| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Teachers' Strategies to Enhance Deeper Learning Skills in English Language Classes

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| **ABSTRACT**

The paper focuses on English teachers' teaching strategies in secondary-level classes to enhance students' deeper learning skills. This paper is the outcome of a qualitative study, a narrative inquiry with three secondary-level English teachers. With the help of in-depth interviews and class observation, the study figured out how the different teaching strategies allow teachers to adopt, integrate and ensure deeper learning skills in existing curricular content. The research primarily collected data through interviews and supplemented it with classroom observations. They subsequently analysed the data under three major themes. The first gives theoretical reasoning; in contrast, the second and third themes widely discuss the practical aspects and examples from actual classroom practices aligning with the researcher's observation track record that revolves around the theme. The study concludes that any strategies the teacher introduces must be reinforced by fostering an autonomous environment for learners, creating a school environment supportive of deeper learning, and ensuring the appropriate assessment of deep learning skills.

| **KEYWORDS**

Deeper Learning, Narrative Inquiry, Autonomous Environment, Appropriate Assessment, Project Based Learning(PBL)

1. Introduction

World scholars have defined the term 'Deep Learning' in different timelines their ways, but the central sense is obvious; it defines deep learning as based on primary knowledge and a meta-cognitive process of re-constructing knowledge and cognitive strategy, which is the transfer of knowledge as a target to solve practical problems in the learning process (Lindsay & Norman, 1977; Yueyinga&Xiaodong, 2016). Many prominent scholars working in this field have defined deeper learning as a collection of student outcomes that includes mastery of fundamental academic knowledge, critical thinking and problem solving, working collaboratively and successfully, having an academic mentality, and being empowered through self-directed learning or learning how-to study (Bitter et al.,2014; Chow, 2010; Trilling, 2010). In this paper, I have alternatively used the terms 'deep learning' and' deeper learning'. Deep learning is often defined as deeper learning skills. Whenever the term 'skills' comes to mind, it usually starts with one of the internationally agreed definitions. International organisations like OECD (Organizations for Economic Co-operation and Development) and the World Bank refer to skills as more than technical competencies, enabling greater societal and personal development. For example, the World Bank's World Development Report 2012 distinguished between entrepreneurship and cognitive, social, and technical skills (Bourn & Pasha, 2020). Policymakers and academics have often referred to these kinds of skills as 'soft skills' or 'life skills', 'core skills',' Global skills', and '21st-century skills' (MoE,2016; UNESCO, 2005; CDC,2019; British Council, 2016).

There is an evolution in the perspective of skills and employability, and jobs that require manual skills are in declining order (Georgetown University, 2013); the critical finding of the report of Georgetown University mentions, "Employers will seek cognitive skills such as communication and analytics from job applicants rather than physical skills traditionally associated with manufacturing" (p. 30). The literature, including the Secondary Level curriculum of Nepal, has anticipated that to fit in the job market of 21stcentury, high school graduates need to master challenging academic content and develop skills in communication,

collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving that they can apply to the complex and new situation (CDC, 2019; MoE; 2016; "deeperlearning4all" n.d.).

Therefore, this study intends to explore deeper learning strategies by bringing together the most up-to-date research from cognitive psychology, contemporary educational theories, and neuroscientific perspectives. The data regulating the study process will show how deep learning encourages students to become creative, connected, and collaborative problem solvers, gain knowledge and skills for lifelong learning, and use various modern digital technologies to enhance their learning. It has unveiled the possible ways of facilitating deep learning in English language classes and how teachers use a diverse range of powerful teaching strategies and authentic learning activities to assist students in becoming independent thinkers, innovative creators, and effective communicators.

This study has led to insights for developing effective learning in Nepal. The investigation scope is broad; it looks into general teaching strategies, deeper learning skills, integrated teaching methods, and curriculum effectiveness rather than limiting it to certain aspects of English language education. The study is carried out at a very pertinent time for Nepal, as the areas covered in this study are identified as the key areas of development under the National School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016–2023. As a result of the study's theoretical and practical implications, it can help to advance teaching theories of deeper learning, particularly in secondary English classes. On the other hand, it can guide other researchers who want to conduct similar research related to cutting-edge teaching and learning strategies. Practically, the paper helps the teachers improve the students' deeper learning skills using various tools and techniques. It also helps the students develop their potential in deeper learning skills to make their learning successful. Overall, the process of this study has empowered with different theories, practices, and hands-on strategies for deeper learning, and most importantly, it has given a level of awareness to all the readers of the proven realities of deeper learning strategies in the Nepalese context. The suggested learning experiences provided for school or system leaders who want to engage with deep learning approaches throughout their organisation are essential. This way, the study is differentiated to accommodate individual learners and groups.

2. Methodology
As the study aims to explore how teachers perceive and share the experience of using deeper learning strategies in English classes, the research will follow a qualitative research design, the narrative inquiry. Scholars have widely advocated narrative inquiry as the best way of inquiring and understanding one's experience, thinking, and life events (Connelly &Clandinin, 2000; Clandinin D.,2009). This study uses the narratives of three teacher participants as an avenue to gain insights into how secondary-level English teachers perceive deeper learning strategies. According to Barkhuizen and Wette (2008), in the light of the narrative perspective, teachers construct their identities as they live stories and tell them. Beijaard et al. (2000) considered storytelling a way of teacher engagement in "narrative theorising". From this standpoint, there is always an interplay between the new experiences and previous stories. Therefore, narrative inquirers must understand individuals, places, and ongoing incidents.

Based on the research purpose, the research participants must be secondary-level English teachers of Nepal who are aware of deeper learning skills and have experience using them in their English classroom to any extent. Considering this criterion, research participants were from three schools (well-known for innovative learning, two from government-qualified model schools, and one from a private school) in Far West Nepal. The researcher frequently met them, discussed them, and repeated the process until they felt the information needed was well-saturated. Since the study adopted narrative inquiry as a research design, I primarily used semi-structured questions for in-depth interviews because a structured interview cannot explore the participants' real perceptions (Ferdinand &Mukumbang, 2021). I visited the participants with the outline of the questions, which were later modified to fit the nature and flow of the interview. Secondarily, class observation and artefact analysis were also carried out side by side to support the elicitation process, which helped shape the interview guidelines better.

The study followed the reflexive analysis that involved staying as close to the data as possible – from initial collection right through to the drawing of conclusions, which is a process that requires one to manage and organise the raw data systematically. According to (Kvale& Brinkmann, 2009), as a researcher, we need to work strategically, creatively, and intuitively to get a 'feel' for the data, cycle between that data and existing theory, and ensure that we follow our intuition, which might lead to unexpected yet substantial results. The study runs smoothly with the data analysis to accomplish the set objective. While translating English, I tried to draw appropriate, relevant, and significant conclusions that served as answers. The most important step of data analysis is to identify the key themes, which were reviewed repeatedly during the process of report writing, considering the findings in light of the limitations and methodological constraints of the study and the prevalence of created themes. At the same time, I have considered whether subjectivities are managed, methods are approached with consistency, 'true essence' is captured, findings are applicable outside the immediate frame of reference, and whether the research processes can be verified (Walliman, 2011) linking my findings to the research questions I have portrayed and relevant theories.

3. Results and Discussion
3.1 Strategies to Promote Deeper Learning Strategies in Secondary Level English Classes
'Deeper learning' is not a very common phrase in Nepali academia; terms like HOT (Higher Order Thinking), critical thinking, soft skills, and 21st-century skills are comparatively more familiar among school teachers. The research reports by the government and non-governmental agencies of Nepal and even the international arena (ERO; NASA Reports, 2013-2019; OECD, 2017; AIR reports, 2014) show that implementing deeper learning strategies in school-level education has become a question for educators working in English language teaching.

In this study, the series of interview sittings and flexible time for the elicitation process helped unveil the stories of the English teachers attempting deeper learning strategies in their classes to some extent. This paper discusses the analysed data under the three major interconnected themes that correspond and establish strong reasoning against the claims made by the literature and primary data.

Deeper learning instructional strategies

Learning Support environment   Assessing Deeper Learning Skills
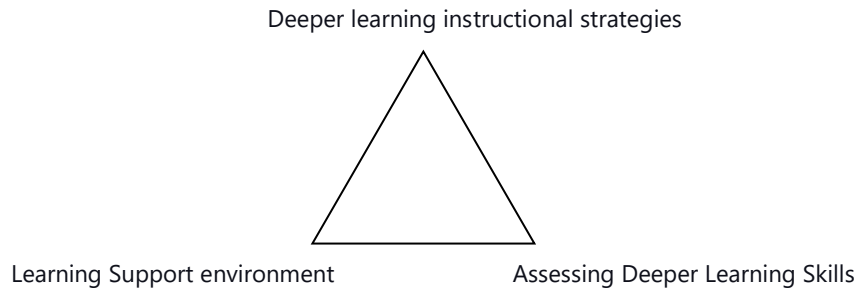
3.2 Deeper Learning Instructional Strategies
In Nepal's school-level education, English as a medium of instruction is a growing trend; therefore, teaching and learning English is no longer just meant for communication, but it has grown into a dynamic concept. It is high time to conduct such a study to identify the natural ground of teaching-learning experiences. Under this theme, the paper portrays how teachers perceive 'deeper learning strategies and brings examples of their classroom context (To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, we address participants pseudonymously).

3.3 Improved State of Learners' Autonomy
One of the participants, Mr. Lotus, explains his experience and observations from his classroom. He claims that he has been designing the tasks in his English classes to improve learners' autonomy and learning abilities and nurture lifelong learning tendencies. Another participant, Mr. Daffodil, shares that his instructional plan mainly incorporates multi-media-based learning and cooperative learning strategies (group work –pair work, jigsaw reading). The two participants contrasted strategies during the discussion.

> *"When I look at new English textbooks of grades 9 and 10 and recall the old curriculum, I find it more instrumented to enable learners to construct and integrate their knowledge system. Moreover, they can be activated to deepen understanding of newfound and routine knowledge. – Mr. Daffodil*

> *"I use multimedia to strengthen their interest through English movies, songs, and novels. I often invite them to choose learning strategies to monitor and adjust the self-learning process and learning effect and also allow them to achieve deep learning with their styles". -Ms. Lily*

The new English curriculum has also emphasised cultivating students' ability to learn and lifelong learning, combining teaching and learning, and stimulating students' English learning interest in elementary education (CDC, 2019; CDC;2020, MoE, 2016). Many documents and reports regarding Secondary education have mentioned cultivating students' autonomy learning and lifelong learning, which indicates that deep learning would play an essential role in the learning process (ERO; NASA Reports, 2013-2019; OECD, 2017; AIR reports).

The synthesised notes based on the narrations by participants clarify that participants are aware of underlying principles of deeper learning even though they do not use the term deeper learning skills in their expression. They have enjoyed witnessing a paradigm shift in the scene of English language teaching in Nepal, and they are attempting to use whatever possible or efficiently available recourses to stimulate deeper learning skills in their English classroom.

3.4 Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Real World Connection in Instructions

Project-based learning (PBL) is one of the core features of all the participants' instructional strategies for developing deeper learning cognitive skills. In all three schools, all staff and management somehow considered project-based learning integral to daily instruction. In some cases, projects were integrated into a subset of subject areas. In other cases, some teachers used projects more than others.

> *"PBL promotes cross-curricular aspects in teaching learning by creating connections across what students learn in different disciplines. In a way, group projects have also helped develop collaboration skills".* -Mr. Lotus

> *"PBL tasks enable learners to link between what they learn in school and situations they may encounter in the real world so that such approach allows us to analyse the issue from different directions and enable us with the skills like decision making, critical thinking, and problem-solving".* – Ms. Lily

Mr. Daffodil lays out optimistic lines on using PBL, similar to both participants' statements above. According to him, PBL helped to develop diverse and advanced communication skills, which makes authentic assessments implemented as part of these projects such as pamphlet designing/publishing for local community issues, running school media houses, Social Networking Sites (SNS)based group management for regular communication. He further highlighted that projects are carried out in different forms at schools. Projects like SNS groups and school news broadcasting clubs are long-term (e.g. an academic year-long) projects each year and are virtually managed. On the other hand, projects like community awareness campaigns, school enterprising challenges, field-based research projects, and case study writing., included a range of fieldwork, instructional activities, independent work, and assessments that involved presenting to community members.

The participants' stories show that teachers are responsible for approximately three or four specific projects per term on average, for a total of between eight and ten projects per year. They narrated several examples of blending two or three subjects in a project, primarily social and English. They claim that when students are asked to analyse several aspects of a topic, it is challenging initially, but it involves them in critical thinking. Many studies on the field of PBL show that multiple dimensions of an issue encourage students to formulate arguments and negotiate with evidence-based logic (Dawadi, 2016; Tochon et al., 2014). Ultimately, the entire process enhances deep understanding that transfers the application of knowledge associated with deeper learning and the development of content knowledge and skills.

3.5 Changing Hats: Dynamics of Students' Roles and Responsibilities

This study revealed how shifting students' roles can make a difference in their thinking patterns and make them more responsible about learning goals and many essential life skills. Even though the study was dependent on the teachers' stories linked to their English classes, the story brought an extensive discussion revolving around student leadership and personal development, which is one of the essential 21st-century skills that is listed in UNESCO's list of transversal skills and British Council has introduced as one of the cores kills (British Council, 2016). Two participants were more excited to share the success stories of how students became virtual learning mentors for their teachers, parents, and classmates.

Ms Lily recalled the story from the first wave of COVID-19 and the lockdown when schools were compelled to commence alternative learning. She highlights how the flipped role of students created challenges and opportunities simultaneously, where they grew not only with critical points of view but also analytically creative in their thinking patterns. She states,

> *"In the beginning, running virtual classes at school in Far-west Nepal seemed an ambitious plan, but later, I realised that teachers need skills to map possibilities and potential among existing resources; we recognised the potentiality in our students' group. We prepared a tech-savvy core team; they started digging out potentialities by applying different interventions themselves".*

Mr. Daffodil also reflects on her similar experience,

> *"It was not easy to start a virtual learning plan in our part of Nepal with a handful of human and tech resources, but I knew how I had to flip the game; I knew a few tech-savvy crowds from the secondary block who could be the mentor of their teachers. Now, all I needed was a change in teachers' mindset. I had anticipated acceptance issues; they might hesitate to become mentees of their students, but it went smoothly. The reason is probably the learning item, not the course contents, but ICT, an informal context".*

Mr. Lilly again adds,

> *"Students knew about the virtual world better than us and learned the most quickly. Some of the senior students worked as a mentor to their juniors. Few students have expertise provided 'orientation' on virtual learning procedures whoever requested them to help; teachers, parents, classmates, juniors, and even other school's team."*

Participants were comparatively more excited when they recalled their steps to the virtual learning program through student mentorship. They all believed it was a rewarding experience and meaningful involvement where they recognised their potential and groomed themselves as mentors and leaders. Participants reported that students enjoyed conducting counselling sessions with juniors, discussing codes and conduct, cyber safety, and online buying digital footprints.; some students amazingly excelled in MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses). They used the virtual platforms Coursera and Future Learn to access top-level courses from top universities worldwide.

> "*The MOOC mentorship journey gave them an experience of making good choices in life and learning collaboratively; most importantly, it encourages self-directed learning*" –Lily.

> "*Their joy was immeasurable as they witnessed the first-time certificates and photos being proudly showcased on the school's official page, a moment later enthusiastically shared by numerous teachers in their personal stories*"- Daffodil.

Participants also reported that the strategy of conducting weekly review meetings to share their achievements and challenges brought a competitive but positive sense. It remarkably developed students' English language, presentation, and independent learning skills. One of the participants proudly shared how they encouraged students to get involved and support a more comprehensive community; they helped teachers and students of other schools. They were often even invited to speak on our experience of MOOC on the more prominent platforms like RELO-US Embassy, Kathmandu University, GEIST, Int. Foundation NUSAN.

Teachers utilised their potential differently during the second phase of virtual classes. Students worked as teaching assistants to their English teachers to keep attendance records, monitor the classes, maintain track records of assignments and project submissions, and ensure the submitted work was moved to the deadline. It shows accountability matters in the success of any academic program. Francois et al. (2020) mention, "This inquiry found that the lack of external accountability pressures neither appeared to negatively impact teachers' efforts, commitment to relevancy and rigour in their classrooms, or their responsiveness to families." (p.1).

The discussion clearly shows that when students are held accountable, they gradually grow with deeper learning skills. For example, the role of editors of their class-wise groups, the opportunity to provide feedback to their friends, and the need to check every minute detail of their classmates' assignments led them to be more careful with the language and content accuracy and develop leading capabilities (Suri,2021a.). Throughout the journey, they know how to respond, dilute the conflict, and reconcile where required.

3.6 Learning Support Environment
Participants in this study discussed the support they provide students inside and outside the classroom to ensure they all acquired the cognitive abilities required to be well-prepared for higher studies and the workplace. For instance, a participant claimed that she gives pupils diverse homework tasks based on their skill levels, and students who need more challenges are given a chance to finish more projects and receive honours credit. She said,

"Ideally, our tasks should provide alternative access points for students where they find space to be groomed at their own pace ".

One of the participants only discussed differentiating or customising instruction tactics. Though all of them agreed that their schools have heterogeneous classes with students of various abilities, differentiation was particularly crucial. They shared other examples that show that their schools have structures and cultures that facilitate the deeper instructional learning strategies discussed above, like English-speaking clubs, need-based counselling focal persons, flexible scheduling, and extended personalised support as much as possible. Some of their statements are recorded below:

> "*I encourage my students to join our language club to develop relationships with a group of students who meet regularly with an adviser (often an English language teacher) to create an individualised and encouraging learning environment*.- Ms. Lotus

> "*To allow students to spend more time on topics and to accommodate peer mentorship, collaborative projects, or interventions before or after school, we have adopted alternative scheduling like multisession class or zero period.*"- Ms. Lily.

> "*Management is supportive of personalised school cultures as a means to include students in their learning and foster an atmosphere where they feel encouraged through peer mentorship, flexible scheduling, and teacher and student teams or clubs.*- Mr. Daffodil

After analysing the participants' stories above, it is clear that they have been able to extend the individualised learning environment, which is crucial to promote deeper learning opportunities, though the level could vary. In this context, renowned literature on

instructional differentiation emphasises the importance of ensuring the growth of struggling and advanced learners, students with diverse cultural heritages, and children with varied background experiences. The goal is to facilitate their growth daily, every week, and throughout the year (Williams et al. (2009). Similarly, flexible scheduling is crucial to fostering a deeper learning culture. Meanwhile, increasing student autonomy also depends on the internal motivation for learning; deep learning can only be accomplished if learners are internally motivated. Yueyinga and Xiaodong (2016) have advocated that choosing a learning strategy, such as a cognitive, meta-cognitive, or monitoring approach, can increase students' autonomy by allowing them to track, modify, and deepen their learning following their learning preferences and pace.

3.7 Assessing Deeper Learning Skills

All three participants find assessing deeper learning in content and skills very crucial. They discussed different forms of assessments; they included longer-term evaluations, like exhibitions of portfolios and daily reflection writing, and rubric-based assessments, which allowed students to demonstrate their accumulated knowledge and skills and their readiness to move from one grade to the next. They further discussed conventional summative evaluations like yearly/half yearly/quarterly pen and paper exams and more regular assessments that let us see how well students can convey the understood ideas in written and oral forms. Under this theme, participants shared various examples from their actual class practices. Some of them are discussed below:

> "*New curriculum has given indicators for learning outcomes. We have subject committees at school, and we prepare rubrics for each topic to assess the work assigned to the students; sometimes, I modify them with slight adaptations, but most of the time, I follow because they are approved to use rigorous performance assessments aligned with district or national level standardised tests*" Ms. Lotus.

> "*Daily reflection writing helps access my students' learning and my teaching. The questions suggested to shape reflection writing are helpful, often followed by why or how questions. For example,' What did you enjoy most/least today? Why? 'How would you adopt today's new learning in your personal life? Give two examples. I have found probing questions and immediate feedback help them scaffold* - Ms Lily.

> "*I employ a variety of evaluation templates/rubrics (self-prepared or adopted) with different deeper learning indicators to keep track of students' progress on content-wise learning goals and to make sure they are developing the skills they need to sustain themselves smoothly in the 21st century*"-Mr. Daffodil

The discussion above mostly frames teachers' different strategies to authenticate deeper learning skills as deep learners must use knowledge structure to address challenges in a genuine learning environment. According to (Yan, 2013), establishing authenticity to support students' deep learning is the only prerequisite for achieving deep learning. Besides formal paper-pencil tests or standardised summative evaluations, participants talked about maintaining a longer-term portfolio, daily reflection writing, and using rubrics as formative assessments to access projects and other assignments. Long-term and shorter-term assessment tools are equally crucial to see how mature students have developed academically and personally. For example, the report of the American Institute of Research (AIR) claims that a long-term portfolio provides numerous opportunities to show proficiency throughout the process; they take part in multiple exhibitions where they get the opportunity to showcase their learning and demonstrate their knowledge connected to the real world (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2013). Participants commonly reported using informal formative assessment tools; reflection is one of the most powerful tools. They are often structured with some elicitation idea. Probing questions can be scaffolding for learners, but reflections are necessary to grasp complicated concepts and deep-level knowledge (Zhou, 2011; Zhang & Wu, 2012). After-class reflection is termed as an 'Exit ticket or 'Exit slip (with pre-designed graphics)' too, in which the teacher provides focus questions before the lesson starts or during class, and students need to reflect on their learning under those focus questions on a slip of paper and handover to the teacher before they leave the class (Suri, 2021 b.). Participants claimed this procedure helps guide instruction the following day and monitor student's progress toward learning objectives.

4. Conclusion and implication

The paper briefly highlights how world scholars have defied the terms 'deep learning' and 'deeper learning skills' and how the world's perspectives on skills and employability have evolved in recent years. It further connects it to the demand for Nepal's secondary-level curriculum and problematises the issue in the context of English language classes in Nepalese schools. It emphasised the need for learners to comprehend the learning objectives, develop an interest in learning independently, and cultivate a deep learning habit. The next part of the paper discusses the methodology adopted; the study followed a qualitative approach, narrative inquiry, and used a semi-structured guideline to interview three secondary-level teachers for data. Then, the paper presents an in-depth analysis of collected data under three major themes and subthemes; the first theme is deeper learning strategies covered in the board discussion through the subthemes of learners' autonomy, PBL, and students' leadership/ peer mentorship scheme. It shows the need for a learning mode that strongly emphasizes knowledge construction, integration, transfer, and application. Second, the theme showcases how the learning support environment is ensured in the schools through advisory classes, language clubs, flexible class schedules, and a personalised learning environment. Since deep learning goes beyond the

surface level and helps students develop their capacity for lifetime learning, teachers and students need to understand the distinction between surface learning and deep learning. Therefore, the third theme highlights how and why to assess and authenticate deeper learning skills; it mainly discusses the success stories of using long-term portfolio exhibitions and daily after-class reflection through an improvised version of pen and paper tests and other formative assessments also briefly discussed.

This paper suggests efficient English teaching techniques at the secondary level, which could be the focal point for subsequent disciplines and levels. Similarly, the discussion will appeal to the teachers, teacher-educators, curriculum designers, and pedagogues. It can provoke the research intensity of the researchers, whose interest revolves around appreciative inquiry, active learning, deeper learning strategies, higher-order thinking, 21st-century skills, content, and language integrated learning, learners' centeredness/engagement/autonomy and self-directed learning.

5. Conclusion

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The study focused on English language classes in Nepalese schools, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other subjects or educational contexts. Another limitation of this study is the contextual specificity or small sample size, as only three secondary-level teachers were interviewed. This might impact the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Similarly, subjectivity in data collection, which is the use of narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews, introduces an element of subjectivity, and different interviewers may interpret responses differently, impacting the reliability of the data.

Implications for future research could address the limitation of a small sample size by replicating the study with a larger and more diverse group of teachers from different regions and educational settings. Similarly, to enhance the generalizability of the findings, researchers could conduct cross-subject comparative studies to explore the applicability of deeper learning strategies across various disciplines. Investigating the long-term effects of implementing deeper learning strategies in English language classes would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact on students' learning outcomes and skill development. Future research could delve deeper into the assessment methods discussed in this paper, exploring their effectiveness in different educational contexts and subjects.

The findings of this study suggest the need for ongoing teacher professional development programs to equip educators with the necessary skills to implement deeper learning strategies effectively. The paper implies that curriculum designers should consider integrating deeper learning principles into the secondary-level English curriculum, fostering a holistic approach to skill development. Policymakers can use the insights from this research to inform educational policies that encourage the adoption of deeper learning strategies in secondary-level education, promoting a shift towards more student-centered and engaging approaches. In essence, while this study contributes significantly to the discourse on deeper learning in Nepalese secondary-level English classes, addressing the acknowledged limitations and building on the suggested future research avenues will further enrich our understanding and application of effective teaching techniques and strategies.

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