily the case. It does not only mean someone expert and one with more knowledge than the learner. MKO can be anyone: peers, parents or friends who are willing to work collaboratively with the learner (Vygotsky, 1978). And, it is here the concept of ZPD comes into play as both of these notions are related with each other. ZPD basically revolves around the concept of what a child can accomplish by working individually and what he/she can achieve through interaction, instruction and guidance from others. Vygotsky believes ZPD is this place where a child receives vital information and ideas from MKOs to accelerate and better facilitate his/her learning. These concepts resonated with the learning process of learners with visual impairment as their peers, teachers, friends and other adults consistently play a central role in their learning process.

Collaborative learning is the key to their success as everything that they do is highly dependent on their peers, teachers, parents and other supporting factors. They can achieve various tasks by themselves but with the right support, guidance, instruction and advice they can achieve greater success. In collaborative learning each member is responsible for themselves and their peer's success, they both work collaboratively in order to achieve a common goal (Laal & Laal, 2012). Furthermore, collaboration is one of the important 21st century skills Erdoğan (2019) which plays a crucial role in learning inside and outside the classroom. Not only that it transforms classroom learning by changing students from passive recipients of information given

by an expert teacher to active agents who construct knowledge (Goodsell, Maher, & Tinto, 1992).

While comprehending the notion of collaborative learning it must not be assumed that only group and peer works are a form of collaboration. As it is more than just working together in groups, it is the whole communication process in the classroom. How does the teacher communicate with students in regard to the information to be learned and how it is to be assessed? How do students communicate with the teacher and with each other? What is the role of the parent? Is the communication directed one way, two ways, or multiple ways? Is it in written, oral, tactile, or computer generated form? Everything, the process as a whole is collaboration (Tileston, 2011). Besides this, another term that should be discussed is cooperation as we often think collaboration and cooperation as the same thing. In collaborative learning everyone works together to achieve a common goal whereas in cooperative learning a member just assists or helps to achieve another member's goal.

In conclusion, all these elements i.e. society, institution, teachers, peers, parents, MKOs, ZPD and so on, all come together under the umbrella of collaborative learning leading to interaction, communication and social togetherness eventually creating the best environment to hold a space where learners with visual impairment learn.

Research Gap

A close and critical study of the literature revealed a lack of research in the field of learners with partial vision-related disabilities in the context of Nepal. There were few studies in this area but they didn't explore the needs and experiences of partial visually impaired learners.

There was a study by Thapa (2017), which focused on English language teaching practices for visually impaired learners. Another significant study was conducted by Thapaliya (2016), that presented an overview of disability in Nepal. Furthermore, Chapagain (2013), was an autoethnography study where he talked about various challenges he faced in the journey of English language learning. Apart from them, there were several studies by Lamichhane that revolved around the notion of inclusive education and disability but did not address the experiences, stories, learning mechanisms and needs of partially impaired learners. A study by Lamichhane (2013) explored disability and barriers to education. This study discussed barriers faced by Nepalese with disabilities in obtaining a school education. Another significant study was Lamichhane (2015), which talked about social inclusion of people with disabilities. In this study, he discussed the issue of social inclusion of people with disabilities who acquired impairments through Nepal's decade-long insurgency. Lamichhane (2016), individuals with visual impairments teaching in Nepal's mainstream schools: A model for inclusion was another crucial study that explored the challenges and strengths of teachers with visual impairments teaching in Nepal's mainstream schools. Finally, teaching students with visual impairments in an inclusive educational setting (Lamichhane, 2017) was another study that highlighted teaching style considerations in Nepal's mainstream schools for students with visual impairments. However, none of them touched upon the field of learners with partial visual impairment and their needs and experiences. The studies were not learner-focused. And, as we know teaching methods might not work but, learning strategies do (Oxford, 2003). Learners' experiences are the major factor for exploring learners' needs, requirements and challenges which act as the foundation to design learning spaces in order to facilitate and accelerate their learning. To that end, this study is

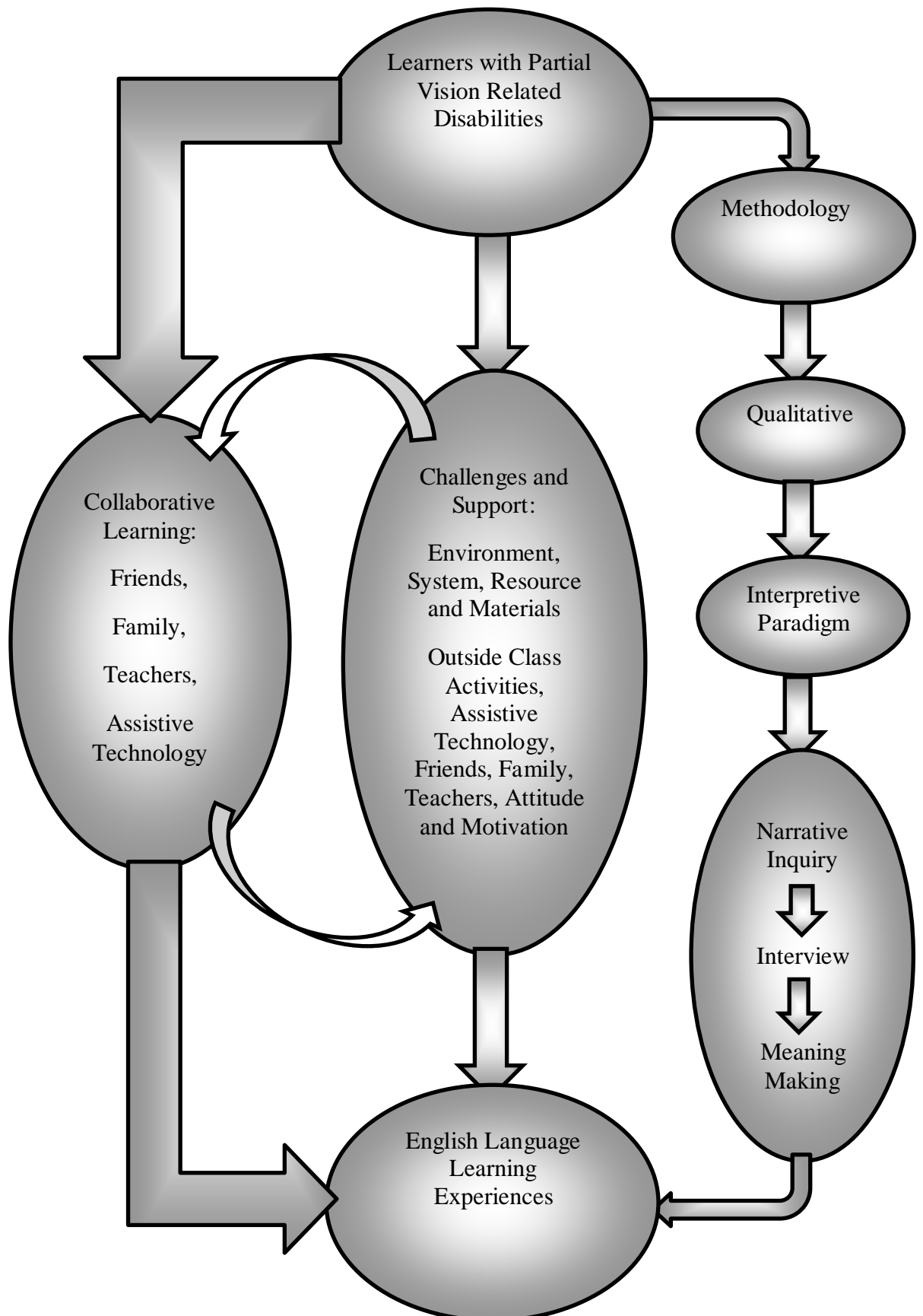
relevant and resonates with both visual impairment and the English language teaching and learning community.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework is vital for the overall planning and conceptualization of the study. It gives the reader and the researcher a bird's eye view of the study.

Conceptual framework is also crucial to visualize the study and its process as well.

The following conceptual framework demonstrates the relationship between learners with vision-related disabilities, collaborative learning theory, various aspects of research and its methodologies along with factors affecting the learning process and experience, eventually leading to English language learning.



Chapter Summary

This chapter touched upon various literary studies done in the area of learners with visual impairment. The chapter began with a thematic review and clarification of various terminologies used in the study. Along with thematic review various policies, acts and laws put in place by national and international agencies for quality and inclusive education of learners with visual impairment were also discussed. Furthermore, how collaborative learning acts as an important learning theory that affects the overall learning experiences of learners with visual impairment was also discussed. Lastly, I reviewed empirical studies and presented the gap in the literature along with my conceptual framework.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter concentrates on the methodological aspect of the study. It begins with my research paradigm where I discuss my beliefs, values and how I perceive the world. Then it highlights the research method that I have used and why I have used it in particular. Other elements of research design such as research site, participants, data collection method and how I made sense of the data follow next. Finally, it discusses quality standards and ethical considerations to maintain the necessary ethics, authenticity and standard guideline of research.

Philosophical Considerations

Philosophies are basically belief systems that everyone has. All grow up in an influence of certain ideology or some kind of belief value system. And, they always guide and affect the way we view the world. We are the product of our experiences, the books that we read, the people that we meet, places we travel and all the other things that we surround ourselves with. They always have an effect on our worldview and our interpretation. In other words, human interprets their world and then acts as believed by (Hammersley, 2013 as cited in Pham, 2018). Like it or not research is directly and indirectly affected by a belief system which falls under the domain of research paradigm. I believe there are multiple realities and experiences of people, their stories and various other factors affect their notion of reality. That is why my research is guided by interpretive research paradigm. Let us further break my paradigm into 3 sub-dimensions i.e. ontology, epistemology and axiology and look at it in more detail.

Ontology

Ontology is the way we perceive reality and truth. There are people who think there is only one single reality and truth and there are those who believe in multiple realities. I am one of those who believes in multiple realities and that truth can be arbitrary. Our circumstances, situations, contexts, experiences and other external factors shape and change our reality and truth. They are multidimensional and as Guba and Lincoln (as cited in Bastola, 2017) also believed reality is constructed in the minds of an individual.

As my research concentrates on understanding the English language learning experiences of learners with partial vision-related disabilities, I believe everyone will go through various situations and experiences and they will interpret truth and reality in their own way. Adding to that, interpretivists also believe reality is subjective, multiple and socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Krauss, 2005; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011 as cited in Pham, 2018), which further supports the idea that everyone has their own way of doing things and truth for every individual is different and unique.

Epistemology

Epistemology basically deals with the world of knowledge, how it is built and obtained. Different individuals have their own beliefs and thoughts about knowledge. Some believe it as subjective and some as objective. I as a researcher believe knowledge to be subjective affected by various factors such as our upbringing, the society that we live in, the people we associate ourselves with, the experiences that we have, the places we travel and the mistakes that we make. All of these factors and more, determine our knowledge system. And, each individual lives a different story and goes through different circumstances.

In this study, I have carefully looked into the lived experiences of my participants as my research data and analyzed it best to my knowledge. I have looked into their experiences and struggles as a visual impaired English language learner and tried to explore and understand their worldview along with problems and struggles that they have faced throughout their educational journey. We know that stories emerge from self and they are composed and received in context (Riessman, 2008). People have their own understanding and interpretation of the same context. So, I generated knowledge through their stories, the conversations and the interactions between me as a researcher and my visually impaired participants who were involved in the English language learning process.

Axiology

Axiology deals with value and people's belief systems basically. Everyone reacts and thinks in a different way. They have their own philosophy and belief system which is guided by culture that they are associated with, the society that they live in, family background and other numerous circumstances. And, whatever they do is guided by their value system. My axiological stance in this study is that I will value my participant's value system. Ontology, epistemology and axiology, all of them are interrelated and guide each other. The world of reality and knowledge is also highly affected by the world of value and belief systems. Since the study is all about narratives, experiences and stories of visually impaired learners, it will surely reflect the belief value system of the participants. To some extent, it will definitely be guided by my value and belief system as well but, I have tried my best to be non-judgmental and neutral while analyzing the data.

Interpretive Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a system of correlated practices and notions that determine the nature of enquiry along three dimensions i.e. ontology, epistemology and methodology. We all know there are many established research paradigms i.e., Positivism, Interpretivism and Critical Postmodernist and so on. This study is guided by interpretive paradigm because it believes that reality is subjective, there could be multiple correct answers and multiple outcomes. Different individuals go through different experiences in their lives which shapes their worldview. As Rehman and Alharthi (2016) affirm, interpretivists believe in socially constructed multiple realities as they are created, not discovered. I also understand that reality is always mediated by our senses. In this study also each individual might have different experiences to share regarding the same situations and circumstances, that is why I have adopted this research paradigm.

Narrative Inquiry as Research Method

The world revolves around stories. People will come and go, but their stories will live on through time. My study revolves around stories and experiences of people. Their lived experiences are my sources of data, which is why I have chosen narrative inquiry as my research method. I believe narrative inquiry is the right way for me because, I understand, experience happens narratively and we need to study educational experience narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007). Before we move on, we must first understand what narrative inquiry is and what a research method really is.

In the simplest of terminologies, a research method is simply a systematic process that we follow in order to explore our research area. Furthermore, in the words of Saylor Academy (as cited in Sheppard, 2021), research methods comprise of

systematic processes of inquiry applied that enables us to understand our social world. And narrative simply is an account of a series of events told in a story-like form either written or spoken. To put it in another way, narrative inquiry revolves around human stories of experiences and people make meaning and sense of their lives through their experiences and encounters. According to Carr (1986), narrative pertains to longer-term or larger-scale sequences of actions, experiences and human events, events that shape us and change our perspective altering our way of thinking, is not associated with short-term elementary experiences and actions. It is a general belief that we view the world as per our experiences and encounters and narrative inquiry as a method deals with human experiences and stories. Hence, I believe this is the perfect method to explore the issue. I rephrase the ideas of the ideas of Jean Paul Sartre, a French philosopher and existentialist, from his book *Words* (1964):

People are always tellers of tales.

They live surrounded by their stories and

The stories of others; they see everything

That happens to them through those stories

And they try to live their lives as

If they were recounting them (as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 1).

By the above quotation, we can say that everyone has a story to tell and experiences to share. This study also basically explores the lived experiences of partially visually impaired English language learners. In this study, I do not claim to demonstrate the exact 'truth', but rather aims for 'verisimilitude' that the results have the appearance of truth or reality (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Hence, as Donald (1988) also believes, the conclusions of this research generally stay open-ended as human experiences are open-ended and lack a definite conclusion.

Study Site and Participant Selection

For the participant to be eligible for the study there were a few criteria that I had i.e. first, one must be partially sighted and second, one must have learned English as a foreign language during their school days. But, I also made sure that I select participants from all walks of life and with diverse experiences so that we get different opinions and experiences. Furthermore, I also tried to incorporate participants of various ethnic backgrounds and also paid attention to gender equality and included both male and female participants.

There were challenges in selecting and finding the right participants. Setting criteria and requirements made it challenging to find participants. So, I followed a purposive sampling using my personal network in the disability community to find the right participants. I chose three participants in total namely (pseudonyms) Jajanka, Clegane and Delores. Purposive sampling technique is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002 as cited in Palinkas et al., 2015). Even under purposeful sampling, I opted for criterion based case selection because I believe, criterion sampling reviews the essential aspects to meet some predetermined criterion of importance, thereby explicitly (or implicitly) compares the criterion cases with those that do not manifest the criterion (Patton, 2015). The reason behind using this technique was the specific criteria and requirements that the study demanded i.e., all the participants must be partially sighted and they must all know the English language.

But, finding the time to interview and transcribe the recorded audio took some time. They were all professionals so they were pretty busy and it took almost a month to get the entire interview done. However, we coordinated and conducted the

interview. All of the participants were people I had met at some point in my life. They were not close friends but I had met them in some programs or some events. I requested them to be my participants and they agreed. After finalizing my three participants I asked for their time and conducted the interview.

Regarding my research site, I selected the Kathmandu Valley. The participants could be from anywhere inside the valley. I chose the Kathmandu Valley as my research site because we have a general belief that we can find people from all walks of life here. We can find students, teachers, professionals, investors and others. It is not that we cannot find them in other places but people come here from all over the country in search of jobs, education, health facilities, opportunities and other purposes. So, Kathmandu, as a capital city, has become a hub where we can find varieties of people. But, due to the pandemic I could not travel and meet them in person, rather we met online via Zoom and Google Meet and conducted the interview. This was both a challenge and an opportunity at the same time. Challenge in the sense that we could not meet in person and opportunity in the sense that we got to use and experiment the new technology. It was my first time interviewing via an online medium.

Short Profile of the Participants

In order to better understand and connect with the stories and experiences of the participants, we must know some details about their lives, this is why I have presented a short profile of the participants below.

Delores

Delores, originally from Hetauda is currently living in Kathmandu. She has a mixed experience of integrated and mainstream education. The cause of her visual impairment is cataract due to which she attended an integrated school in Kathmandu

until her SLC. After her SLC all her educational journey took place in regular mainstream institutions. She has a bachelor's degree in Social Work and English, a diploma in Counseling Psychology and she is currently doing her master's in Gender Studies from Tribhuvan University. Professionally, she is working in an Australian-based tech company as a Learning and Development business coordinator. Apart from this, she is a board member in an organization which works actively to spread awareness and support people with disabilities. In addition to that, she is voluntarily involved in many other organization that works for the betterment of people with disabilities.

Jajanka

Jajanka is a local resident of Kathmandu who got his education from mainstream institutions. From his schooling to university, he attended regular educational institutions and adapted in the system. Cause of his visual impairment is due to retinal pigment degeneration also known as macular degeneration.

Educationally, he has a master's degree in Counseling Psychology from Tribhuvan University and a bachelor's degree in English, Journalism and Psychology from Bangalore, India as a recipient of a government scholarship that he won.

Professionally, Jajanka is a full-time practitioner of counseling psychology, part-time educator and a part-time content writer. He has a rich and diverse professional experiences of being a Teach For Nepal (TFN) fellow, an intern at United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Nepal, teaching and in other areas and likes to see himself as a jack of all trades. Apart from this, he loves travelling, exploring and is an adventure seeker.

Clegane

Clegane is originally from Shyangja but currently is living in Kathmandu with his wife and family. He had a mixed educational experience of both integrated and mainstream schools. The cause of his visual impairment was cataract, due to which he attended an integrated school in Pokhara until his SLC. After that, he came to Kathmandu and educated himself in mainstream regular institutions. He has a master's degree in Sociology from Tribhuvan University and a bachelor's degree in Rural Development and Sociology from the same university. Besides this, he has also travelled to the United States of America (USA) in a cultural exchange program as a recipient of Fulbright scholarship and to Japan for ICT training. Professionally, for his living, he is an independent contractor who interprets languages. He is a freelancer with his own company. Furthermore, he is a general secretary in an organization that he founded in 2012 A.D with a couple of other members which works in the field of education, inclusion, health and employment opportunities of young persons with disability.

Data Collection Method

Narrative and stories are the core elements of my research. Since narrative inquiry is my research method, exploring the learning experiences of the learners, their stories and their lived experiences are vital to my study. In order to uncover genuine retelling of their lives I believe interview is the best tool because it provides in-depth information pertaining to participants' experiences and viewpoints on a particular topic (Turner III, 2010). So, for my data collection I conducted semi-structured open-ended in-depth interviews to explore the stories. I applied semi-structured interview because at some point we have to be focused in a certain area and retrieve specific information whereas at some point we have to be flexible and let the

conversation flow (Adams & Cox, 2008), I understand that I cannot prepare for a life story interview by devising a lot of specific questions but I need to make the participant comfortable and facilitate in telling me their stories. After the opening request for a narrative, my role as a researcher is to remain a good and critical listener (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), which is also why I opted for an open-ended in-depth interview.

They were all professionals which made it difficult in managing time for the interview. But, they were really cooperative and understanding as well, and we managed a common time between us and conducted the interview. The threat of pandemic was still there so we mutually agreed and conducted the interview online. Zoom video conferencing and Google meetings were the two primary platforms that were used for conducting the interview. Zoom is basically a collaborative, cloud-based videoconferencing service that offers features including online meetings, group messaging services, and secure recording of sessions (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016 as cited in Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019). Similarly, Google Meet or Google Hangouts Meet is also a video conferencing platform built by Google. While conducting the interview prior consent of the participants were taken and the interview was recorded. I also kept a field note on the side to record and document subtle behavioral variations. Since the interview was online, my observation was limited to subtle changes in the tone of their voices, switching between the language depending upon the question, their hesitation and excitement during the interview.

One of the issues faced was unstable internet connection which resulted in repetition of the question, lagging, a lot of waiting and even switching to mobile data. But, they were all very cooperative and understanding. The interview was directly

recorded in my laptop through the inbuilt system of both zoom and google meet. All three interviews went on for more than two hours so we did it in multiple sittings. Since it was an in-depth interview I let their stories flow and did not think it would be right of me to stop them as they were telling their stories. As Dörnyei (2007) also mentioned, in deep interviews participants reveal sensitive information that is not related to the goal of the study but, that becomes a valuable asset for the interviewer to know the participant better and to build a good connection with them, as a result, benefits during the overall interview as they become comfortable with us. Later I listened to the recordings, transcribed them and analyzed the data. I stopped with three participants because the data seem to saturate. All of them were agreeing on the same things and were narrating in a similar fashion. This is why I did not go for more participants and settled for three.

Meaning Making Process

I actually underestimated this process. I thought this was going to be easy and would not be so time-consuming. But, I could not be more wrong. My total recorded interview was between seven to eight hours and it took me a really long time to transcribe it. As Dörnyei (as cited in Alshenqeeti, 2014) also indicated, a one-hour interview may tentatively take up to six to seven hours to transcribe, and around fifty pages of transcript: I spent weeks transcribing the conversation between me and the participant. The interviews were all conducted in the Nepali language with occasional code-switching between Nepali and English. I translated the interview into English during the transcription.

After the transcription, I moved on to the next step i.e. coding and generating themes. For this I first listened to the interview again and again, I read the transcripts several times and identified recurring narratives, opinions and experiences. Then, I

coded and categorized them. As explained in Tweed and Charmaz (2012), coding is actually the first step of the analytic process that involves taking the data apart. When coding, researchers break their data into manageable and analyzable fragments and name these fragments. Moreover, Charmaz (as cited in Saldaña, 2016), also affirms coding as the “critical link” between data collection and their explanation of meaning. After that, I searched for common themes which I categorized under my three research questions. In other words, it is simply a process to divide, group, reorganize and link the data to derive meaning out of it (Grbich, 2013). Eventually, the data was analyzed and discussed in light with relevant literature and theories to support and validate my opinions, claims and narratives.

Quality Standards

A researcher must always pay attention to the quality standards while conducting the study. It is important and an integral part of the study because the knowledge that we as a researcher are sharing and the knowledge and stories that we collect through interviews and other mediums must not only be genuine and authentic but also reliable and meet a certain standard. In my study, I have used Lincoln and Guba’s guideline of trustworthiness to assess the quality of my study. Trustworthiness of a study is guided by four major criteria i.e. credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Stenfors, Kajamaa, & Bennett, 2020). Along with this I have also considered verisimilitude as one of my important quality standards. To sum it all up, there should be a correlation and connection between all the elements of the study i.e. between the data we collect, the literature we review and the analysis that is done based on the data. To assure this I have maintained these quality standards in my study.

Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude is one of those quality standards that should always be considered by a researcher guided by narrative inquiry research method. It is important because in narrative inquiry research we deal with narratives and stories. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) in their prominent work, ‘stories of experience and narrative inquiry’ also mention it as an important criterion to judge the value of narrative inquiry. It believes that lived experience method does not critique individual lives, but rather it presents them for comparison with others (Given, 2008). And I as a researcher made sure that the stories I uncover and the narratives I present represent the entire partially visually impaired community.

Moreover, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2005) also has defined it as “*the quality of seeming to be true or real*” (p. 1698). Similarly, research literature believes, verisimilitude enables us to make our study seem ‘real’ and ‘alive,’ transporting the reader directly into the world of the study (Creswell, 2007 as cited in Loh, 2013). Hence, in order to meet the quality standards, I have made sure that my study resonates with the readers.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is another quality standard that is vital to every qualitative study. A study must have a sense of trustworthiness and authenticity, the data, narratives and stories that we tell must be genuine and true. So, in order to maintain trustworthiness in my research I paid attention to parallel criteria of trustworthiness as mentioned in Lincoln and Guba (1986) i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

I maintained the credibility of my study through prolonged engagement with the participants and through peer debriefing with my fellow researcher friend and my

supervisor. Similarly, transferability has been maintained through thick description as suggested by (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Henry, 2015). I concentrated on providing deeply detailed account of one's research to check the potential for application in other similar contexts i.e., times, places, and people. I have maintained dependability by maintaining consistency in my research. Consistency with the research process and its analysis and also by doing check and balance. Finally, I have paid attention to confirmability of my study by maintaining a link or relationship between the data and the findings (Stenfors et al., 2020).

Ethical Considerations

We must always pay attention to ethics and value people's stories. As qualitative researchers, we often deal with people's lived experiences and real-life accounts and when we are dealing with real-life incidents, we directly and indirectly have access to their lives, emotions, feelings, memories and other sensitive information. So, we should always be extra cautious while dealing with these elements. Furthermore, Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001) also mention that, the protection of human subjects or participants in any research study is imperative hence, the need for ethics and ethical consideration.

In the study Informed consent, anonymity, voluntary participation, privacy and confidentiality have been duly maintained. Participants were pre-informed and the study was only conducted with their permission as it is believed as the most valuable of all ethical principles (Davidson, 2008; Howe & Moses, 1999; Rivière, 2011; 45 CFR 46, 2009 as cited in Udo-Akang, 2013). The study was conducted with the participant's voluntary participation and at their own time. Furthermore, anonymity has been maintained using pseudonyms meaning their names, personal identities, affiliated organizations and other valuable and sensitive details cannot be identified

based on the study (Recker, 2013). Lastly, privacy and confidentiality have been maintained by being cautious about the data and stories which the participants didn't want the readers to know. Apart from this, no particular identity will be revealed in any form of research disclosure including report, paper and presentation (Recker, 2013).

Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on the methodological aspect of the research. It started with research paradigm where I justified why I selected the interpretive paradigm and my philosophical stance. While making my philosophical stance I touched upon my ontology, epistemology and axiology. Furthermore, I have discussed my reasons behind selecting narrative inquiry as my research method along with various components of research design such as research site, participants, data collection process and how I made sense of the data. Lastly, I have concluded the chapter with the description of some quality standards that I have maintained and the ethical considerations that were considered to withhold the essence of a research.

CHAPTER IV

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

This chapter analyzes, explores and critically examines the English language learning experiences of learners with partial vision-related disabilities through their stories. The participants shared their experiences, memories and moments of learning the English language. These shared lived experiences are discussed under four major themes i.e. English language learning, seating arrangement, evaluation and assessment and role of assistive technology in language learning with the aim of highlighting the English language learning experiences of the participants eventually answering the first research question of my dissertation i.e. how do learners with partial vision-related disabilities learn the English language?

English Language Learning

Language learning takes place in numerous ways and forms. There is no one such way of learning a language and no method works 100% of the time. It is the learners that affect the process along with various other factors such as the environment, exposure, materials, resources, community, friends, etc. As Al Zoubi (2018) mentions that, it is a general belief among researchers that a learner learns a language much more quickly and easily when exposed to the target language as it plays an essential role in learning the language easily and successfully. We learn a language much faster when we get exposed to the community of the target language. Moreover, motivation is one of the major factors for learning a language (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1959). It is also believed that if we are in a situation where we must learn a target language for our survival or a need then also the learner learns

the language rather quickly. Clegane had a similar experience to share, he did get introduced to the English language at an early age in his school but he was not proficient in it. He could understand it but was not fluent and confident in his English but, a visit to the USA on a cultural exchange program changed all that, he fondly recalled, *“I was exposed to the real English language there, I had no choice but to speak, I was in that circle and that helped my language proficiency and fluency a lot. And it built my confidence as well.”* But Clegane also confessed that he consciously put himself in a position and exposed himself to the English language during his bachelor’s studies. He recounted:

When I came to Kathmandu after my SLC, I joined and completed my intermediate from MM College and it was then I had this realization that I must improve my English so I enrolled myself into a private institution and slowly I built my English language. It didn’t happen overnight but slowly, as we started taking exams in English, reading and making notes in English, it slowly built.

Clegane did this purposefully as he realized the importance and need of the English language but, his learning process had started very early in his life. It was when we were talking about his school and early days that he shared, *“...it started casually in the school setting with normal regular classes. I picked up the language slowly as the classes progressed.”* But, even as a child he was fascinated with the language. As explained by Gass and Selinker (2008), if a learner is motivated and interested in a language, he/she learns much faster and to a greater degree. As we were talking, he fondly shared one of his incidences that played a big role in his language learning:

Since it was an integrated school foreigners used to come to support us with donations and materials, and when they used to come I used to go to them and talk with them. Hello Namaste, my name is this this, I would talk with them regardless of my abilities. My other friends were shy to speak with them but I kept on doing it regardless of my language. Our school didn't have an ideal English learning environment as we were a community school but, I kept on communicating with the foreigners and I enjoyed it as well.

Clegane unconsciously was practicing and adapting various strategies to learn a foreign language. Of course he did not know anything about the underlying principles and theories of language learning at that time but as he was talking with foreigners he was actually exposing himself to the native speakers of the language. Native speakers of language and exposure to the target language helps in language learning. When we get exposed to the target language in its natural form, we learn the language much faster because we gradually internalize the practical model of language and its usage (Al Zoubi, 2018).

Moreover, another thing that Clegane was practicing unconsciously is that he was overcoming his shyness and showing interest in the language. From the discussion of Gass and Selinker (2008) and Gardner and Lambert (1959), we know that, if we are motivated and interested in learning a language, it becomes much easier for us to learn the language. Clegane further emphasized:

When we talk with foreigners we will learn about their way of life and culture. Furthermore, I was partially sighted, as a result I could see a little. So, I would immediately go in front and communicate with them. And, they would also happily talk back, sometimes give me chocolate as well. And, I would say, 'thank you' or 'excuse me' while talking. They used to talk in a very polite

manner and that used to energize and motivate me to talk further at that age.

That is how my English started.

Listening to Clegane's story of learning English, I understood that communicative approach to language learning worked for him since communication, exposure and attitude towards the language made a huge difference in his learning of the language. Had the native speakers of the language not spoken to him in a polite and welcoming manner, he might have never been motivated to learn the language.

Clegane learnt the language through communicative approach to language learning as this approach believes that communication and interaction are more important along with expressions to learn a language rather than syntactic rules (Nunan, 1999). And, this concept stayed with Clegane and influenced his learning. But, it was not the same with Delores and Jajanka. Each one of them learnt the English language in a different way. While Clegane learnt through communication and speaking, Jajanka distinctly remembers and emphatically affirmed, "story, by reading storybooks!" he further elaborated:

Like I said before, it was only when I reached class two, three, four that I really started to study and put some effort into it. And, how it started was, I learnt that if I study then I will get good grades in exams. When I score good marks, I will be first, second and third. If I become first, second, third then the school will give me prizes. And what prize does the school give? Storybooks: storybooks written in English. And, the day I used to get the books, I used to read almost the entire book on that same day. That is how I built my language.

He again restated, "I learnt and built my language through reading." As Foncha (2014) also mentions reading is considered one of the dominant mediums of learning a language. Jajanka further added:

And, by reading course books. In the beginning of the session we used to get new books. I was not able to see the pictures, it might be due to my sight. It was difficult for me to distinguish since color and pictures were not that clear to me, so, I was not interested in them. But, I was into stories. We had two/three books Gulmohar, Headway and Active English. The school used to teach us at least two or three of these books in a year. From the day I bought new books to a week I would finish reading all the stories in those books. I used to do this every year in every session. I was really interested in reading and I would say reading built my English language. I used to share this same story with my students when I was a TFN fellow.

From Jajanka's experience as well we can see that reading plays an important role in building one's language. He again reestablished that:

I would say it was reading and in later stage it was watching: by watching YouTube videos and listening to the English spoken in those videos. Listening: it's listening to English. By listening to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), The BBC radio and Television (TV).

He beautifully summarized, *"I built my English through reading and listening: by reading others' writing and by listening to others' spoken English texts."*

We can see that Jajanka and Clegane distinctly remember how their learning started and what influenced their learning of the English language but, Delores cannot quite tell how it happened for her. She narrated:

At that time speaking in English was not mandatory at our school. We used to speak in English sometimes but most of the time we would communicate in Nepali. I do not know how I actually learnt English. It happened gradually and unknowingly I guess. I studied English at my school but, I would not say

that was the only reason behind it. I do not know anything about structure and rules of grammar. So, I think it happened organically as I spoke in the classes and later when I engaged myself in other activities outside class I would listen to people speaking in English. I think they affected my learning along with English songs and movies that I watched. I think that is how I learnt the language.

Listening to Delores, I understood that her language learning took place organically and unknowingly. This aligns with Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar that believes children learn language effortlessly and are born with an innate ability to learn languages (Cook, 1985). But, she was exposed to the target language whether via classes, outside activities or songs and movies. I got curious and inquired more regarding the influence of songs and movies on her English to which she answered, *"I used to listen to English songs when I was at school but I started watching movies regularly only after School Leaving Certificate (SLC) Examination. Since I was in a hostel, we could not watch many movies there but I used to listen to songs"* So, at later stage movies and at an early age, songs played an important role in influencing her English language.

This also further validates the fact that everyone learns a language in a different way and there is no one true method that works when it comes to language learning. All methods and strategies have their advantages and disadvantages, some work at a point and some do not. It all depends upon the situation, learners, teachers and other various factors. In conclusion, Clegane primarily learnt it by listening and speaking with the native speakers whereas Jajanka learnt it by reading English storybooks and listening to native speakers speak English on the BBC radio and TV.

Delores, on the other hand, cannot quite tell how she picked it up but what is true is that she was constantly exposed to the target language.

A Normal English Class

When we talk about English language learning, we cannot overlook English classrooms because proper academic learning and sharing of knowledge takes place in the classroom space. They not only get exposed to the target language but language learning also naturally occurs through classroom discourses inside the classroom (Brevik & Rindal, 2020). In this process, all the participants remembered their normal English classes. In this study, we have taken the classes that the learners were in as their normal English classrooms.

Both Clegane and Delores who went to integrated inclusive schools during their childhood had somewhat similar experiences. They both admitted that they did not have a good English learning environment in the school. English speaking was not promoted and English classes used to be a blend of the English and Nepali languages with Nepali being the dominant language. Clegane described his normal English class as:

It normally began with greeting the teacher in English and sometimes he used to say 'sit down' in Nepali and sometimes in English. Then, he used to say the name of the topic in English and ask us to turn to a certain page number. After that he used to teach the contents in English but, we would not understand it. Most of the students did not understand how to distinguish past, present, tenses, or a/an/the and so on. The teacher would again explain everything in Nepali.

He further added:

We never got interested in English, we did not have that environment. There was only one subject which was taught in English and the rest in Nepali. So, as I remember, the teacher would only talk for fifteen to twenty minutes in English in a forty five minute class and students would speak in English only to give answers or while reading out loud.

This shows that teacher talking time was more during Clegane's classes and students did not get much opportunity to participate and practice the language. We know that students should use the language more in order for them to learn it and i.e. student talking time should also be encouraged (Cardenas, 2013). Regarding the English classroom, Delores shared a similar experience with Clegane. She also recalled:

It did not feel like an English class. The teacher used to come and teach us but he would only use the English language while teaching the course, rest of the time we would communicate in Nepali. Even the courses: he would teach in English and then again translate everything into Nepali. And we would practice English only while doing exercises. So, there wasn't such a great English environment.

This shows that the application and use of the target language are vital in order for us to learn it. Classroom interaction does not only mean regular every day back and forth conversation but there is more to that. A lot happens in a classroom, we communicate, share ideas, debate, interpret and make meaning of the language which eventually helps in our learning of the language (Cardenas, 2013). Contrary to Clegane and Delores, Jajanka who went to a private school in the city had a different classroom experience. He remembered:

In my early days my classes were traditional, we had to study book like Gulmohar and books from Indian writers which had difficult vocabulary. So, firstly what the teacher used to do was underline difficult words before starting a certain chapter. In the second session the teacher would make us memorize the difficult words along with its meaning and spelling and punish us if we couldn't memorize them. And, only after that, the teacher would teach the chapter line by line. I have forgotten how my classes were but I remember that I would never understand 100% of the story, I would only understand the central idea of what it was trying to say because of the difficult vocabulary that the writer used.

Jajanka's early school experience further validates Krashen's $i+1$ theory of input hypothesis. It believes that we cannot skip the level and we have to take things slowly. We cannot understand input far beyond our comprehension rather it has to be just a little beyond for us to make sense (Krashen, 1982). But, he found his $i+1$ in storybooks outside the course and simple stories which helped in his language learning. He further revealed that he had a wonderful teacher at the secondary level who used to focus on group discussion and would incorporate games in the classroom to explain the chapters. In his own words:

She was a bit innovative, she incorporated games in the classroom and would also take us outside the classroom to explore and learn. It was a bit different. Furthermore, she promoted external reading and writing more. We had to write something of our own once a week and submit it to ma'am and in return, she would reward us. So, my English classes during my secondary years were wonderful.

From this, we can see that a motivated teacher who genuinely wants the students to improve can really make a difference in a learner's life. Teachers can take various decisions to make their class interesting and facilitate the learners in a proper way (Naibaho, 2019). In the same manner, Clegane also expressed that, captivating and making learners interested also heavily depends upon the teacher. Because later on as he reached the secondary level he shared that he got interested and excited about English classes because the teacher was interesting. He continued:

We had a teacher named Hari and I used to enjoy his classes. Sometimes new teachers used to come for teaching practice and they used to teach us very politely and would make us do various activities. Those classes used to be fun and we used to enjoy them.

From these accounts, we can confirm that a good teacher can make or break the learning experience and people who know about teaching methods and pedagogies have an advantage over people who do not. Moreover, the English classrooms also play an important role in language learning and the environment in the classes can really make a difference in a learner's life.

Learning Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking

When we talk about English language learning we cannot ignore four skills of language i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking. All four of these skills are important to learn a language. Language is learnt with the help of these four skills but, learning how to read, write, listen and speak is rather tricky. There is a big argument regarding which one we learn first. Although they are taught separately, one acquires them all at once simultaneously. Reading helps with our writing and listening helps with our speaking and vice versa. The participants also could not figure out which one did they learn first and how it all happened. These four skills of language are like a

chain, if we break one ring then the entire chain falls apart (Sadiku, 2015). The participants also had the same opinion and talked about the correlation between four skills of language and simultaneously learning them.

Jajanka, who went to a private English medium school, believes reading was the foundation behind his English. He distinctly remembers how he learnt reading, he recalled:

I developed my reading skills along with the English language by reading storybooks and stories in the course books. We used to get storybooks as prizes whenever we would be first, second or third during the annual exam. Likewise, we would also get new course books in the beginning of the session. So, as soon as I would get those books I would self-study them at my home. That is how I developed my reading, by self-study and practice.

In Jajanka's case, it was his English storybooks and stories in his course that got him into reading and his reading as per his experience was self-taught. It was slow and gradual but he taught himself through stories. And, he admitted that it was his reading that helped them with this writing as both these skills are closely related to each other and complement each other (Sadiku, 2015). He expressed that teachers would admire his language skills and he frequently took part in essay competitions. His reading definitely complimented his good writing skills. In his own words:

I used to write as a child and take part in essay competitions frequently. I had a linguistic mind and was good with language from an early age. Teachers would also encourage me to write more and go to competitions. But, I really started enjoying English when I had a new secondary teacher who created an environment where we could enjoy English and have fun with it. She did not only teach the regular course but gave us external reading and writing

assignments as well. We had to write something of our own every week and submit it to her.

A good encouraging teacher does really matter. Jajanka's teacher made him write regularly and encouraged reading and writing practice. As the ancient proverb goes, "practice makes a man perfect," same is true in language learning as well. He believes that this largely attributed to him being skilled in his reading and writing. Another thing we cannot ignore is the notion of Chomsky that some learners are innately better at learning language than others as Jajanka himself mentioned that he used to love and do better in linguistic fields rather than in technical areas.

But Clegane and Delores had different stories to tell. Both of them agreed that they never quite learnt reading and writing. Clegane, who went to an integrated school in Pokhara, claimed, *"I was never a fan of reading, I like to interact with people rather than read books."* He emphasized that he went to an integrated school and different types of people used to visit them and he loved interacting and communicating with them rather than reading books. When I asked, *"if he remembered how he learnt reading or how reading started for him?"* He replied, *"we learnt reading by reading out loud in class. During class the teacher made us read, I think I picked up reading from there."* But, he restated, *"my reading was never strong, I had a sharp mind, I would listen attentively in class and orally I am very sound but, my reading and writing are weak."* He further elaborated:

Reading braille books is a slow process. We have to feel the writings with our hands and read them. It takes a long time for me to read. Since my reading is weak, so is my writing. I don't know the right grammar structure and spelling because I never read it. I have a good conceptual mind but, I cannot rote

learn. I know how to use a word and its meaning but I don't have print literacy and might not know the spelling of the word.

Clegane's source of language was listening and speaking, he did not read much. And, I think Jajanka's practice of reading and writing and Clegane's lack of practice justify each other. Clegane and Delores have similar stories. She also believes that she learnt reading through classrooms and by reading out loud in class when the teacher asked them to do so. She also confessed that her reading and writing are weak and she does not have proper braille literacy as well. She expressed:

I cannot read braille by feeling with my fingers, I have to see them to read it and it is really difficult. And, I cannot even read printed books because the fonts in those books are really small. I could read it before but now I can't.

She articulates that it was due to her habit. She had a habit of reading before but now she has lost her habit. This perfectly aligns with Skinner's theory of behaviorism that language learning is a habitual action that is based on practice and repetition (Skinner, 1976). She further added that the right environment makes a huge difference in the learning process. She expressed:

It was too easy for us in that integrated school. We did not have to struggle and make an effort. Everything used to be on the table and we were given excuses. We had support of the teacher, school and friends, we didn't have to do much. But, another thing is also that we didn't have proper materials and resources. If we wanted to read the latest books then we couldn't find them in braille or in larger prints. As a result, we could not read.

She also shared that her spelling is really poor which she related with her lack of reading. Moreover, she claimed that she does not write much and the only memory she has of writing is writing questions and answers during class. This further brings us

back to Juriati et al. (2018) who believe that reading affects our writing performance and vice versa. Hence, like Clegane speaking and listening are her strong factors whereas reading and writing are not. Lastly, all of them agreed that:

We never had to read and write regularly. Even in exams the writer would verbally ask us questions and we would verbally tell the answer and the writer would write for us. We never had to read the question papers. And, with the present technology, we don't have to read at all. Yes, we read books, articles, news and messages but, we read by listening. We don't read it by feeling the text with our fingers or looking at the print. Computer reads it for us.

Delores is trying to read as much as she can by herself but Jajanka and Clegane totally rely on computer reading. So, we can see how the notion and culture of reading is changing for learners with visual impairment.

So, listening and speaking clearly are their strong traits. Let us look into how they learnt these skills. Jajanka distinctly remembers listening to BBC radio and TV when he was young and learning the pronunciation from the native speakers of the language. He explained, “...my English started with reading storybooks but later it was listening and watching: listening to BBC radio and watching BBC TV. I picked up pronunciation and speaking from there.” Jajanka in his own words basically built his English by reading others' writing and listening to others speak. Here, as Al Zoubi (2018) noted, he was exposed to the target language in its native form through the means of TV and radio and learning was happening outside the classroom. Jajanka further added, “I also developed my listening and speaking ability by listening to my brother and sister reading the newspaper every day.” He expressed that his brother and sister used to read the daily English newspaper to him every day. He acknowledged:

We had subscriptions to English daily newspapers and I couldn't read them since the fonts were really small so my brother and sister used to read the news, articles and contents of the newspaper to me. And, I would listen to them and also make a list of difficult vocabularies.

Clegane and Jajanka had one thing in common i.e. listening to native speakers of the language. Both of them listened to BBC radio and picked up their listening along with new vocabularies. Clegane recalled:

I was an attentive listener in the class, I would listen to what the teachers would teach and to the foreigners who would visit our school regularly. I was fascinated with the English language since my childhood so I attentively listened to the native speakers of the language and tried to copy them. Later on as I grew older I listened to BBC radio and used to learn new vocabulary and its uses from there. I listened to the native speakers and picked up my English.

BBC radio and the speakers there had a huge impact on Clegane's and Jajanka's English as they developed their listening from there which later influenced their speaking. Talking about speaking, despite his shyness and incompetency with the language, he kept on speaking the language and interacting regardless of his mistakes. He narrated, "...when the foreigners used to visit our school, I would go in front of them and communicate with them. Yes, I would make lots of mistakes but I always tried and I started getting better slowly." This shows that we must practice and get over our shyness in order to learn the language Schwartz and Thornbury (as cited in Oflaz, 2019) also argued that psychological factors such as anxiety or shyness, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, and fear of mistakes are the elements that commonly hinder students from speaking and learning the language.

Delores on the other hand neither listened to native speakers nor spoke with them but it was her friends and teachers that taught her listening. She recounts:

I used to attentively listen to my teachers in the class and to my friends who would read stories and class notes out to me. I would ask my friends to read out loud to me for at least an hour a day and that is how I listened to the language.

In all of the participants we have one theme in common, they listened from a source and picked up the language from there. Similarly, she did not speak with the native speakers but she did speak regardless of not being fluent and proficient with the language. She added:

We had a hostel in charge with whom we had to speak in English with and in the entire hostel, I was the only one who would speak representing the girls.

Whether I know the language or I didn't, I had to speak in English.

Furthermore, in our school we had to conduct morning assemblies where we had to share, thoughts of the day, news and speak on various topics. I would regularly speak there. So, I think that really helped with my speaking.

Moreover, I used to be an anchor in various talent hunts and programs that my school organized so those events really helped me.

This shows that in order to develop speaking, we must speak, in order to write better, we must write. English is a language and the more we practice it, the better we get at it. We will make mistakes but, we should use, communicate and express in the language regularly in order for us to learn it.

Learning Vocabulary

Reading, writing, listening and speaking are the four major skills of language but, vocabulary learning is also an important aspect of language learning that affects

all four skills along with language learning in general. For this research I define vocabulary, simply, as the words we teach, learn and use in the target language.

However, I also understand that a new item of vocabulary could be more than a single word: the point is a single semantic unit, for example, post office and mother-in-law. (Ur, 1996). Upon asking how did Jajanka learn vocabulary, he replied:

My vocabulary also built through reading. Along with reading books, I had also maintained a diary in Microsoft word where I used to make a list of words that I would come across as I browsed the internet. That is how I learnt new words.

We can see that even in vocabulary learning his reading played an important role. Reading books has a direct link to vocabulary development as reading offers access to varieties of words that the learners would not typically encounter in day-to-day conversations (Snow, 1991), and during the reading process, they internalize the meanings through textual contexts and illustrations (Ganea, Picard, & DeLoache, 2008; Mol et al., 2009 as cited in Wasik, Hindman, & Snell, 2016). He also believes that reading storybooks helped him along with his interest in learning which supported his vocabulary development. He also maintained a diary of new words to further improve his vocabulary. As Ediger (1998) mentions that keeping your personal diary and making your own dictionary of words is one of the effective ways of learning vocabulary. Similarly, Clegane also had his own ways of learning new vocabulary and how to use them. He also accepted that BBC played a major role in the process of learning and developing new vocabulary. He acknowledged:

I used to listen to BBC radio at that time. And, as soon as I heard new words that I didn't know I would remember them. I used to listen to the news on BBC. Sometimes I would listen to Nepali news first and then listen to English

sometimes I would listen to English first and then in Nepal. So, in that process whenever I would come across a word that I didn't know I would immediately listen to the news in Nepal and find out its meaning and how it was used. That is how I made sense of the words. I was not into diary keeping, making lists of words and meaning and reading them.

Listening, speaking and practical use of the language were key to Clegane's learning of language and vocabulary. He was not into reading and writing much but he was extremely active when it came to using the language and practicing with it. He further added, *“as soon as I learnt a new word, I immediately wanted to use it and play with it.”* This further confirms the idea presented by Ediger (1998) that we need to use the words that we learn in order to better understand and retain them. Delores, on the other hand, joyfully remembers and wishes she had the same practice now as well. She retells:

We had good books from good publications like Oxford, English reader and others which had a section called meaning into words and synonym and antonym which would not only introduce us to new words but also taught us its usages. It would have its definition and other related words which would make learning fun and easy.

She feels a good textbook is one of the best resources to learn and develop vocabulary. As we can read and re-read them, furthermore, if new words are presented in an interesting format that motivates the readers to learn (Wasik et al., 2016). Now due to the advancement of technology and the introduction of gadgets, we have many options but, at that time, a good book and proper resources and materials really made a difference in enriching the learning experiences. As Ajoke (2017) also cited, proper instructional materials are crucial and significant tools

needed for teaching and learning in order to promote teacher's productivity and improve student's performance. Lastly, she added that she did not make a diary and list of new vocabulary items but she shared that the school used to regularly ask them synonym, antonym and vocabularies from meaning into words. So, in case of Jajanka and Delores although it was difficult then but the school taking the responsibility to focus on their vocabulary and regularly asking them its meaning and uses really helped them in building their vocabulary in the long run.

Learning Grammar

Grammar is an integral part of any language. If we are to learn any language with accuracy and with precision then we must also be well aware of the grammar and technicalities of that language. Grammar can simply be defined as 'the way words are put together to make correct sentences' (Ur, 1996, p. 75). It is considered as an important element in language. Similarly, to quote (Harmer, 1987, p. 1):

Grammar, then is the way in which words change themselves and group together to make sentences. The grammar of a language is what happens to words when they become plural or negative, or what order is used when we make questions or join two clauses to make one sentence.

Generally, there are two approaches to teach and learn the grammar of a language i.e. deductive and inductive method. Deductive is more rule and structure focused whereas inductive focuses on practical exercises before going to rules, forms and structures (Thornbury, 1999). Some memorize all the technical rules and processes whereas some naturally adapt with the exposure to the target language. Upon talking about their grammar learning process, my participants also had similar experiences to share. Jajanka who went to a regular mainstream school throughout his life confirmed that, he learnt grammar deductively. He confessed, "*I learned the*

grammar rules through rote learning. I memorized them.” He further recalled, “*...in my school they used to punish us if we didn't know the rules of grammar. So my grammar was all parrot learning. I memorized them.*” Along with memory-based learning he also admitted that his reading of storybooks at a young age really helped with his language. As our conversation went on, he recalled an incident:

What the school used to do was ask us structures and rules and then we had to construct sentences based on those rules. And, if we were unable to complete the task then they used to harshly punish us. But, I think my interest towards reading books also supported my language learning.

Here, we can clearly see the implementation of the deductive approach because first he would memorize the structures and later would use them in construct sentences and practice. Anyway, now, he is happy that he has been able to blend the old memory-based learning with new pedagogies and practices, as a result, he is doing fine with his English. Delores on the contrary learnt grammar inductively. She remembers her teacher writing grammar structures and rules and asking her to memorize and practice them but cannot quite tell how she learnt the proper use of grammar. She casually shared:

I don't know how I learnt grammar and the specific reason behind it but, when I write something I would have the feeling that it is grammatically incorrect or there is something wrong with the sentence. I cannot quite explain it. Yes, we did write structures and rules in school but I never memorized them.

This aligns with the idea of the inductive approach as this approach believes in practical use and exposure to the language to learn grammar (Thornbury, 1999). When we look at Jajanka and Delores, we can see Jajanka inclining more towards deductive whereas Delores towards inductive method of grammar learning but

Clegane's case was totally different. When asked how he learned grammar, he confessed that he never quite learnt it and is not good with it. He told me:

I am not a sound person in grammar. I am good at speaking but not quite up to the mark with writing, reading and grammar. It is because I listen a lot so I can speak well but, I do not read much hence, I am not good at writing.

We can clearly see the connection between the four skills of language from Clegane's comments as well. All four of them are interlinked and reflect each other but reading and writing are more closely interrelated whereas speaking and listening go hand in hand. In the same manner, Clegane further shared an interesting thing about him, he confessed, *"I never got a chance to read many books, I mostly learnt by listening to others. Since I listened to others, I know the words but as I haven't read it, it is difficult for me to write the word."* After listening this from Clegane I immediately thought of Delores who shared something similar along the line. Since, many books were not available and accessible to her she couldn't read much. As a result, she knows the words and its usage but struggles with the spelling. Clegane further elaborated:

For example: let's take the word condolence. I know the meaning of the word, I have heard about it and I can use it perfectly in required situations but, I never got a chance to read the word condolence, I only listened to the word. So, I don't know how to write the word and its spelling. I only know the pronunciation and usage of the word, I do not know its structure and spelling. Because people only read and pronounce the whole word not the letters.

I think this explains why many learners can speak a certain language but cannot read and write fluently in that language. Major idea behind a language is communication and to get the message across, reading and writing are considered

comparatively advance skills. This made me reflect on my days when I used to work in a travel company. There were many tourist guides who could speak native-like English with all the proper accent but when it came to reading and writing, they were unable to perform it. This perfectly applies to Clegane as well since he read by listening whether it was listening to teachers or his friends or a computer. And while giving exams as well, he never had to read and write. He would verbally express his views and the writer would write for him. Hence, affecting his reading and writing skills. And grammar as a skill is improved through practice and making mistakes, since he did not practice reading and writing actively his proficiency with grammar did not improve much.

Seating Arrangements

We do not think much about where someone sits in the class. Learners keep changing their place and they continuously move around in the class but to someone with vision-related disabilities where one sits has a direct impact on the learning process. Seating arrangement falls under the area of classroom management. Through appropriate classroom management, teachers create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social-emotional learning (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006 as cited in Gremmen, Van Den Berg, Segers, & Cillessen, 2016). This has a direct link to learning. Where we sit makes a major difference in our listening and to someone who relies heavily on their listening, being in the right place near to the teacher really does matter. Since learners with partial vision cannot see what is written on the board, all they have is their ears. So, I thought about exploring this aspect as well. Although it does not seem much, it has a significant impact on one's learning, particularly if the learner is visually impaired like me.

Upon asking if Clegane had a place where he preferred to sit in his class he precisely answered, *“always first bench on the side.”* Since he was so precise, I was curious and asked why that particular position. To which he explained, *“...it was like a habit, a natural thing to do. Moreover, I would never be able to listen properly when I sat behind and for me if I sat behind, it was as if I wasn’t studying at all.”* As he continued, he had a wonderful experience to share, he recalled:

I never stayed on the last bench in first and second periods but, in the fifth, sixth and seventh periods if I was ever on the last or second last bench then the teacher would sarcastically ask if we didn’t want to study that day.

In Clegane’s case, seating arrangement did play a role in his learning. Being in the front row meant he could listen to the teacher properly and accurately. Moreover, he would be far from the noise coming from the backbenches and distractions and had easier access to teachers (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008). Delores followed a similar strategy as well. She also used to pick either the first or the second bench in the class. Along with this the school also had a way of supporting them, she elaborated:

Sometimes there would be rotation otherwise I would always sit on either the first or the second bench. And, there was one good thing about the school i.e. they would always pair us up with one of the top five students so that they would help us.

In Delores’s case, the school also paid attention and helped them by pairing them with one of the top five students. This indeed is a good strategy as learning happens collaboratively and one student helps the other. All of them are actually working together to achieve shared learning goals (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). She also confessed that when she reached class nine and ten, sometimes, she wanted to sit on the last bench but, what happened was, there would be noise and she could not listen

to her teachers well and her mates also could not see what was written on the board properly so she instantly realized that it would affect her learning and chose either first or the second bench.

Among the three participants, both Clegane and Delores chose to stay in the front rows but Jajanka had a different preference, he needed windows. He remarked:

I used to sit by the window. Sometimes it would be on the first bench and sometimes it would be on the last bench. Wherever there was good lighting from the window I used to choose that place. Mostly I sat on the last bench because there used to be a lot of windows there.

He continued:

I could never see the board, it did not matter where I sat. So, my friends used to tell me what was written on the board and I used to write it down. I never studied by looking at the board.

All three of them had many things in common. All of them could not see the board no matter where they sat and listening was a vital part of their learning. Two of them preferred first benches whereas one of them needed good lighting as proper lighting also is a key variable to create a learning environment (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008). But, regardless of their placement they all highlighted and agreed upon one important thing i.e. good friends who helped them. Friends who played a significant role in their learning by helping them to achieve the common learning needs. Here each individual was accountable for their learning and their friends' learning and they succeeded by working collaboratively together (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). This further highlights the importance and significance of collaborative learning in the lives of visually impaired learners.

Evaluation and Assessment

Evaluation and assessments are an important part of our education system. They are also necessary to assess the learning of an individual and the system or the process that has been followed. Both assessment and evaluation go hand in hand in our educational process as we need to assess the learning experience and help learners improve and also pass judgment and grades (Yambi, 2020; Kizlik, 2012). These days some follow formative assessment system, some summative and some follow a mix of both. But, during the time of my participants, schools and educational institutions mostly followed summative evaluation and assessment system. They generally attended an exam at the end of the session which measured their learning and quality through grades (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Moreover, those grades determined their value and also decided whether they would be upgraded into a different class or not (Kizlik, 2012).

Exams

Exams were a crucial part of evaluation and assessment system back then, in a way they still are now. Not much has changed throughout the years. While talking about exams during his school, Jajanka casually recalled:

I went to a mainstream school and got a normal education. In my school, I was the only one who was low vision so, in the beginning, the school also treated me like a mainstream student. I used to take exams by myself and I was always unable to attempt all the questions, I could only attempt 70% to 75% of questions in exams. They didn't used to give extra time but I used to pass the exam.

This is how Jajanka recalls his initial exam giving process in the school.

Delores on the other hand had a mixed and a bit different experience as she went to an integrated inclusive school. She recalled:

In my school, we had options for people with visual impairments, either we could write in braille and the teachers in the blind section would translate it or we could keep writers and attempt our exam. But, in my case since I was partially sighted, the teachers always encouraged me to write by myself. So, up until class nine, I wrote my exams by myself, only in Nepal I kept writer because my handwriting was really poor. It was only since SLC that I kept writers for my exams.

We can see the application of Learning Media Assessment (LMA) in Delores's case. The school has applied various LMA approaches to address and support the needs of a learner (Koenig & Holbrook, 1995). Delores further added, *"I kept a writer in all my board exams but in the internal exams that my institution took I wrote by myself."* But, this was not the case for Jajanka and Clegane. They did not have these choices. Either they had to write by themselves or keep a scribe/writer. Clegane, who also went to an integrated school, kept a writer for all his exams. He recalled:

Till class seven we would take exams in braille as the question would come in braille but after that, it came in a printed format so I took all my exams after class seven with the help of a writer as I do not have print literacy and it is much easier to give exam with the help of a writer than in braille.

Exam is a big part of our teaching learning process and people with vision-related disabilities are mostly dependent on writers, families and friends for their exams. Due to lack of proper support in our educational system, as KC (2019) shared

in her article, exams are no less than nightmares for learners with visual impairment because they go through a lot of stress of finding a scribe, studying and various challenges put forth by our system itself. We can see that only a few integrated schools have adapted the concept of LMA and provide learners with options and readily available scribes whereas rest of the institutions conduct exams in a regular manner which in fact is not disability friendly at all. Visually-impaired learners have to tackle various obstacles on their own along with the pressure of performing well in exams.

Question Paper

When we talk about exams, question paper is another major element. Understanding what the question is demanding is like winning the half battle. But, we must first be able to read the questions or someone must read it out to us. They had different opinions and experiences regarding this matter. Delores who went to an integrated school went through mixed experiences. She recalled:

It was different during my school days, font size was bigger and they used to make the question paper bold so that it was easier for us partially sighted students but, as we grew older the font size got smaller. The question papers that we received during our SLC and after that had small font size and it was difficult for us to read it. But, what is also true is that, it is all about habit and confidence. In school I used to write and try my best to read but since we kept writers for our SLC and other board exams we did not have to do much work at all. So, the reading habit got lost.

Furthermore, she added, “...in intermediate as well, the habit of doing assignments and writing slowly diminished and now I cannot write as much as I could during school. That habit and confidence are lost.” This further validates the concept

of positive reinforcement that behaviorism talks about. Behaviorism, habit formation and human behavior are all about interactions between stimulus and responses (Budiman, 2017). Delores stopped the process of exercising her eye and reading, as a result, her capabilities diminished. Similarly, Jajanka also had a similar experience to share as in his school days he used to read and write on physical paper but now he cannot do it. He agrees with Delores and expresses, “...before I could read printed materials but now I cannot, it has something to do with habit as well but my eyesight has diminished too.” He continued:

I could read the questions in the exam but my reading speed was really slow. I could never attempt all the questions. When I went to higher classes, the school asked me to keep a writer and so did I. That made it easier for me to take the exam and since then I have always kept writers during all my exams.

Clegane also took the help of a writer to take his exams since he did not have print literacy but, in his early days he used braille to write his exams. He recalled, “...till class seven the questions used to come in braille and I would take exams in braille. But, from class eight we used to get printed question papers and I took all my exams with the help of a writer after that.” We can see that all of them are heavily dependent on writers in order to be successful in their exams. They could attend the exams by themselves but it would require a very rigorous need assessment and an individual centered learning environment. Even here we can see a dominant role of collaborative learning.

As we were talking about question papers and difficulty during exams Jajanka recalled his days of being a part of an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and how adaptive the system was and how our education system could also learn from it. He shared:

I have this experience of taking IELTS, it is a global exam that many take every day. 1000s of people take it at a single time, but they take care of the special needs so well. While filling up the exam they have these questions on our condition regarding disability and assistance that we require. Either we need large print and how many percent larger. Extra time and how much extra time, 25%, 50%, 100%, there are so many criteria. So similar to that if we gather students' needs before the exam and provide them with the required assistance that would make it easier for us.

Here also we can see the effective application of assessment of learners' needs before the test and how it can be helpful. Learning media assessment can be an effective solution to better facilitate and support learners with disabilities (Koenig & Holbrook, 1995).

The Writer

People with vision-related disabilities often take the help of writers while they appear for exams. In a way, writers are a medium through which they display their talent, knowledge and capabilities during exams. A good writer makes a big difference in their lives. Having said that, the participants have mixed experiences with writers, some are good and some are not so pleasant. But, all three of them agree that finding a good writer with an open mind and positive attitude is always a struggle and they often have to manage with what is available. Regarding writers and searching them Delores explained, "*...while I was in integrated school till my SLC it was easy because the school itself would search writers for us but, as we went for higher studies then we had to search writers by ourselves and it is a hectic process.*" Finding the right person to write your answers can surely be a hectic process because both of them have to function at the right speed and should know each other.

Basically, both the writer and the one who is taking the exam should be in a perfect sync to perform well. Furthermore, we cannot just choose anyone as our scribe, he/she has to be someone junior. Some scribes have financial requirements, some are not available on time and some are not cooperative (Khan, 2019). All this leads to extra stress for a student before an important exam. As we were talking about writers/scribes, Jajanka fondly explained how he started taking their help. He recalled:

I used to give the exam by myself up until grade nine and I could only attempt 70% to 75% of the questions and there was no extra time for me as well. But I was managing to pass all the exams so, the school decided to experiment and take the help of a scribe. And I gave the exam with the help of a writer. Then I started to attempt all the questions and my exam finished on time. Moreover, I started scoring 80/90 in most of my subjects and since then, I have never looked back.

This shows the importance of a good writer and support in the life of a person with visual impairment. Likewise, Clegane, who also went to an integrated school till his SLC, took all his exams so far with the help of a writer. As we continued, he confessed, *“I cannot read a book, neither a normal book nor a big font size book because I do not have print literacy. I only have braille literacy.”* From the experiences of all three participants, I understood that the possibilities and limitations of a human mind are endless but we have to train and keep pushing it. This again aligns with the idea shared by behaviorism that if we train our mind, then anything is possible but if we do not exercise the muscle then, the ability gets lost (Budiman, 2017). Jajanka and Delores could read and write when they were children. Yes, they struggled and it used to be slow but they could perform the activity then. But, now their habit is lost. Similarly, with Clegane as no one trained him, his visual and

sensory muscles did not receive the stimulus as a result he does not have print literacy.

Lastly, I asked them about the difference between writing something by own self and writing with the help of a writer to which they all agreed and replied that writing by own self is far better than writing with the help of a writer because it is much more organic and you go in your own flow of thoughts. Jajanka and Delores had the experience of both, till class nine they both wrote by themselves but, after class nine that is since their SLC, they took their exams with the help of a writer so regarding the difference they openly shared their opinions. Delores admits that it is easier to write by own self as they can think and thoughts can flow in their own way. Whereas when they take the help of a writer, they have to verbally share their answers and they constantly have to repeat themselves so in this process the train of our thoughts gets disrupted. Furthermore, she added:

Sometimes writers feel bored when we write more and sometimes they move around, get distracted and disrupt our fluency and flow as well. As we verbally tell the answers sometimes writers interrupt us saying, 'can you speed up or isn't this a lot'? Which really makes us feel awkward. But, keeping a writer has its benefits as well, it became easier for me to understand and read questions and I could attempt all the questions.

But, she still restated that, "...writing by own self is always better, you can write in your own pace and flow." Jajanka and Clegane also agree that writing the answers by own self is the best. Jajanka further explained:

I feel a little difficult while writing with the help of a writer. Because the mind works in a different way. Sometimes it is blank and sometimes it has a lot of ideas and thoughts. At that time the writer cannot understand our mental

processing and cannot handle our thoughts. And the stream of thought goes away and we again have a hard time thinking. And we have to ask the writer to read the entire thing from the beginning again. And our valuable time is wasted in this manner. If I could type the same thing on my laptop then I would have finished it much faster and in a proper manner.

As Jajanka shared, technology and going digital might be one of the solutions to better facilitate learners with visual impairment as they can write and attempt the exams at their own pace and flow. Clegane also expressed his frustrations in a similar manner:

It is frustrating and difficult when we don't get a good competent writer who can write our thoughts and opinion properly in the exam. And we cannot check our paper. We cannot read our answers. Questions like match the followings, fill in the blanks, paragraphs and pictorial questions are difficult for us. We need to read them several times and search for answers. It's difficult to ask them to read it multiple times and describe everything. The question patterns are not disability friendly.

They all agreed that going digital is the better option for now because then at least they can do everything by themselves. Yes, everyone is not sound with digital gadgets and technologies but, slowly they all voiced that going digital is a better way forward.

Role of Assistive Technology in Language Learning

We cannot imagine a life without technology now. We cannot imagine learning without technology these days. And, this current pandemic showed us its possibilities. The recent advancement in technology and tech gadgets played a crucial role to prevent the collapse of our education system. Students were able to learn even

during the pandemic when everything nearly came to a shutdown. But even before the pandemic technology played a major role in the learning process of learners with vision impairment. With the advancement of technology, more importantly computer systems and information technology, development of technologies assist people with visual disabilities to enhance their learning achievements (Brassai et al., 2011). They rely on these assistive devices for information, navigation, books, music, communication, and so on. From an educational perspective, they rely heavily on these devices for their learning as well.

Nevertheless, with the good comes the bad as well. Advantages and disadvantages go hand in hand. Technology does play a major role in the learning process but, it had its drawbacks as well. Delores confessed that before she could read books that had bigger and bolder fonts but now that habit of her is lost and this is due to technology. This again comes back to the idea of stimulus and response by behaviorism (Budiman, 2017) but, as noted by Edyburn, also addresses the concerns of researchers that believe assistive technology makes learners dependent and students with disabilities will not be able to do the tasks on their own (as cited in Ahmed, 2018). She got used to using technology and the easier way of reading resulting in her loss of habit of reading books and now she confessed that, *"I cannot read books now but before I could."* She shared that there was a scientific term for this condition which was called Lazy eye. The condition of Lazy eye/Amblyopia is a condition in which the person does not develop the vision of an eye or both properly during childhood (Boyd, 2021). Amblyopia is a common problem in babies and young children. What happens is when we do not use the weaker eye or send the signals to the brain it receives fewer visual signals. Eventually, the eyes' ability to work together

diminishes, and the brain suppresses or ignores input from the weaker eye. She also gave an analogy of a machine that:

Our body and mind are like a machine and our eyes are the same. If we keep exercising and using them, they remain active but once we stop we feel as if we cannot make them functional anymore. Before I could read books but now I cannot and my vision has not diminished much as well. So, now I zoom the screens and read or I listen to books but physical textbooks: I can no longer read them.

Similarly, Jajanka, who studied in a regular school and also took his exams by himself till grade nine, also had something similar to share regarding this. In his case, it was not a lapse that happened due to heavy use of technology but rather a mix of habit and diminishing eye condition. He accepted:

Before I could read normal font sized textbooks but now I cannot. My eye starts to hurt and I get dizzy when I look at them. It is because of my lack of habit as well but more because of my diminishing eye condition. My vision has decreased since my childhood.

Clegane, on the other hand, is not print literate. He is only braille literate but, he claims that his real practice of the English language happened when he had a mobile phone in his hands. He shared what he used to do:

I used to talk to myself in English pretending to others that I was talking with someone on the phone. No one called me but I used to pretend saying, 'hello, hello, okay okay, I will do that I will do that', I would talk to myself and people would be amazed that I was talking in English. What that did was built my confidence to talk in English and my fluency as well.

Observing the excerpt of Clegane, I understood that technology played a big role in influencing his learning. But, something bigger also happened in Clegane's life, he shared:

In the process of learning computers and how to use them, I got a chance to go to Japan and take the training and it was there that I had to speak in English. I had no option either I know the language or I did not I had to speak. I made many mistakes like instead of saying drinking tea I said eating tea, I rice eat instead of I eat rice, mistakes with he she, I made countless mistakes but eventually people used to understand the zest and I slowly learnt and built my language.

This shows that if we want to learn a language then we should not be afraid of making mistakes and practicing. Learners make errors in both comprehension and production and it is through these errors that they learn (Ellis, 1994). It is believed that these mistakes and errors are indications of a learners' attempt to figure out certain systems, some sort of regularity on the target language the learner is exposed to which helps in learning the target language (Gass & Selinker, 2008). We can see that his Japan visit had a positive impact on his language learning as he was exposed to the target language there. Furthermore, soon after his Japan visit, he got a laptop which introduced him to emails and other features which further helped in his language learning. After getting a laptop, he expressed:

I could read and listen to contents in English but, the best thing was we could chat on Skype. We could talk with people in English and that helped with my fluency as well. We could talk with native speakers there and for the sake of language practice as well I used to talk with them.

He again restated, *“I actually picked up the English language by talking and working with the native speakers. I learnt about their culture along with the language.”* Clegane is a living example of the concept that exposure to the target language helps in language learning (Al Zoubi, 2018). Advancements in technology helped everyone. It made people dependent but, it outweighs with the positive. Jajanka, who is also heavily dependent on technology, accepted that in his later years after school, it was these devices and gadgets that helped him to further advance and polish his language. He described:

Later on in my life, I watched a lot of YouTube videos, watched and listened to BBC on TV and radio. Listening to the native speakers of the language really helped me to build my English. Furthermore, I also used to read a lot of English newspapers like The Himalayan Times and My Republica online.”

Reading and listening have really been the core behind Jajanka’s English language learning along with technological knowledge and the computer classes he took. He claims, *“...the computer skills that I learned through training classes have been very helpful and it was after that training that my life’s horizon completely changed.”* Technological advancement helped him to broaden his horizon as he could access the world through his skills. This not only helped him in his language learning but also in his everyday functioning. Despite some drawbacks, everyone agreed that technology and assistive devices have played a major role in their life and language learning and they conclude that, a life without them is unimaginable.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the English language learning experiences of learners with partial vision-related disabilities under four different themes. In the first theme, I explored the English language learning experiences of the participants by

further categorizing their shared stories under sub-themes. Here, I analyzed how they learnt four major skills of language along with vocabulary and grammar.

In the second theme, I delve into their seating arrangement as it is also one of the factors behind language learning. Thirdly, under evaluation and assessment theme, I studied their experiences of attending exams, working with a writer and how they managed during these situations. Finally, I explored how assistive technologies have affected their language learning experiences and changed their lives forever. This chapter basically is an archive of language learning experiences of people with partial vision-related disabilities.

CHAPTER V

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

This chapter analyzes, explores and critically examines various challenges and obstacles faced by learners with visual impairment during their English language learning process. The participants share their stories and experiences of their struggles and hindrances during the process of learning. These lived experiences are documented under three major themes i.e. challenges with the learning environment, challenges with the system and resources and materials with the aim of exploring various challenges and flaws in our system that hindered in their learning process eventually answering the second research question of my dissertation i.e. how do they narrate their experience of facilitations and hindrances while learning the English language?

Challenges and Obstacles

There are challenges and obstacles in everything. Nothing that really matters comes easy, we have to always struggle for the things that really matters. Same is true in language learning. If it were easy, everyone would be language geniuses but, it is not the case and learning languages is not easy. There are many factors that affect the learning process. Learners go through challenging situations and various obstacles that test and force them to think critically and creatively. In the meantime, they also come across selfless, honest and genuine support that helps greatly in their learning process.

Challenges with the Learning Environment

English is not our native language. For many Nepalese English is their second language whereas for some of us it is our third language. For many indigenous communities, they have a language before Nepali that is their mother tongue or the first language. After that, they learn Nepali as their second language and English as a third one. Considering these situations it is a struggle learning the English language. Not only with the English language, actually the entire process of getting a quality education is a struggle for learners with disabilities in Nepal (Lamichhane, 2013). Delores and Clegane also agreed that learning English was a difficult task for them. Delores confessed, “...we used to speak in broken English because no one spoke in English and no one knew much. But, that helped in getting over the initial hesitation on speaking in English.” Furthermore, she added, “...at one point, the school tried creating the environment by making it compulsory to speak in English which only lasted for two months. But, during that time we would at least communicate in English in front of our teachers.” Although the school tried to create an environment to expose the learners to the target language, it did not last long. Lack of the right supportive environment was the first challenge to English language learning that they faced since exposure to the target language is vital for learning a language (Al Zoubi, 2018).

Moreover, after completing the school education, the situation did not improve much, Delores confessed that there was not a good environment to develop and polish the language after SLC because the environment that she got in college was totally different. She shared:

It was after SLC when I went for higher studies. If we spoke in English then people would tease us saying we were showing off and flaunting which

discouraged us to speak the language and made me not want to use the language.

We do not realize but instances like these break learners' self-confidence and act as a hindrance to our learning process. Like Delores, Clegane did feel that English was difficult but he enjoyed it as well. He revealed, *"I did not like these grammars, tenses and all those technical things I was never interested in them but, the language itself along with its culture, interactions and behaviors; I was really drawn to them."* Clegane is the perfect example of Vygotsky's ideology that we learn language through social interactions where community plays a central role in learning (Vygotsky, 2012). Furthermore, he had mixed feelings about the English language. He loved the essence and communicative and practical side of the language but not the technical one. He admitted that learning a new language is challenging but, he could not think of any significant factor that hindered his learning. He positively expressed:

Yes, the school had limited resources but given the time that I was there and the situation, what the school did in order to support our learning and well-being from the classes to extra activities and exposures. I must say it was good enough.

Clegane believed that the school did all that was possible to support them and help them with their learning. Jajanka, on the other hand, felt that English learning became fairly easy for him due to the environment that he got in school and at home. Jajanka went to an English medium private school in the city and his parents and family members were also really supportive whenever he needed them, as a result, it actually helped him in learning the language with ease. A study by Lamichhane (2013), also shows that the attitude of parents towards their children and their

encouragement really has a great impact on one's learning. Closely looking at the experiences of Clegane, Delores and Jajanka, I understood that the right environment, resources and support system can really make a huge difference in one's learning process.

Challenges with the System

There are varieties of challenges that learners go through. They face many obstacles during their journey of learning. But, learners with visual impairment have one extra layer of challenge that they face i.e. the educational system itself (Lamichhane, 2013). Challenges with resources, materials, trained teachers, access and environments are there but sometimes the educational institution itself becomes the first barrier towards learning. Instead of supporting and facilitating the learners they in turn discourage and become the first hindrance towards the learners. All of the participants had different sets of experiences where the educational institutions and the entire system itself acted as a challenge for the learners to overcome.

Jajanka and Delores both had bitter experiences with the educational system. Jajanka, who went to a mainstream regular school till his SLC, confessed:

My schooling was fine since it was the school of my father's friend but, it was very difficult in intermediate. The school did not have classes after SLC so I had to move to another school and getting admitted itself was a huge challenge and struggle. Some colleges rejected me saying they cannot teach me whereas some who were welcoming were far. So, it was a challenge finding the right college. Furthermore, in my undergraduate as well, one of the so-called big colleges in the city rejected me.

Even before facing the challenges with learning and supportive needs, learners face difficulty getting into the education system. This difficulty of getting in the

education system in order to peruse higher studies has been revealed (Lamichhane, 2013). It is really difficult for learners with disabilities to access education in the first place. This actually reveals the bitter reality of our education system that institutions, staffs, administrators and teachers are not well aware of and properly equipped to facilitate learners with supportive needs. Delores also faced such challenges. Luckily she did not have problems during the admission process but she had to go through a hectic process while arranging necessary documents and writer for her exam. She shared:

When I went to the education office with my writer to make a necessary document for my exam, they could not comprehend and understand my situation and impairment. They were unaware about people with low vision and it was difficult for me to explain to them.

Being in the middle between fully sighted and blind, sometimes people with partial visual impairment have a tough time explaining their condition and seeking support. Delores also got frustrated with the system while she was arranging writer for her exam. As KC (2019) and Khan (2019) also mentioned searching and arranging writers for the exam is one of the most troublesome, stressful and hectic processes for visually impaired people. Delores shared one of her experiences:

The biggest stress we go through during exam is due to a shortage of writers. Firstly, there is so much to study, on top of that we need to search the writer for our exam. Which oftentimes is a hectic process. What to do if we do not get a writer and even if we get one, that writer has many criteria and not everyone is financially sound. They have certain demands financially and some back out at the last hour. And we expect him/her to be a good writer but while writing they are not competent enough.

There was a problem that she personally faced during her studies. Reflecting back on her bitter experience with the education system she not only shared her story but also offered a solution as well. She expressed:

Another obstacle after finding the writer is the process of approval. We have to go to the writer's college for approval after that we have to do the same in our college and after that we have to go to the university and take the necessary document from there. And while making those documents, the writer has to come with us and they send us back if we cannot meet certain criteria and we have to come back again. It is a hectic process, we have to waste our 2/3 days to do these things. And it is a waste of time during exam. What they can do is, the institution and university should list everything on their website and mention everything clearly so that it would be easy for us to manage a writer. Our government procedures are really troublesome.

This is one of her experiences where she had to face our unorganized education system which clearly reveals a lack of support for learners with disabilities (Lamichhane, 2013). There must be many Deloresses, who have gone through such encounters and such hectic processes.

Clegane, on the other hand, luckily has not faced such difficulties. He so far has not faced difficulties with the admission and the writer but, he admits that we need to improve our education system in several ways and one of the lackings he felt is with navigation. He criticized:

It is very difficult to navigate in the academic setting. We walk independently but we cannot see everything. There are no proper signs and boards let alone in braille. It becomes difficult for us to locate places and identify people. Talking about people, they wave at us and call us using gestures, it is difficult

for us to recognize these gestures as a result people feel as if we are ignoring them. People often misunderstand us as ignorant and rude, which actually is not the case.

Being misunderstood by people, problem with navigating and finding places is a common challenges that every person with visual impairment faces. Even major universities, public places, hospitals, parks, government offices and many other essential places are not disability friendly. They do not have yellow paths, wheelchair access, signboards and other necessary arrangements to give access to learners with disabilities (Soleimani-Sefat, Rostami, & Movallali, 2016).

Resources and Materials

Resources and materials play a vital role to accelerate and support the learning experiences of learners. The right resources and support materials can make a life-altering learning moments that can significantly impact the learners because the right instructional materials are crucial in the teaching and learning of the English language since they are used to complement the efficiency of a teacher, and effectiveness in lesson delivery (Omabe, 2006 as cited in Ajoke, 2017). On the contrary, lack of proper resources and right support materials could mean a major hindrance in the learning of a language.

As we were talking about school and how Clegane's experience of schooling was, he casually lamented that there was a lack of resources in his school and it was very difficult for him to learn. He expressed:

During our SLC, there were ten of us who were visually impaired and there was just one set of books in braille for all ten of us, it was very difficult. We used to take turns reading and we would get the same book again only after ten days. This was the situation of course books, other resources like guess

papers and question banks were far from our reach. We studied with such struggles.

We can see the affirmation of comments made by Gnawali (2018) in his study through Clegane's experience as well. Gnawali shared:

Real life classrooms in most government schools (also known as community schools) in Nepal are very different from the ones pictured during the training courses and in the mainstream English language teaching (ELT) methodology books: they are far from the ideal (p. 257).

Clegane too grew up and studied with very limited resources during his schooling and with a lot of struggle, but his higher studies were even more difficult. He further added:

In my intermediate i.e. eleven and twelve we did not even have a set of books to share. We did not have these advanced technologies of today like flash drive, memory card and others. Now it has become much easier and cheaper: cheaper in the sense that in a single flash drive we can store all the books of an entire year. In my time I used to buy cassettes for fifty rupees each and record in them. It would run for sixty minutes and it had very limited space hence, I had 200-300 cassettes full of such recordings. And, recording was not easy as well, I used to call my friends and ask them to read their notes and record them and in return, I used to treat them with lunch and snacks. Later, I used to listen to those recordings and make notes in braille. It was really difficult.

As the level of study increased so did the difficulty for Clegane. "*It was even more difficult during bachelor and masters*", he conveyed since the courses at these levels were vast. At the bachelor level, we have a set of books but only relying on

those books will never be enough. And in masters we have to refer to many books and prepare, relying on the course book is never enough, so, recording everything was just not possible for him. Clegane continued:

I recorded only selected materials and made notes out of them, most importantly I used to attentively listen to what the teachers used to teach because I did not have other options. This is how I used to manage and I was able to score first division in all levels from SLC to my masters.

This proves the age-old proverb, “*where there is a will, there is the way.*”

Clegane grew up and managed with very limited resources but it was his motivation to learn that kept him going. As motivation alone is one such factor in language learning that can totally change everything (Gardner, 1985; Gass & Selinker, 2008). During Delores’s and Jajanka’s time, it was not as difficult as Clegane’s because they were in the city and till that time some level of advancement in technology had already happened. But Delores does agree that lack of resources was a big hindrance in the process of language learning. She lamented:

I feel we lack behind when it comes to reading and writing. Because there are many reading materials. In libraries and at our homes we come across many books, similarly, friends suggest us that we should read their favorite books. But, they are not available in large prints or in braille and there is a huge difference between listening and reading a book.

Although reading and listening both are receptive skills of language, they both have their own significance in language learning. As she was sharing, she confessed:

I am very weak with spelling because I always listened, either to my friends reading or teachers or a computer reading the text. Since I did not read it myself, my reading is slow and I have problems with the spelling. This I think

is one of the major hindrances in learning English. Many books get published and are in the market but we cannot read them.

We can see the connection between reading and spelling clearly through Delores's experience which is also mentioned by Santoro, Coyne, and Simmons (2006) that, while reading we read the spelling as well but, it does not happen while listening. Furthermore, a study by Lamichhane (2017), also mentions that scarcity of resources and reading materials is one of the biggest hindrances in learning for learners with disabilities in Nepal. Learning is a continuous process that happens outside school as well but, there should be resources, materials and proper support to the learners in order to help them learn easily. English storybooks are one of the major factors that support learning English. And, there are a lot of storybooks in normal prints but only limited number of them are available digitally or in audio version and even fewer are available in braille. So, to someone with visual impairment who wants to read them, accessing them is a tedious process. She further remarked:

The richer our vocabulary is, the easier it is for us to speak and use the language but, we did not have access to new books and materials which meant we had to rely on our friends and other supports. I had to request my friends to read to me for half an hour for me to learn new vocabulary. And half an hour is more than enough if someone gives it to you. But, I had to rely on my friends and my learning period was limited.

This is how she used to manage despite the lack of access and resources. Being partially sighted, it was different for her. She had only two books in braille and others were normal printed books which she could not read for long. So, she had to take support from her friends. She restressed, "...it was all due to my good friends." It was the same for Jajanka, his family and friends played a major role in his learning

process. This again re-connects everything back to the notion of collaborative learning and its importance in the lives of a learner with visual impairment. Here friends and parents act as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) and they are supporting the learners through social interaction and communication (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, 2012). Delores shared that she would ask her friends to read to her as she could not read prints for a long time and was not that skilled in braille. Similarly, Jajanka took the help of his family to read the materials and made notes. Luckily, since both of them went to schools in the city, they did not face a scarcity of books and resources as Clegane did.

Guess Papers, Question Banks and Practice Books

Besides textbooks and reading materials that either the institutions or the teachers provide, guess papers, question banks and practice books are important resource materials that the learners use to support and accelerate their learning. But, I always wondered about how accessible and usable those materials and resources were to learners with visual impairment. I personally had a difficult time using them since the fonts on those materials and books were really small and faint. So, out of my curiosity I asked them about these resources and materials. All of them agreed that it was very difficult for them to access and make use of those resources fully. They all complained that the materials were not disability-friendly since they were not available in braille or in large fonts or in an audio format and the concerning authorities need to make them accessible to all (Lamichhane, 2016).

None of them had access to those practice books, question banks and guess papers till SLC. Clegane expressed, “...*we did not have any such things during our time.*” Jajanka lamented, “...*I never really followed guess papers and those practice books until my intermediate because I did not even know that such things exist in the*

market.” They solely relied on the things that were taught in the class. But, Delores was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to access them. She could not read them since the fonts were really small but her friends helped her to access them. She fondly expressed:

In school during SLC, we practiced those set books a lot. In school it was not that difficult. It is all about support and friends around you. We stayed with the same person for 10 years so it was very comfortable to work with them and ask them to read it fast or slow. I could not read it during that time as well but I used to ask my friends to read it and since we were childhood friends, I did not feel any sort of hesitation to ask her for help.

Even here we can see that good friends played a vital role in Delores’s learning regardless of her not being able to access the materials by herself. We can see the application and effective utilization of peer teaching, one of the oldest forms of collaborative learning in her case here (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). However, they did acknowledge that they used these materials since their intermediate level. Jajanka responded:

In intermediate, I took major English which I felt a little difficult and in that subject my friends used to give me photocopies of the difficult questions or the topics I felt difficult which my brothers and sisters used to read it out to me. I could not read it myself but my brothers and sisters read it aloud for me.

As we were sharing, he also shared his experience during his time in Teach For Nepal (TFN) and expressed the lack of accessible materials and resources then as well. He recalled:

When I was in TFN, I scanned those entire books and question banks. At that time I was already forward in technology and I scanned everything and saved

it in a word file which we could listen. But there were many mistakes and grammatical errors in those books. So, me along with three of my other friends, we edited and corrected every book and resources from class seven to ten.

We can see that Jajanka's technological skills helped him a lot this time to tackle with the problem of accessibility of resources as both his skills and technical advancements had significantly improved (Brassai et al., 2011). But, during the time when they studied, they were not that fortunate enough to make use of these advanced software and devices. Clegane could not access any of these resources during his studies since they were neither available in braille nor in soft copy. Many materials and books have been digitalized now but, it was not the case some 10/15 years back (Kleynhans & Fourie, 2014). So, he relied on his friends. He recounts, *"I would call my friends and ask them to read the important topics and record them."* Delores also did the same thing. She verified:

I did not follow those guess papers much since I could not read them. The fonts used to be really small. But, that does not mean I did not use them at all, I used them occasionally to find the answers to some difficult questions and at that time I used to ask my family members and friends to read them out to me which I would record and make notes of.

Now, they all agree that technology is the answer. Going digital with digital literacy and digital accessibility to materials and resources is the key. Clegane put forth:

This is the age of technology, so we need to connect children with digital devices. Production of materials in braille is difficult and even though we produce it distribution is difficult. We cannot replace braille because it is the

foundation but, I think we should accelerate digital literacy and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) tools. Since, digital materials are accessible, easily transferable, producible, durable, affordable, time saver and economic.

He further added, “...we need to train children in digital literacy and its uses because it is the future.” They all unanimously agreed that going digital is the future along with large prints, audio materials and braille. Lastly, they also acknowledged that the right materials and resources are vital as they are one of the key factors for learning. But they also restressed that they are just supporting factors and are secondary, the most important thing were the learner themselves, their attitude towards learning and their motivation (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Gass & Selinker, 2008).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed various challenges and obstacles faced by English language learners with partial vision-related disabilities in their language learning process under three major themes. In the first theme, I explored how various environmental factors hindered their learning. Similarly, the second theme analyzed how the educational system itself became a hurdle in their learning. Finally, under resources and materials, I discussed the availability and applicability of learning resources and materials for visually impaired learners.

CHAPTER VI

SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE

This chapter analyzes, explores and critically examines various factors that supported and assisted visually impaired learners in their English language learning process. The participants share their stories and experiences of their triumphs during the process of learning. These lived experiences are documented under three major themes i.e. outside class involvement and activities, assistive devices, teachers, friends and family with the aim of exploring various support systems and factors that assisted in their learning process eventually answering the third research question of my dissertation i.e. how do they narrate their experience of support and assistance while learning the English language?

Support and Assistance

Where there are problems, there are solutions as well. Similarly, with challenges, obstacles and hindrances there are support systems and ways around those challenges as well. Language learning is affected by various factors such as age, exposure, motivation, peers, aptitude and many others (Gass & Selinker, 2008). And if we get the right support and assistance then it assists greatly in the learning process. In the section below I discuss various aspects that greatly affected, assisted and supported the learning process of visually impaired learners i.e., my research participants here.

Outside Class Involvements and Activities

Among various factors that have an impact on our learning a language, outside class environment is a vital one. In twenty four hours a day we spend just around

seven to eight hours inside the classroom and the rest sixteen hours are spent outside. Whether it be playing, doing homework, time spent with family and friends, doing other extra activities, television, social media, etc. So, they unknowingly play a major role in our learning of language. Furthermore, Krashen and Terrell (1983) believe communication as the primary goal of language and Natural Approach to language teaching as one of the best ways to teach language communicatively. And, it is during these activities and involvements that learners communicate more. Genuine language learning happens outside the classroom or school i.e., in a non-academic context (Terrell, 1977), where learners use their creativity to the fullest. It is in the conversations that happens in toilets, playground, on the road while going home that the students try out the language they learnt in class because the classroom setting makes them too conscious and reserved. They are in constant fear of making mistakes.

While talking about outside involvements, we cannot miss the extracurricular activities and competitions that the learners take part in. It is these activities and engagements that built the confidence of an individual along with their language proficiency. Jajanka had something similar to share along these lines:

I had a thing for language and linguistics, I was not good at mathematics but I used to do better than my classmates in subjects related to a language. Seeing this the school and the teachers always used to encourage and motivate me saying you should write and I used to participate in essay writing and debate competition.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jajanka's natural ability and competence in the English language actually aligns with the notion of Chomsky where he talks about Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and how some are by birth

better in terms of language than others (Cook, 1985). In the long run, what these activities did was polish and developed his writing abilities. He gained confidence in his English writing which in fact actually paid dividends in his later years. He won a scholarship to study in India for his bachelor's studies and he currently is also working as a content writer. So, we can say that such involvements played a significant role in learning a language.

Similarly, Clegane also had similar experiences, he was very active and was very popular among his friends. He recalled:

My school life was great, I was always the first boy which means teachers loved me. I could see a little so I used to help my blind friends as well so they loved me as well. School's environment was very supportive and I used to participate in a lot of extracurricular activities both inside and outside the school. Except quiz contests because I was not that good with them, other activities like speech competitions, debate competitions and song competitions I never came empty-handed.

Looking back now, he realizes that these activities played a significant role in building up his self-confidence eventually improving his speaking and listening abilities. Lariviere (2016) also feels that English language learners need more than just academic exposure for language acquisition to occur. They need a suitable environment to develop their interpersonal language through social contexts (Lariviere, 2016). And, for Clegane this happened through these extra school activities. Apart from this after his SLC he came to Kathmandu and was perusing his higher studies. During this time he revealed that he was voluntarily involved in various organizations where he was exposed to native speakers of the language which helped him improve his language. In his own words:

I was a volunteer in many programs organized by several organizations and foreigners used to come in those programs. To name one Nepal Association of the Blind (NAB), I was active there and whenever they organized programs I used to grab the opportunity to communicate in English. Being partially impaired I had a mix of friends including blind and normally sighted and sometimes I used to take people to visit places. My English was slowly improving with such activities but I did my real practice when I had a mobile phone in my hand.

So, from these accounts, we can clearly see that Clegane developed his English language through interaction and communication outside of the school. As Vygotsky (2012), also argued that social interaction is key to language learning. Furthermore, he exposed himself to the target language voluntarily to develop his language skills (Krashen, 1982). We can clearly see that even after school, communication and interaction were the primary factors for his learning. Furthermore, he admitted that, *“he was forced to communicate in English when he went to Japan and the USA for courses which later helped in his fluency and self-confidence.”*

Jajanka, Clegane and Delores were very active in extracurricular activities that helped them polish and learn the language. Delores also had a similar experience as Clegane and Jajanka, she too involved herself in these opportunities which as she looks back immensely helped with her language development as she was exposed to the target language (Al Zoubi, 2018). She shared:

Besides, studies another thing that supported my English language learning was morning assemblies. We had to conduct those assemblies in English along with sharing things like thoughts for the day, news, fun facts, etc. such activities helped me to develop my habit of speaking in English. Furthermore,

I used to be an anchor in various programs that were held at the school like parents' day and various talent shows. So, in those programs we had to speak in English and talk about our 'self'. So, those activities and programs made me used to the language and further polished it.

Learning happens everywhere: inside the class, outside the class and while doing activities. It is just that there should be an environment to learn and the learner should be willing and motivated (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Looking at all three participants we can see that extracurricular activities really enhanced and supported their learning of English.

Moreover, when we talk about activities outside class and school we must not ignore the time before and after the school along with holidays because what we do in those hours also unknowingly affect our language learning. They had a notable impact on Delores's English language learning. She recalled her after school days and expressed:

In my case what helped was, in our school except in class it was only with our hostel in charge that we had to speak in English. No matter the situation it was only me who would talk with him. Everyone would send me as their messenger. Whether we had an issue with the dress or the food or needed resources or we had to go swimming, I was the one who had to communicate. So, whether I knew the language or not I had to communicate in English and what that in return did was helped me build my language.

This further validates that we must practice the language to learn and bravely practice it without caring about the mistakes in order to get better (Oflaz, 2019). Furthermore, as we practice, it becomes a natural habit which reestablishes the notion of behaviorism that if we keep practicing something then our brain trains itself to

accept it, as a result, it becomes a natural phenomenon (Budiman, 2017; Skinner, 1976).

Besides this, another factor that influenced Jajanka and Clegane's English language was BBC radio and TV. Both of them exposed themselves to the target language through the medium of BBC. As Lalima (2013), also tells us that Radio and TV are powerful mediums that have been affecting learners' language learning process. Radio in particular since it is cheap and easily available. Clegane was a regular listener of BBC radio and used to pick up new vocabulary from there. In his own words:

I used to listen to English news on BBC but I would not understand everything so I would immediately listen to the same news in Nepali and make meaning out of it. For instance, if the news read, Manang is a beautiful village. I would not know what it meant so after the news in English ended I would immediately listen to the same news in Nepali and learn what they were trying to say. And, now I know what beautiful is or village is and how to use them.

Clegane unknowingly was applying the grammar translation method to accelerate his learning process as he was translating words from English to Nepali by listening to BBC radio (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Jajanka, on the other hand, was good with language due to his reading but he turned to BBC for better pronunciation, new vocabulary and better speaking ways. He regularly watched BBC TV and listened to BBC radio and YouTube, at a later stage, to learn how the native speakers of the language spoke English (Al Zoubi, 2018). He made a diary of new vocabulary items and paid attention to pronunciation, meaning and usage. This is how BBC radio, TV and internet played a crucial role in the lives of Clegane and Jajanka to learn the English language.

Assistive Devices

Technology and assistive tools have become a major part of our everyday life but these technical gadgets and tools play an even more valuable role in the life of learners with visual impairment. These recent advancements in technology and amazing software have made their lives much easier and everything easily accessible (Brassai et al., 2011). And, the way they use these gadgets and techs is also different. They have their own ways and techniques of using them.

Delores, one of the participants, cannot imagine her life without these tools now. She acknowledges that most of the things that she does are heavily dependent on her laptop, smartphone and tablet. She reads and listens to audiobooks with the help of her laptop. Out of curiosity, I asked her on how she uses these devices to which she happily replied, “... *I rely more on laptop and I zoom everything. I change the background of the laptop and zoom the contents and read them. I cannot read physical textbooks now so I rely on my gadgets.*” I further asked so you use the laptop by zooming and do not use other assistive software. To which she explained, “*I keep talkback on the side to not give too much stress to my eyes but mostly I zoom the screen, change the background and use my laptop. Sometimes I use the magnifying glass and sometimes I do not.*” She further added:

I use contrast to help relieve the pressure off my eyes. If I am using my phone then I keep it in a dark mode and when I use social media I make the fonts bigger whereas if I am reading something then I change the background to black so that I can see better.

Jajanka, on the other hand, uses these devices differently. He does not use a magnifier since it puts a lot of strain on his eyes, rather he prefers screen reader software. Besides computer, another device he relies on is his smartphone. He shared

that he uses a screen reader to use his mobile as well. Jajanka also agreed that without technology and these modern gadgets he has nothing as it has become an integral part of his life (Ahmed, 2018). He shared, *“now if I do not have my smartphone and my laptop then I cannot do anything. I cannot learn anything, no source of information and I cannot even do my job.”* Along with Delores and Jajanka, Clegane is also heavily dependent on these devices for his everyday tasks and works. He too cannot imagine a life without these devices.

Now we have all sorts of devices, gadgets and applications to assist our learning but some fifteen or twenty years back these tools and technologies were very limited. All of the participants cannot imagine functioning without computers, cell phones and tablets nowadays. But during Delores’s school days she used to have something else that helped her in learning. She became nostalgic:

When I was in school, I had a strong bond with one of my teachers in the blind section. And, she used to see me struggle while reading books. Seeing this she had given me a magnifying glass and a wooden board that could stand upright. That magnifying glass enabled me to see smaller fonts and that wooden board helped me to direct my reading material towards the source of light which meant I did not have to bend over too much to see the reading material. These tools helped me a lot while reading.

Here also we can see the concept of collaborative learning, ZPD and MKO all in one place. As her teacher, one of the community members assisted in her learning through small but vital support (Vygotsky, 1978). It was very simple and inexpensive but made a significant impact on her learning. Similarly, Clegane did not use magnifiers but he used cassettes during his higher studies to record and help him with note keeping. He shared:

We did not have technologies like today, all we had was cassettes. I used to call my friends, offer snacks and lunch and ask them to read the important sections so that I could record them. It was difficult at that time.

Collaborative learning played an important role in Clegane's learning which we can see in his narrative above as well. Social interaction and help from his peers played a vital role in his learning (Vygotsky, 2012; Laal & Laal, 2012). Modern assistive devices and tools were not readily in use and available during those times. Mobile phones, computers and laptops came much later in our society. As we talk about smartphones, computers and modern ICT tools we should also talk about the software and application that they use to assist them in their learning. They all used the basic software for their support. Jajanka and Clegane shared, *"I use mobile with the help of talkback since I cannot see it and computer with the help of screen reader software like Job Access with Speech (JAWS) and Non Visual Desktop Access (NVDA)."* In Delores's case, since she has slightly better vision, she uses magnifiers. She also shared, *"I use mobile phones and computers with the help of magnifiers, but, I do keep NVDA on the side to lessen the strain on my eyes."* Similarly, all of them use other software like Digital accessible information system (DAISY) and FineReader to convert physical books into audiobooks and readable digital copies. In conclusion, these technological devices and tools for learners with visual impairments are more than just a tool to help with their education rather a fundamental work tool that is equivalent to pencil and paper for non-disabled students (Sousa, 2013). These assistive techs as they put it have really, *"changed their lives."*

Teachers, Friends and Family

Wonder how our life would be without any one of them. Some realize it and some do not but, teachers, friends and family play a significant role in our life. In a

way, our education begins at our homes with our parents. Our first interactions happen at our home with our family and then comes our friends and then comes teachers and school. As Kallivayalil and Thomas (2019), also believe a child's education starts at home. Parents, who are also responsible for molding the child's character, are the first teachers. There is even a proverb along similar lines, "mother is the first and the best teacher"; knowingly and unknowingly we perform various activities and learning takes place organically when we are children. Parents or family are also considered as the direct holders of educational work (Emerllahu & Dali, as cited in Ceka & Murati, 2016). In Vygotsky's words, they are MKOs, who help us in our learning process through social interactions (Vygotsky, 2012). They guide us, work with us and give us valuable instructions which Vygotsky terms as ZPD where the learner accelerates their learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). Upon just randomly saying these three words they had various thoughts, feelings and opinions. Jajanka thought of three words i.e. support, fun and care when asked what came to his mind when I uttered the words friends, teachers and family. Clegane on the other hand, distinctly associated friends with cooperation and support and added, "*...in life genuine friends are rare few*", teachers with those who teach what we do not know and family with support. Lastly, Delores considered friends as a part of life, teachers with respect and family as her mentor and guide.

Family

Family plays a vital role in our life. They guide us and play a major role in shaping our character and mental well-being. Upon talking with Clegane, he had similar feelings to share, he also acknowledged, "*...parents were very supportive, loving and caring*" but he also lamented that:

They know nothing about my condition and did not play any role in me learning English. They were not educated and all the resources were not available in village as well. It was a middle class family, we did not have many networks and were not that fully equipped with resources as well.

But, his parents knew the value of education and finally searched for a school which would facilitate his supportive needs and it changed everything. Delores also shared a similar feeling with Clegane that her parents and family were full of support, always encouraging and motivating who never made her feel that she was visually impaired and made her believe that she could do everything. Parents' attitudes toward their children with disabilities determine learners' achievements to a great extent (Lamichhane, 2013).

Contrary to Clegane, Jajanka's family did not only provide him with love, care and support but played a significant role in his learning as well. He claimed that among these three vital elements of our life i.e. family, friends and teachers, his family played the most important and supportive role in his learning. He started by expressing that if it were not for his parents then he would never have gotten the opportunity to study. Whether, financially, physically or emotionally it was his family that helped him. Furthermore, he added:

Whether it be going to the exams or reading notes or helping in making notes, my siblings helped me a lot. I used to be in the school for certain hours, for five or six hours, and I would spend most of my time with my family. So, I think my family was the main support in my learning.

I was curious about how did his siblings and family helped in his note keeping and learning and inquired further to which he replied:

I had to make notes really roughly during class. I used to roughly write down what my teachers and friends used to say at a fast pace and sometimes my siblings, sometimes my mother used to copy them fairly in a note copy or diary for me. Mostly my younger brother used to copy them for me.

Yes, his friends helped him in class which is a perfect example of collaborative learning (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012) but we can really see the importance of support he received from his family members. It really had a major impact on his learning. We can see the implementation of Vygotsky's idea of ZPD and MKO clearly in Jajanka's life. Here, his family and siblings specially are acting as MKOs and he is being benefitted due to the guidance and help from his family members (Vygotsky, 1978). He further explained, "...another way they helped me was by reading newspapers and articles to me every day." He elaborated:

We had a subscription to The Himalayan Times and My Republica but, I could not read them since the fonts in those newspapers were really small. So, my brother or my sister used to read them every day to me and I used to listen to them. I also picked up English in that way.

Reading was the core behind Jajanka's English whether it be reading storybooks by own self or listening to his brother and sister read the newspaper. We can see from his experiences that a strong family support really makes a big difference in someone's life. Reading story books at an early age and listening to his siblings read the newspapers daily became the base behind his English language learning. Last but not the least, he added that his family really was a big help in his mobility as well.

Teachers

Teachers are another important factor in our learning. We look up to them, we learn from them, we copy them and, in return, they challenge us, they share their knowledge with us and guide us in the right direction. In Vygotsky's words, they are one of the vital MKOs that affect the language learning process. Teachers have a major impact on students' lives, a good teacher can have a huge impact on the entire education system and the students.

Jajanka, who was also a TFN fellow as an English teacher, understands the value of a good teacher now more than ever but, he did understand that a good teacher is important and plays a significant role in the learning process quite early on in his life. He quoted, "...a teacher makes a big difference in a student's life." This really caught my attention and I asked him, "why do you say so?" To which he added:

In the beginning, I was not that academically strong. Among ten students my roll number used to be ten. I was that kind of student. I do not know, either the mainstream school and teachers did not know how to teach me or it was my slow growth and development. It could be both as well. It might be the inability of teachers or my lack of curiosity and interest. But, it was only when I reached class three/four I got some sense that I should study and it slowly improved.

He further added:

Although I was improving, I found mathematics very difficult but that also improved when they brought in a new teacher in class nine targeting SLC who used to teach really well. And, I scored ninety in math for the first time, I used to be just pass before but now I scored ninety. So from that incident, I realized that, a teacher matters. He fondly used the analogy of lyrics from a popular

song by Swar Samrat (emperor of voice in Nepali) Narayan Gopal 'एउटा मान्छेको मायाले कति फरक पर्दछ जिन्दगीमा' saying a teacher has a major impact in teaching and learning of a learner.

We can clearly see the application and validation of the concept of ZPD by Vygotsky here. Jajanka was capable but with the help of his teacher that is an MKO, his learning process escalated. Teachers indeed play multiple roles such as controller, organizer, observer, facilitator, tutor and so on; all at the same time to help the learners learn better (Naibaho, 2019). He continued that his English was comparatively stronger than other subjects but it was all rote memory-based learning. Rote memorization is basically one of the oldest and most used learning techniques where you repeatedly practice something unless you learn or memorize it (Ahour & Berenji, 2015). But when he reached class nine he came across a wonderful English teacher, so wonderful that the teacher used to say, *“English is not a subject to study but English is a subject to enjoy.”* The teacher provided such type of environment in the classroom which made learning fun and enjoyable for Jajanka (Naibaho, 2019). After the introduction of a new English teacher, Jajanka quoted, *“I started enjoying the subject and scoring really good marks in English. Furthermore, that also was a major factor for my interest in English teaching which later also influenced my decision to become an English TFN fellow.”* He went into nostalgia and added:

What I did during my fellowship in TFN as an English teacher and how much I was able to improve my students, it was all due to my English teacher from class nine. My source of motivation was that English teacher.

Furthermore, Jajanka added when he was in his undergraduate he met wonderful teachers there as well who supported him both academically and emotionally. He recalled, *“...she was my psychology teacher who was a psychologist*

herself. She supported me emotionally and academically like a parent. Being far from home, meeting such people made a real difference.” Listening to Jajanka, emotional support and connection is another factor that makes a big difference in someone’s learning. A classroom where there is a positive and warm relationship between students and teachers where they feel valued, accepted and safe, learning just flourishes (Protheroe, 2007). He not only received emotional support but academic support as well. He added:

I had really wonderful teachers in my bachelor's. Some teachers gave notes and reading materials to me in soft copy. They did it especially for me so that it would be easy for me to learn. They were really hard working teachers. They would study many books in the library and make notes. They would explain those notes in class but later would type the same thing and email it back to me. They used to really make an effort just for my sake.

He shared that due to the help and support of teachers his studies went really well. He added:

And some teachers would scan the entire book for me. They would stay in the library by themselves during lunch hour, scan the book and send it to me. Because I used to be in classes and would not be free but whenever they had free time, they would stay in the library and scan the book just for me. I even received such kind of honest supports.

This showed that the teachers that he met during his undergraduate studies in Bengaluru really were well aware and knew how to support a learner with visual impairment. They really were self-motivated and caring. Similar to Jajanka, Delores also had supportive and encouraging teachers who always encouraged and motivated her. She recounted:

In my school, I had a teacher who would always encourage and motivate me. She always used to say take all the time you need but write by yourself. I will read it. They would always keep me in the place with the best lighting. They would really motivate and support me. Not only in my studies but they encouraged me to participate in Paralympics and dance as well.

Not only in school but she had really supportive teachers in her high school as well. She joyfully recalled:

I had a teacher while I was doing my higher studies who would always encourage and support me. He even gave me his Kindle to support my reading and learning saying that I could keep it till I finish my studies. And, he also encouraged me to write by myself regardless of my handwriting and offered extra time to write. Moreover, he also encouraged me to travel, hike and go on tours. And, I have travelled since then giving me some of my best memories.

We can clearly admit that a single teacher does make a difference and has a significant impact on someone's life. A small source of encouragement and motivation goes a long way when it comes to learning and building self-confidence.

Delores gladly expressed:

Had he not encouraged me, I would have never gone on hikes and traveled. Now, I do not miss a single chance to travel. I know there will be challenges, it will take a little longer but I do not miss a chance to travel.

And, she has kept the same spirit alive in her academic and professional career as well. Teachers really played a significant role in all of their lives and really impacted their learning. This further affirms that, with the right support and assistance, learners with visual impairment can also perform equally well.

Friends

Wonder what our life would be without friends. Yes, we go to school but, when we are children most of our time is spent among our friends. Teachers teach us, parents care for us but it is with friends that we constantly spend our time with. It is with friends that I think we learn the most from. In Vygotsky's words, they act as MKOs and we learn from them through social interactions and communication. The concept of collaborative learning truly applies here since we constantly work together to achieve shared learning goals (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Moreover, in the case of learners with vision-related disabilities, friends are even more important as they constantly support their peers and help them. Upon talking about friends all of the participants agreed that their friends were one of the most important aspects that supported and impacted their learning. Delores assured this claim as she expressed:

Major factor while learning is a good friend. No matter where you go, school, college or university, you need to have good friends. And, luckily all this while I had really good friends and I too used to concentrate and perform well in classes so it also helped.

I really got interested and further inquired and asked, “*what do you mean by a good friend is important?*” To which she further explained:

It is like this. In schools and colleges you are with your teachers only during the class and while they are teaching, but you are with your friends most of the time and they help you with everything like in making notes, telling you what is written on the board, helping you record guess papers during exam, while in the classroom, having lunch, everywhere you are with your friend. If you have a helpful friend then I do not think you will have much of a problem. Also, why I say this is, I had a friend in school when I was in grade five, we

would sit together in class and she used to make notes of important topics for me in big fonts which, made my life very easy because it is difficult for me to read braille. Since I am partially sighted, my sense of touch is not that sharp so I read braille by looking. So that note really helped.

Notes play an important role in a student's life. Exams are unavoidable, we cannot remember everything that is said and done in a class, reading the entire book every time is not possible and we cannot go to our teachers every time we need them or do not know something. So, in situations like these notes play a vital role. Notes are basically a written transcription of information gathered from various sources such as lectures, books and other mediums along with learners' own reflections and interpretations which they can refer to later for better understanding and to memorize for future use (Boch & Piolat, 2005). They not only save our time but make our life easier as well. She further kept going:

Even in my bachelor's my friends helped me a lot, they used to make notes for me in bigger fonts and record important topics for me. I was able to learn properly because of my friends. So, I would say that friends are really important, not only in education but everywhere.

Delores really had a good friend circle that supported her learning. Her community of friends played a vital role in her learning and academic success. She was really excited and nostalgic as she was sharing her experiences and memories as it reminded her of her best friend at school. She recalled:

I had a really good friend, my best friend who was very lazy. So, at that time I made two goals. One I need to make her pass and two I have to encourage her because if she does not read then I cannot study as well. So I would encourage

her and although she was not good with her studies, she would read and study for me. She would read and I would remember them in my memory.

They are still best friends and they definitely helped each other to learn and grow. Unknowingly, she was practicing one of the significant aspects of collaborative learning i.e. encouraging and motivating her peers to learn. She was not only taking responsibility for her learning but her friend's learning as well which is one of the essences of collaborative learning (Laal & Laal, 2012). But now, technology has made her life much easier as she relies heavily on technology these days. She has adapted herself into a blended support system of friends and technology these days.

Similarly, Jajanka too feels blessed as he also had wonderful friends who helped him throughout his educational journey. He disclosed:

During my school, I was fortunate to have good friends I used to mostly sit on the last bench as it had the most windows and good lighting and my friends used to read to me what was written on the board. I could never see the board so, they were my eyes. They used to write first and then help me.

We can see the importance of his peers in his learning but when he reached higher grades, they had an even more significant impact on his learning. He elaborated:

My friends helped me a lot, when we reached higher grades the teachers used to write a lot of notes on the board and I could neither read what was written on the board nor write at their speed. But, some of my friends could write at the pace of the teacher. So, they used to first write really fast and then read it back to me and then I would also write. This is how I used to make notes during class. This was one of the major supports that I received.

Even here we can see the application of Vygotsky's notion of ZPD and MKO with Jajanka and his friends as with the help of the right guidance and support he could achieve much more (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, his friends did not only support him inside the class but they were there for him outside the class as well. He acknowledged:

When we were in class nine we used to have extra classes. We had to go to the school early in the morning and come home late at night. So they would come to pick me up in the morning and drop me off during the night since it would be dark outside.

We can see another aspect of collaborative learning being reflected through Jajanka's life i.e. collaboration and support does not have to be limited only inside the class but as Laal and Ghodsi (2012) argue the essence of collaborative learning is creating social and moral beings who understand each other and extend their activities outside the class. They communicate even after school and keep the learning and support process going. Not only Jajanka and Delores, but Clegane also recalled his friends helping him in every step. As they went to high school, bachelor's and master's, even then all of them received crucial helping hands from their friends. Clegane conveyed:

I could not see what was written on the board so, my friends used to read it out to me. I sometimes used to write in braille but mostly I listened. Being partially impaired I felt a little awkward writing in braille since it made a lot of sounds and drew attention.

Clegane elaborated that it was a give-and-take relationship. His friends used to help him in the class but, since his mind and memory were sharp, later he was the one who used to help them while answering the questions during exams. He articulated, "I

could not rote memorize things but I was very good at grasping the concept along with expressing and giving logical opinions.” This further again aligns with the notion of Chomsky that some individuals are innately better at learning than others (Cook, 1985). They, adapt and comprehend with little effort. As he kept expressing he also lamented that these advanced computers, gadgets and technologies were not available during his time so this is what he used to do:

I listened carefully while the teacher taught the lesson. Recording everything that happened in the class was not possible because it would be too long and teachers used to dictate notes in a slow manner. On top of that, it was not easy like now: you take your mobile to the class and record it. So what I did was, listened carefully to the teachers and later I called my friends and asked them to read out the teachers' notes and recorded them.

Listening to his stories, I also shared my experience, *“I did not use recorders and wrote with the help of friends”* to which he added:

Your education happened a bit late and until then a lot of digital material and digitalization had occurred. It was not readily available everywhere but compared to mine it was easier. We did not have compact discs (CDs), Video CDs (VCDs) or Digital Video Discs or Digital Versatile Discs (DVDs), we only had cassettes.

Clegane’s education happened around five years before the two participants, maybe that is why he had to struggle more than others while pursuing his studies. But we can also see that during school, it was the same for everyone. Everyone relied on their friends and parents for support. Everyone relied on social interactions, communication and MKOs i.e., their friends mostly along with teachers and parents to

accelerate their learning process (Vygotsky, 1978, 2012). Clegane concluded, “...*my friends helped me more than teachers and parents.*”

But, now as they are older, mature and with the advancement in technology, they all admit that technology also has become their friends and play a vital role in their everyday life. It affects all aspects of their life from their studies to learning new skills to professional engagements to everyday life. They cannot imagine a life without these gadgets and techs now.

Major Factors for Learning

We have touched upon many areas and aspects and discussed several factors that affect our learning. Factors that supported us and that hindered us along with participants lived experiences but in the end, to sum it all up they all agreed that it is all about self-motivation and attitude towards learning that really matters, everything else is just secondary and supporting factors only (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Gass & Selinker, 2008). Jajanka quoted, “*it is all about self-motivation, a little push from others and the right environment. Everything else is just a supporting factor.*” Delores and Clegane also shared similar opinions. Delores blurted out:

First, it is you, all materials and gadgets are secondary. It has to come to you that I need to do this. And you need to be very clear about your goals. And, you need to try and stop making excuses. No one is going to create the environment, you have to create your environment. It should come from you and you are responsible for yourself, everything else is just a supporting factor.

Clegane too feels the same but he believes teaching learning process also plays a significant role in learning. He articulated, “...*teaching learning process also plays*

a major role in learning. Well-trained teachers, well-equipped classroom, materials and resources and the overall environment significantly affect the growth of a learner.” But he restressed:

Your personal motivation and attitude is the biggest thing. If you think you cannot from the inside then the person most certainly cannot. Having said that even to get motivated and inspired, external factors and environment play a vital role.

Appropriative and supportive environment indeed plays a vital role in language learning as it exposes you to the target language in the right way (Al Zoubi, 2018). They all had similar things to say but expressed them differently. Jajanka stated:

While learning I prefer being alone without any noise or disturbances where I can concentrate. And, I do not want people unnecessarily helping me without me asking for it. I want people to help and support me only when I seek it and in specific areas and situations that I seek it in. I prefer solitude where things happen as I prefer. I would learn best in such environments.

We want to struggle and figure things out by ourselves without others getting in our way and Jajanka completely embodies this idea. Delores also expresses similar thoughts but in a different way. She believes that comfort is the biggest threat to growth. We must move out of our comfort zone to learn and grow. In her own words, she put forth:

For me, if you are always in a comfortable environment, where you do not have to work hard and make an effort. Where everything is easily available to you according to your needs and requirement, I think you can never learn and grow in such an environment. Nobody likes difficulties in life but, you need

challenges and you need to struggle, so, if you are exposed to a diverse range of people, places and situations then I think one learns the best and grooms themselves.

Why she says this is, she continued:

In my ten years of schooling, there were not many challenges or major obstacles that I had to overcome. There was no pressure to study well, we could get by not doing homework by making simple excuses: we could always blame it on our condition and support teachers by saying they did not translate our works on time. But, after my undergraduate, I started a job. Job outside of my field i.e. business consulting company and it was there that I faced many obstacles and challenges. I did not know even the simplest terminologies and basic things. I faced a lot of obstacles and challenges but that taught me and groomed me as well. A partially sighted humanities student is working in a business consulting company, so, I think in order to learn we need to diversify and step out of our comfort zone.

She is indeed right that nothing grows in the comfort zone. Despite our limitations and impairment we must challenge ourselves and strive for the best. And, only then we will learn and grow. I would like to end this chapter by borrowing some profound words from one of Denzel Washington's speeches that, "it is not easy." It never was and it never will be. We must motivate ourselves and strive to achieve the things and the dreams that we want. Whether it be learning a language, climbing a mountain, earning wealth and wisdom, keeping healthy or travelling the world.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed various factors that supported and assisted the English language learning process of visually impaired learners under three major

themes. In the first theme, I explored how outside school activities supported their learning of the English language. Secondly, I discussed the role of assistive devices and its significance in their lives. Finally, this section dealt with the most important aspect of the study i.e. teachers, friends and family and how they impacted their language learning journey. Lastly, there is a short discussion regarding the major factor that the participants felt is vital for language learning in general.

CHAPTER VII

INSIGHTS, CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND MY JOURNEY

This is the last chapter of the dissertation which begins with a summary of my insights. I present some of the important insights to sum it all up which eventually guides my conclusion. Finally, I reflect back on my journey of studying at Kathmandu University and the process of writing the dissertation along with various life lessons and wisdom that I have gained for life along the way.

Insights

After data collection, the data were thematically categorized, analyzed and interpreted based on the theory selected for the study. The data was discussed by generating three separate themes in order to answer the three research questions i.e. how do learners with partial vision-related disabilities learn the English language, how do they narrate their experience of facilitations and hindrances while learning the English language and how do they narrate their experience of support and assistance while learning the English language respectively. Those broad themes were further divided into sub-themes during the discussion process in order to further enrich the study with valuable insights.

Under the first theme, English language learning experience there were four sub-themes. The first sub-theme touched upon the English language learning process of learners with visual impairment with the aim of answering the first research question. Major insight to take back from this section was that, language learning takes place in varieties of ways. In some cases, reading played a dominant role in learning but in most cases, listening played a central role in learning for learners with

vision-related disabilities. Primarily, listening and speaking were the two language skills that significantly impacted their language learning process. Everything that they did was linked with these two language skills eventually sidelining reading and writing.

Another sub-theme that I discussed was the seating arrangement of the learners. It enriched us with the insight that seating arrangement does have a major effect on the learning process of the learner. It cultivated us with the insight that, no matter where they sat, they should be able to listen to their teachers properly and always be with their friends. The emphasis was on collaborative learning as they learn mostly with the help of their friends as they cannot see what was written on the board. So, the major insight was, where a visually impaired person sits in the class matters but, whom he/she sits with matters more as they mostly learn with the help of their peers.

Evaluation and assessment of a visually impaired learner was another significant sub-theme that was discussed. It presented me with the insight that, exams oftentimes are stressful and difficult for visually impaired learners as they have to rely on writers to attend their exams. And, finding a good and competent writer to help them is always a challenge. Furthermore, the process of making necessary documents for a writer is also a hustle. It was also revealed that question papers and answering mechanisms were not disability friendly as everyone was given the same printed question papers without any adjustments. There were no provisions for larger font size question papers, or questions in braille, or in audio or in soft copy which made it difficult for visually impaired learners to access them. Finally, one of the key insights gained was, going digital with adapting to modern technologies is a viable solution forward.

The last theme to answer the first research question was role of technology in language learning. Through the study, I developed the insight that, technology and ICT tools are absolutely essential in learning the English language and in their everyday life. From cassettes to CD/DVD to flash drives to smartphones and advanced computers, these modern gadgets and technology played a vital role in facilitating and accelerating their learning process and now a life without them is unimaginable.

Under the second theme, challenges and obstacles, there were three major sub-themes to better answer the second research question. It dealt with challenges and obstacles that visually impaired learners faced during their learning process. The study enriched us with valuable insights from the lived experiences of the learners. It revealed that environment was one of the crucial factors that affected the learning process of any learner. If English speaking environment is there then the learners get exposed to the target language and learn quickly whereas the opposite happens when the environment is not conducive.

Furthermore, another key insight that was gained was, that the education system itself became a challenge sometimes. It was revealed that even before facing the challenges with language learning, learners tend to face the initial obstacle of getting admitted to the institutions itself. Furthermore, they faced daily challenges with navigation and supportive needs which filled me with the insight that, educational institutions are not disability friendly and do not have appropriate facilities, trained manpower and disability-friendly infrastructures to facilitate the supportive needs and requirements of learners with disabilities.

The last sub-theme under the theme challenges and obstacles was resource and materials which dealt with the availability of resources and materials for learners with

visual impairment. The study further deepened my insight and revealed that visually impaired learners face a serious lack of learning resources and they have to manage with very few materials. There was a lack of learning resources and materials such as books in braille, large font size books, audiobooks and reading materials in soft copy to accelerate the learning experience of visually impaired learners. And, in these circumstances mostly, family and friends acted as their learning support mechanism. If I have to sum up everything with one valuable insight then that would be going digital as it is the future now.

The third theme that was discussed to answer the third research question dealt with factors that supported the learning process of visually impaired learners. It enriched us with the insight that besides school and classroom there were various other factors that supported and had a significant impact on the language learning process. I developed the insight that outside school activities such as essay writing, speech competition, debate competition, anchoring and general communication also played a major role in learning of a language. Furthermore, the study also filled me with the insight that TV and Radio along with internet give the learners with some well-needed exposure to the target language which as a result help in the process of learning and polishing the language.

Another vital insight that I gained was that assistive devices such as smartphones and laptops have become their eyes to explore the world. Everything that they do depends on those devices and technologies. Lastly, we gained the insight that teachers, parents and friends play a major role in their learning process. It was revealed that some teachers went the extra mile to support the learners with special needs whereas most did not know how to support a visually impaired learner. In terms of parents, some parents were very supportive and created a favorable learning

environment where a learner flourishes. But, the major takeaway from this study was that friends are the ones who play the major role in the learning process of a visually impaired learner. They collaboratively learn from each other and help each other in the learning process. Friends helped them with their notes, recordings, revisions, readings, travelling and so on. The core learning process revolved around them. In addition to friends, it was also disclosed that motivation and attitude towards learning also made a significant impact on the learning process of the learners.

Conclusion

The study explored and tried to understand the English language learning experiences of learners with partial vision-related disabilities. In this process, it also analyzed and took into account various challenges and obstacles that they faced during their learning process and the factors that supported their learning. From the analysis of the data for this study, I conclude that learners with vision-related disabilities learn a language like English in a context like Nepal differently from his/her normal friend without disabilities. Some learn it by reading, some by listening, some through speaking and some through writing. The zest is that one size does not fit all and everyone has his/her own way of learning. In the case of learners with visual impairment, listening and speaking tend to play a dominant role. Since, listening plays a major role in their learning, where they sit in the class also matters as it directly affects their chances of being able to listen to the teachers.

Moreover, the study reveals that it is a challenge for learners with visual impairment to take exams. It reveals that the assessment system is not at all disability-friendly and learners have a hard time coping with it. Finding a qualified and competent writer is a constant challenge that they face. Furthermore, no modification such as larger prints, audio materials, questions in braille or in soft copy is made with

the question papers as a result visually impaired learners have no choice but to take help from a writer to attend their exam. Same is the case with learning materials and resources. There is a scarcity of reading materials and learning resources for learners with visual impairment. The study enriches us with the insight that learners manage with very limited resources and resort to techniques such as taking help from their parents, friends or recording the classes and notes to fill the gap created by lack of resources. There are reading materials and resources in normal prints but for a visually impaired learner, they are not accessible. The study not only highlights the problems but also offers a convening solution i.e. going digital. We must take advantage of the modern technologies and move towards digitalization and more techno-friendly mediums so that visually impaired learners can also easily access and take advantage of these resources.

Sadly, the study also exposes the reality of our education system and how it is not disability friendly. Learners face challenges such as hassle during the admission process since every institution does not accept them easily. Which is a byproduct of the fact that the institutions do not have proper navigation system to accommodate the learners along with lack of trained manpower and lack of awareness on how to facilitate the needs of a visually impaired learner. If we look into most of the major infrastructures including educational infrastructures in our country, we can clearly see that, majority of them do not have wheelchair access, no yellow paths and no proper signposts to help with navigation. Furthermore, teachers and other personnel lack awareness of how to facilitate and support the learners with special needs.

The study not only highlights the problems but also looks into the positive aspects and the factors that supports the language learning process of the learners. One of the major insight to withdraw from the study is that appropriate learning

environment and exposure to the target language really makes a difference in the learning process. It further brings to light that the classroom and the school alone is not the place where exposure to target language happens but, extra activities and engagements such as essay competition, debate competition, anchoring, speech events, watching TV, listening to the radio and just general conversations outside the classroom setting are vital to create that learning space and exposure to the target language.

Lastly, the most important insight and the core essence of the study is the value of collaborating learning in the life of a visually impaired learner. The study reveals that, everything is dependent on collaborative practices and social interactions as their family, teachers and friends act as the major supporting factor behind their learning. In some cases, their family members play a major role in supporting them and in some cases, their teachers facilitate them by addressing their supportive needs and requirements but most of the time it is their friends who constantly help and assist in their learning process. Whether it be making notes or helping with a lesson or recording important ideas or travelling. Their friends act as their eyes and vision to guide them. But, what we also cannot deny that a learner has to be self-motivated and have a positive attitude towards learning in order for learning to flourish and accelerate. The study basically is an exhibition of the true essence of collaborative learning practices and learners' motivation towards learning which we observe through reflections and retellings of participants' narratives, memories, and their lived experiences.

Implications of the Study

The outcome of the study implies that every individual learns differently, so it is better if the first thing institutions and teachers do is to figure out how a learner best

learns and only then will they be able to facilitate and accelerate their learning process. It also indicates that teachers, facilitators are everyone in general are to be better informed regarding various types of disabilities and how to cater to their needs. Moreover, appropriate training for the teachers on how to support learners with visual impairment and other types of disabilities is urgent. Apart from this it further suggests that collaborative learning plays a big role in the life of visually impaired learners, so, it is preferable if institutions and teachers provide and create an environment where collaborative learning flourishes. It also highlights a lack of learning and supportive materials. So, designing and developing proper supportive and learning materials to facilitate and assist learners with visual impairment is a necessity. Likewise, it implies that our education system is not disability friendly in terms of learning, navigation providing appropriate supportive needs and others, which desperately needs to change. Lastly, it indicates that the policies are there but they have not been properly implemented, so, it is necessary for the governing body and people in the authorities to make sure that the policies are being properly implemented and are serving their purpose.

My Journey

Before joining Kathmandu University (KU) for my Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree I had a vision, a dream and my eyes out toward the horizon. And, after nearly four years, I am happy to say that my dreams have not changed a bit, my fears have subsided a little and my skill sets have been added. In these years I have met some of the best, most wonderful and amazing people, I have learnt and have had profound realizations that will help me throughout my life.

Four years back I wanted to study Special Needs and Inclusive Education so that I can teach learners with disabilities and help them get a better life. Four years

later, I want to study Special Needs and Inclusive Education even more, write stories, earn a lot of money because money matters and travel the world. But, I was a Humanities and Arts student and I could not go into Education. So, I searched around and I guess it was my destiny to make camp at the School of Education, Kathmandu University.

I still remember the first day I came to Kathmandu University for inquiry. The first person I talked to was my beloved Guru Prof. Dr. Laxman Gnawali. And, he just held me in his wings. All my problems and worries just disappeared after I met him. So, began one of the best times of my life. I rarely missed the classes and I enjoyed every second of it.

Oh! Did I ever tell you that I absolutely fell in love with Dr. Tikaram Poudel from the very first class? I don't know what it was about him but it was magical. And, his classes were sheer joy. Throughout my two-year journey, I only missed his classes three times and it was due to two deaths of my family members and a conference outside the valley. I have recordings of his classes, I will listen to them sometime again and relive those moments. I shall relive the stories he told, the moments he created, the memories and the hearts he touched.

Another class I absolutely loved was by Prof. Dr. Laxman Gnawali. Every class was a mixture of reflection and deep realization. He had a knack for making complex works and projects simple. We often did not realize the value of things and activities that he was conducting at that moment but once we start a research project or work, it all used to come full circle. Even in this dissertation writing, I revisited his classes, papers and books he suggested to read, websites he asked to visit, the techniques of reading that he instilled in the early days and most importantly APA

that he taught. Everything that he did, every class that he took and his words and advice, it all came back around.

Another amazing teacher I came across was Mr. Dinesh Thapa. I do not think I have met a harder working, dedicated, passionate and genuinely honest person. His classes were heavy with contents and knowledge. He wanted us to have it all. I revisited his classes on Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Research and Dissertation writing several times while writing my dissertation. Besides his classes, I enjoyed tea talks with him in the canteen. He used to give genuine and practical advice that used to act as life lessons for us. He was busier than us, worked harder than us, had an unimaginable schedule and still was managing everything. I used to be absolutely blown away. I used to get a fresh perspective every time we had a conversation.

There were other classes as well but I have to be honest, they were not all that memorable. I enjoyed them but they were not magical. Despite the classes, one of the most satisfying works I did was write my own fiction as one of the assignments. I hope to rework and publish it someday. The classes went on and we reached 4th semester. The classic dilemma of either writing a research paper or a dissertation approached. It had me overthinking for months. I asked my professors, seniors and did some rethinking and decided to write the dissertation. So began one and a half years of struggle, self-doubt, laziness, realizations, research, reflection and learning.

What Kathmandu University and Writing Dissertation Taught Me?

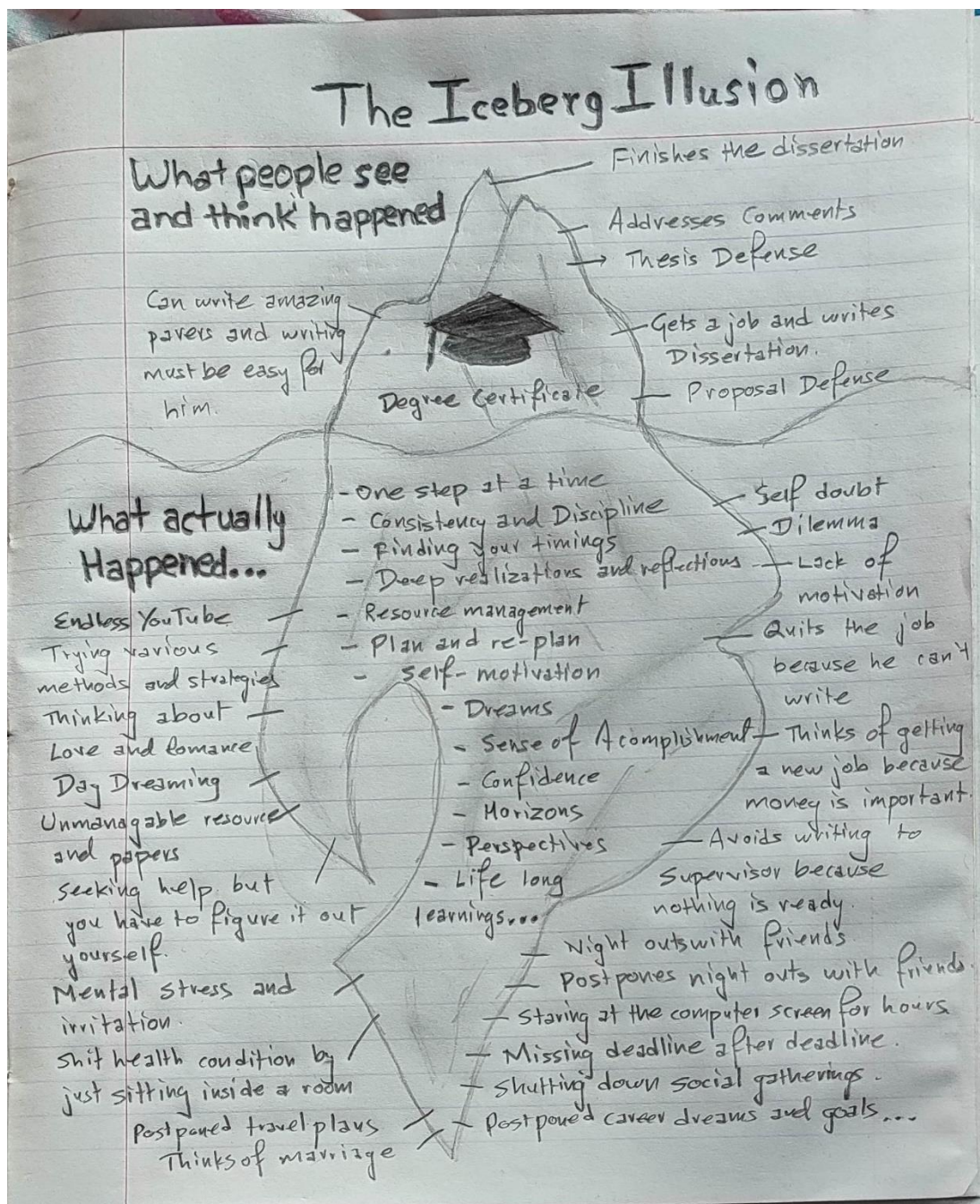
Whether to write a research paper or a dissertation to get the master's degree is a classic mortal dilemma that almost every master's student goes through. Which path is for you is a question you must ask yourself and search for the answer within you. No professor has the answer to that, no senior, no one. You weigh your

circumstances, make a choice and get on with it. Both the roads are equally alluring. But, if you ask me, I would say, if you write a research paper, make sure you publish it and if you write a dissertation make sure you write it well, make papers out of it or a book and publish it as well. You will learn the lessons you need to learn either way.

As Robert Frost famously wrote that we have miles to go before we sleep. Indeed my destination is still far away and there is much that I need to do but I believe this is a step in the right direction and even if I have not reached there yet, I have at least boarded the ship. And, this ride is already proving to be life-altering and full of wonderful experiences. It is more about the journey than the destination but I believe when I reach the destination, the journey will have changed me completely and turned around my perspectives.

Throughout this wonderful journey, I have learnt that, it is not easy, it never was, and it never will be. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it. This is the longest writing project that I have ever undertaken and it has taught me the value of consistency and discipline. I have not mastered the art of discipline and consistency but I have realized its value. There were many obstacles along the way, the pandemic hit me hard, and it affected my mental well-being. And, I learnt as a writer we need to come back to our work and keep going. But it is only possible if we really love our work and if it means something to us. There were disappointing days, lazy evenings, staring at the screen for hours, sacrificing social circles, postponing travel plans, quitting the job, reassessing your goals, questing yourself, postponing your personal deadlines countless times, missing opportunities and so on. But, there were also deep realizations, reflections, a sense of accomplishment, finding your routine, figuring out your best work timings, realizing the importance of discipline, consistency, learning to plan and re-plan, staying motivated and many other lessons for life. So, it is all

about the experience actually. I believe everything happens for a good reason and Kathmandu University happened for a good reason. I met such wonderful people there. I am sure the dots will align looking back. I would like to borrow a quote by Vincent van Gogh one of the best artists to have ever lived i.e. "For my part, I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream." It is time to climb another mountain, it is time to chase my dreams, write stories and travel the world...



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APPENDICES

Interview Guidelines

Major Research Questions

- How do learners with partial vision-related disabilities learn the English language?
- How do they narrate their experience of facilitation and hindrances while learning the English language?
- How do they narrate their experiences of support and assistance in their process of learning the English language?

Introduction

1. How would you like to introduce yourself?
2. How do you feel about your eye condition?

Education

3. How was your educational journey? School-college-university.
4. What kind of school did you go to? English medium or Nepali medium?
5. How was the environment of the school?
6. How did you start learning English? Do you remember anything?
7. How was a normal English class?
8. How do you think you learnt new words?
9. How do you think you learnt grammar?
10. Do you write? How do you think you learnt writing?
11. Reading, writing, listening and speaking. In which are you the strongest and the weakest why?
12. Could you read the normal book?

13. Do you write in paper or use braille?
14. Where did you used to sit in the class?
15. Does where you sit matter to you?
16. Could you see the board? If not then how did you manage?
17. What did you used to do at your home after school? Did you watch cartoons, movies and songs? Which language were they in?
18. Except school, did other factors help in your learning of English?
19. What helped you in your learning process?
20. What hindered you in your learning process? How did you overcome it?
21. Did you use any assistive technology or materials for help?
22. What would have made the learning experience better? How can we improve the situation?
23. Did you face difficulties during admission?

Friends, Teachers and Parents
24. When I say friends, teachers and parents, what comes to your mind?
25. Among these 3 who played a major role in your learning?
26. How did your friends, teachers and parents treat you?
27. Did your friends, teachers and parents help? How? From school to your higher studies.
28. Do you have a favorite teacher? Why is he/she your favorite?
29. Did they encouraged you or discouraged you?
30. In what kind of environment do you learn the best?

Materials
31. How do you read books? Then and now? Could you read the books normally?
32. Could you read guess papers and practice books? How did you manage?

33. What was your note keeping process? How did you do it?
 34. Did you use audio recorders?
 35. Could you read the question papers easily in exams? SLC, bachelors and masters?
 36. How did you give your exams? Did you keep writers or gave it by yourself?
 37. How can the schools/education board and others help?
 38. Do you listen to audio books? What kind of audio books? And, if you read, what kind of books do you read?
- Technologies
39. What technologies and gadgets do you use? Laptop, mobile and others?
 40. How do you use your mobile and laptops?
 41. What do you think of technologies and learning these days? Has things changed then and now?
 42. Do you imagine what if we had all these technologies and gadgets back then?
- Opinions
43. What plays a major role in learning?
 44. Any suggestions to teachers, friends, policy makers, parents, schools, anyone?
 45. Anything you would like to add? Any suggestions?

Sample Transcription

Interviewer: Namaste, how have you been?

Interviewee: Namaste, I have been great.

Interviewer: How would you like to introduce yourself?

Interviewee: My name is Delores and I am currently doing my masters in gender studies. Originally from Hetauda I am currently living in Baneswor.

Interviewer: What helped the most in your learning process?

Interviewee: I think friends helped the most in my learning process.

Interviewer: How did they help you? Can you share an incident?

Interviewee: My friends used to read what was written on the board for me.

And they would speak as she write so that I could write along with them. A wonderful story. I had a really good friend, my best friend who was very lazy. So, at that time I made two goals. 1 I need to make her pass and 2 I have to encourage her because if she doesn't read then I cannot study well as well. So I would encourage her and although she wasn't good with her studies, she would read and study for me. She would read and I would remember them in my memory.

Interviewer: How did teachers help in your learning process?

Interviewee: Teachers really encouraged and supported me. They always used to say take all the time you need but write by yourself. I will read it. They would always keep me in the place with the best lighting. They would really motivate and support me. Not only in studies had they encouraged me to participate in Paralympics and dance as well.

Interviewer: What do you think is the major factor that affects the learning of an individual?

Interviewee: First it is you, all materials and gadgets are secondary. It has to come to you that I need to do this. And you need to be very clear about your goals. And, you need try and stop making excuses, and you should be able to go with the time. And no one is going to create the environment, you have to create your environment. It should come from you and you are responsible all these materials and everything else is just supporting factor.

Interviewer: Any suggestions?

Interviewee: They are bringing a lot of things in the education system in terms of technology. But we don't have books online. If a child doesn't get the entire course book in accessible way then how he/she will build his/her foundation? Curriculum should be disability friendly and cooperative. People still don't know about our condition. Teachers should be aware about our condition and they should try to understand our condition and how their small effort can make a big difference in their life.

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

Interviewee: Thank you.