

CHILDREN'S ORAL LANGUAGE AND LITERACY SKILLS: AN  
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY IN NEPAL

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## DEDICATION

For all the preschool children

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted for the candidature for any other degree.

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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

*Meenakshi Dahal* for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy in Education*

presented on 30 May, 2018.

Title: *Children's Oral Language and Literacy Skills: An Ethnographic Study in Nepal*

## Abstract Approved

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The Nepal Government has increased formal schooling around the country for young children. Therefore, it is important to understand how language and literacy skills contribute to children's success in formal schooling. Early language and literacy skills are basic requirements for ensuring children's achievements during their formal schooling. Oral language is the foundation of learning and literacy skills. Effective support from families and teachers is important for the development of these skills. The ethnographic research has shown that efforts are required to support young children in acquiring positive attitudes and increase their knowledge about language and literacy from the beginning of their lives from both families and teachers in preschools. This research found that current practices, even though there are variations in support systems, the practices are inadequate for young children who do not speak Nepali as their mother tongue. The study shows that children having opportunities to discuss and play in their own language settings were more confident, expressive and vocal and this was carried over to the school setting. Therefore, the implications for home activities are to use available materials and context with an increase of interaction and conversation from family members. The implications for

preschools are to use dual language activities, integrated to more informal play-based teaching, and use of materials in the classroom. The implications for policy makers are to increase teacher training in play- based teaching methodologies, provide materials that promote home-based contexts, and to promote and train for dual language learning programs, using the mother tongue of the children in the classroom.

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Meenakshi Dahal, Degree Candidate



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## ACRONYMS

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| CBS    | Central Bureau of Statistics  |
| CERID  | Centre for Education Innovation and Research Development            |
| DDC    | District Development Committee                                      |
| DEO    | District Education Office   |
| DOE    | Department of Education   |
| ECD    | Early Childhood Development   |
| ELDS   | Early Learning and Development Standard                             |
| HT     | Head Teacher  |
| INGO   | International Non-Government Organization                           |
| MOE    | Ministry of Education   |
| NASA   | National Assessment of Student Achievement                          |
| NEC    | National Education Commission                                       |
| NGO    | Non-Government Organization   |
| NPC    | National Planning Commission  |
| SDG    | Sustainable Development Goals                                       |
| SMC    | School Management Committee   |
| SSRP   | School Sector Reform Plan/ Program                                  |
| SSDP   | School Sector Development Program                                   |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural<br>Organization |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund                                      |
| VDC    | Village Development Committee                                       |

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is internationally defined as an important age for the holistic development of children from conception to the age of eight. Early childhood development (ECD) includes the significant areas of health, nutrition, education, community development, psychology, child development, and economics among others (Evan, Mayers, & Ilfeld, 2000). However, there is still a critical need to develop a universal definition of the term early childhood development, its importance, and the processes to follow in order to ensure the development rights of the children. According to the World Bank, “Early child-care and development includes all the support necessary for every child to realize his/ her right to survival, to protection, and to care that will ensure optimal development from birth to age eight” (Evan, Mayers, & Ilfeld, 2000, p.2). The studies in developed countries have also revealed positive impacts of ECD on learning and development, especially in cognitive development, school success and achievement, health, and social behavior (Engle et al., 2011, Nores & Barnett, 2010). Therefore, investment in early education in the first eight years of life has grown substantially (Engle et al., 2011; Nores & Barnett, 2010; UNESCO, 2005).

The importance of early childhood development is underscored by the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Children (1989), World Declaration on Education for All (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990), Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), Declaration for Access to Quality Education for the Poorest and most Vulnerable Groups (Miles & Singal, 2010), United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG), and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Early

childhood development (ECD) means providing necessary support for every child to realize his/her right to survival, protection, care, and education, which will ensure optimal development from birth to age eight (Evans et al., 2007). Early childhood years of life are a critical window of opportunity to lay the foundations of positive physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, which critically impact later development of skills and behaviors (UNESCO, 2007).

Primarily, ECD programs are for ensuring healthy growth of the children, their nourishment and protection from harm, providing them with a sense of self-worth and identity, enthusiasm and the opportunities for learning (Young, 2002). In addition, the ECD programs are focused on the children's early learning (literacy, numeracy), ability to think critically about the contexts, and communicate effectively. Research has established that children who participate in early childhood programs have better school performances; they are healthier, and emotionally balanced (Walker et al., 2011 in the Lancet Series, 2011). They have better results in grade one and grade two (Young, 2002). It has been shown that they will be economically productive and socially responsible (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2007). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds who participate in early childhood development programs are more likely to benefit, especially in primary school to complete their education (Mustard, 2007; Young, 2002). One of the key areas in childhood development is the home language and literacy of young children. The role played by home and preschool environment for the development of oral language and literacy skills of children will be elaborated throughout this study.

The study followed a qualitative research paradigm to explore children's oral language competency in relation to their home environment and parental support for enhancing their literacy skills (reading and writing). In doing so, the study considered

the fact that ethnographic studies allow “multiple interpretations” of realities and “alternative interpretations” of data (Fetterman 1989 as cited in Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p.86),

Believing that the learning and development theories are appropriate to analyze cultural influence in the early learning process, I applied socio-constructivism and social learning theories to understand the influence of the cultural context of the children in their learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1977). I observed and analyzed the local cosmologies of the young learners, and observed interactions of the teachers, parents and children within their own cultural premises. In doing so, I applied Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) to understand the teachers and the peers’ role in the children’s language and literacy skills development.

### **The Nepali Context**

Although the Government of Nepal has been implementing some early childhood related education programs for the past twenty years, they did not fulfill the contemporary research-based holistic needs of young children. When ECD centers were not included in the education structure, there was a wide difference in the program components as well as management (UNESCO, 2008). However, to regulate ECD interventions, the government launched the National Policy on Early Childhood Development in 2004. The goal of the policy was to promote a comprehensive approach to ECD programs for children aged 0-5 years and to safeguard their rights to fully develop their physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, spiritual and moral potential (MOE, 2004). This policy resulted in increase of the number of ECD centers without strengthening the system for quality enhancement. These ECD centers were operating independent of the school structure. It was only in 2016 ECED was integrated into the school structure through the eighth amendment of the Education Act.



There are different ECD programs implemented in Nepal. Among them, there are two types of center-based programs- a) two –year community-based early childhood education and development (ECED) centers and b) one –year school-based preprimary schools (PPC), which are operational under the Ministry of Education. Following the Eighth Amendment in 2016, the Ministry of Education prioritized one-year preschool (ECD) programs to be a part of the formal school structure. Early childhood educators in Nepal understand that the objective of ECED centers is “to expand access to quality ECED services for children of four years of age to prepare them for basic education” (School Sector Reform program (2009-015). School Sector Development Program (SSDP) has also prioritized quality enhancement of the programs.

The eighth amendment of the education act also addressed the education-related issues mainly of different socio-cultural minority groups. It concentrated on teaching and learning approaches in primary school’s grades, and competency of teachers for child-centered individualized instruction.

The education policy has been reviewed and revised several times to ensure equity, accessibility and quality education (Bhatta, 2009). To increase the access to all children, the policy provision was made for special education, inclusive education, informal education, continuous education, distance education or/ and open education. But it did not practically address the issues of mainstreaming minorities within the school system. The children from minority and vulnerable groups are still out of the school system. This challenges the government to develop further robust policies to bring these children into school. School Sector Reform Program (SSRP) (2009-2016), one of the major education policy reformations in Nepal, emphasize education in the mother tongue up to grade three, and flexible learning opportunities for the

children of diverse groups (MOE, 2007). There have been revisions in the education policies with regard to the language of instruction. The revision of Education and Sports Act to amend ‘the existing some of the Nepal Act (2063)’ changed the practice of monolingual (Nepali only) medium to bilingual (Mother tongue and Nepali) (MOE, 2016). Currently, multilingual (Mother tongue, Nepali and English) medium of instruction is to be used in primary classrooms. Despite these inclusive policies for the minority languages, their practice has not been widespread within the school system. The SSRP also emphasized increasing access, quality and effectiveness in ECED programs, focusing on the children from marginalized and socially excluded groups to increase their educational attainment in terms of literacy and numeracy. However, in the implementation, SSRP could not address the issues of access, quality and effectiveness of existing programs for the marginalized communities. The evaluation of SSRP program shows that although the enrollment rate was increased, there were disparities in social inclusion, and gender parity. Female teacher’s recruitment was identified as one of the indicators to bring marginalized group of children in school (joint evaluation of SSRP program, 2009-2016). However, this indicator did not meet the standards. To overcome the gaps seen in the SSRP, the Government of Nepal started implementing School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) in line with Nepal’s vision to graduate from the status of least development country (NPC, 2015 as cited in MoE, 2016). SSDP has been designed aligning with the sustainable development goal (SDG) number four: ensuring equitable and inclusive quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all encompassing the entire education sector under the broader framework of Nepal National Plan of Action (UNESCO, 2003 as cited in MoE, 2016).

The Government of Nepal has, however, given importance to literacy and has designed a program for educating all young children to be able to read and write at a functional level in society. The policy and strategy of the ECED programs are also supporting early language and literacy in the primary grades. For this the government is supporting learning materials, infrastructure, and teachers' training. However, teacher preparedness for literacy (reading and writing) and numeracy instruction in the ECED centers is still not addressed adequately. The basic foundation for literacy is built through early interventions in schools by providing support for ECED centers and to the primary grades (grade 1 to 3) in schools. Early Learning and Development Standard (ELDS) and Minimum Standard (MS) for the ECED programs have developed indicators in terms of literacy and numeracy. However, the assessment of the children's learning and development is not practiced accordingly. For example, there is a domain of language and communication in ELDS to enhance children's oral language and vocabulary skills. Many ECED centers were not aware of the standards, contributing to children to have poor preparation in oral language and literacy skills. Hence, the oral language and its relation with children's literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) are yet to be studied.

### **Language and Literacy**

Language skills begin to develop from birth and are enhanced through everyday household interactions and parents' support through activities such as reading books, telling stories, singing songs, and talking to one another. Parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers and significant other family/community members can play a vital role in language development, in preparing young children for success in the schools, and in becoming self-confident and motivated learners. Parents can also play important roles in children's reading and writing development. Children's

literacy skills (learning to read and write) typically start developing at home before formal schooling, and continue beyond early grades.

Early childhood programs can play important roles in children's language development (Pandey, 2012). The acquisition of language is one of the more remarkable achievements of early childhood. By age five, children essentially master the sound system and grammar of their language and acquire a vocabulary of thousands of words (Teaching strategies, 2010). Research suggests that adults should create rich language and literacy environments through everyday communication and responses to a child's curiosity (Papelier, 2010).

Most commonly, literacy skills are understood as the skills that are needed for reading and writing. However, literacy is the use of language and the way of communication. It can be both verbal and nonverbal, and this starts before children learn to read and write (Ghoting, 2011). Literacy includes child's experiences with conversations, stories, books and variety of print materials. Literacy includes more than just reading and writing formal print. It includes reading cues, facial gestures, reading the world. It is important to lay a strong foundation so that children are ready when they are taught to read.

One of the related concepts is functional literacy. A person is functionally "literate" when s/he is engaged in the activities related to literacy, which are required for effective functioning within their group and community, and also for enabling them to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for their own and community's development (Murray, Owen, & McGaw, 2005). Therefore, literacy skills not only include reading and writing, but also require other skills associated with the learning processes. According to UNESCO, literacy is broadly described as a skill required for an individual to live.

The most common understanding of literacy is that it is a set of tangible skills – particularly the cognitive skills of reading and writing – that are independent of the context in which they are acquired, and the background of the person who acquires them (UNESCO, 2006, p.149).

Literacy is not only the ability to read text, but also broadly covered as “an autonomous set of skills” and “a learning process” which is “applied, practiced and situated” (UNESCO, 2006). However, it requires set of skills to function in everyday life. Reading, writing and numeracy are integral parts of literacy.

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) identifies three forms of literacy: reading, mathematical, and scientific (OECD, 2003). According to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, USA, literacy is the activities involved in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and appreciating both spoken and written language (Shiel, Cregan, McGough, & Archer, 2012). For many children, print literacy skills begin to develop in the preschool years, with knowledge of alphabets, phonological awareness, letter writing, print knowledge, and oral language (National Institute for Literacy, USA, 2009). Therefore, early literacy skills start with simple skills such as listening and speaking, which later develops into complex encoding skills such as reading and writing.

### **Social Interaction**

Children’s social interactions which involve literacy activities such as play, reading and writing, reading books, scribbling, communicating, and interacting with adults are influenced by the socioeconomic conditions of the families (Ginsborg, 2006; Van Vechten, 2013). Children from low-SES backgrounds are more likely to be disadvantaged academically than those from high-SES backgrounds, thus renewing the cycle of social disadvantage (Ginsborg, 2006; Van Vechten, 2013). Therefore,

children's language development is greatly influenced by social interactions with families, teachers, caregivers and others regularly involved in their lives (Vygotsky, 1978). Relevant cultural and rich language and literacy experiences in the early years are important to the language and literacy development of children. These experiences include opportunities for children to interact with topics and information reflective of their families and communities. Cultural experiences include the individual cultures of the family and communities. Interactions in the family provide rich language experiences that are high in quality and opportunity. Children entering school having such experiences have more opportunities to become successful readers and writers (Papelier, 2010). Research (Jenkins, 2002) shows that poverty issues affect language development of the children.

### **Low Socio-economic Status**

Children from low income families face more difficulties in learning to read in primary grades (Ginsborg, 2006; Van Vechten, 2013). For example, they tend to begin school with poorer vocabulary, less prior knowledge, weak verbal abilities, lack of phonological sensitivity (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Children's learning takes place through the interactions with their family members, peers, teachers, and with their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Children learn through the cultural experiences by interacting with others and following the rules, norms, and values set by the culture in which they are brought up. Teachers are responsible for creating a learning environment that increases the ability and interest of learners. Therefore, teachers play an important role in developing learning environments and activities that facilitate learning. The quality of teachers' preparation is directly related with the teaching-learning activities and processes (Guerriero, 2013). According to Vygotsky (1962), the available social environments

always influence the learning process of children (as cited in Smagorinsky, Hansen, & Fink, 2013).

In everyday life, new knowledge is created and exchanged with the purpose of forming beliefs, and acting in the world as a conversation or social interaction. Social learning theory explains that children imitate the words and language patterns they hear by watching and listening to the models provided by family members and other caregivers in their lives (Bandura, 1989). They repeat those sounds that are rewarded with smiles and praise (*dada and mama*) and drop out the sounds that are not rewarded (Crosser, 2008). Children throughout the world reflect the same characteristic in learning and development (Kolb, 2014). Many countries have been prioritizing their education policies to provide optimal support for children's learning and development from the very beginning.

### **Problem Statement**

The learning achievements in primary grades are important for the overall education of children and to the nation as a whole. According to the national assessment of student achievement (NASA) report, primary grades have shown that more than 50% of children in Nepal are weak in reading, writing and comprehension (ERO, 2015). Similarly, a study undertaken in Kailali, Nepal, revealed that 42% of the grade three children were not able to read a single word in a minute (Save the Children, 2008), and only 43% students in grade two could read all of the letters of the alphabet correctly (Room to Read, 2009). A study conducted by World Education (2012) revealed that only 3.3% students in grade two and 19.9% in grade three could read all consonants correctly. Research (Shiel et al., 2012) has shown that in the early years between 2 to 5, children need rich interactive language opportunities with others in nurturing environments. One of the main objectives of ECED center (preschool) is

to prepare children for formal school, providing early reading and writing skills (DOE, 2012).

A Save the Children (2013) study revealed that children at grade one and grade two are even weaker in vocabulary and reading skills (Save the Children, 2013). In Nepal, one out of three children in grade two cannot read a single word (USAID, 2014), could not pronounce words clearly, correctly and/ or fluently. These realities raise a number of questions that need answers. Why are children in Nepal weak in reading and writing? What possible gaps exist to support enhancement of literacy skills for young children? How does difference in home language and school language influence children's language and literacy skills? What is the preparation of teachers to develop children's language and literacy skills? What programs can teachers access that will improve their competencies in this regard? How does the existing policy adequately address the required support to develop the early literacy skills? Or is there a gap in practice, especially, in the part of policy implementation?

There could be a number of reasons for the gap. One could be that the ECD centers are not fully prepared to enhance the literacy skills including reading and writing. The low level of teacher preparation of the teachers and poor support from parents and other stakeholders may have contributed to the adverse effects in the literacy skills of the children. The teaching-learning approach followed in preschools (ECED center) may not prioritize oral language and literacy skills development. The question of why so many children in Nepal in grades 1-3 face difficulty in reading, writing and numeracy skills in the upper grades remains unanswered. Home, community, and school context influence teaching and learning activities in the pre/schools (Dahal, 2013). Experiences from home and school may contribute to the literacy skills of the children. It is vital to understand the influencing or contributing



contexts for literacy skills development of the children if we are to improve literacy performance. It will be helpful to identify the reasons for their weak literacy skills, and to support children, teachers and the policy makers in creating more appropriate learning environments.

### **Rationale of the Study**

Nepal is a multicultural and multilingual country with over 100 castes and ethnic groups as well as over 92 officially recognized languages (CBS, 2011) spoken throughout the country. Children from diverse communities participate in the pre- and primary school education in the country. In this context, Nepal has adopted a multilingual policy for education. The language of instruction at schools should be the mother tongue (local language) and Nepali (national language) and/or English (international language). The language of instruction should also be offered according to the community's language and cultural context i.e., the mother tongue of the community. This can be provided by hiring teachers from the community. Because of the language choice of the people from the community, however, the teaching-learning process and the language of instruction may not be as inclusive as it suits the diversity of the children. The language of instruction adopted is not always based on the contextual need. Many times the language used in the classroom depends on the language of teachers. Thus, some children are excluded from the opportunity to participate in interactive learning processes that support development of oral language. Oral language is the ability to speak and listen, which also contributes to the base of literacy. For example, children having opportunities to listen and to share develop their oral skills. If they fail to interact in the language of instruction followed in the classroom, their oral language skills can be inadequate or poorly developed. As a result of not being able to understand the teacher, many

children not only fall behind in their lessons of literacy and numeracy but are also they become less confident in expressing themselves in oral and writing mediums. The development of their literacy and numeracy skills may be weak, leading them to fall behind in learning.

The weak reading skills in the primary grades children may be because of the weak oral language development (Justice, Mashburn, & Petscher, 2013; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). The reading materials presented to them might not make any sense to them. According to observations and research, millions of children enter preschools only with their home language, to encounter Nepali (or English) as the dominant language of many programs, thus disrupting their oral language acquisition in their home language. Oral language is the foundation for emergent reading development as it provides the semantic base, syntactic base and phonological base for the reading and writing (Hill & Launder, 2010). Children from different language backgrounds may not be able to communicate in the second language as they have limited vocabulary and meaning. Therefore, continuous exposure to the second language is needed to support them in developing their vocabulary and meaning, which in turn is needed to develop reading skills. A rich vocabulary and highly developed oral language skills enhance reading comprehension of children (Dahlgren, 2008). Lack of support for oral language development might have created the adverse effects in literacy skills of children. The teaching learning approach followed in preschools (ECD center) might not have prioritized oral language learning and vocabulary development. To this reference, it is very important to find out if teachers (ECD/ pre-and primary grades) are not giving priority to the practice of oral language. If they are not, it is equally important to find out the reason behind it. Therefore, the

present study focuses on oral language development of the children in family and school environment within their social and cultural contexts.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study is to explore the oral language development of the children in preprimary schools (ECD centers). I specifically analyzed aspects that have been contributing to the process of learning at home and at preschools in relations to language, communication, and early literacy skills. This includes the analysis of the strategies parents, teachers, and children have been using to foster and support oral language and emerging literacy skills at home and preschools.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do children demonstrate oral language at home and preschool (ECD center)?
2. What language and literacy skills do children use or demonstrate at home and preschool (ECD center)?
3. What strategies are being used to enhance oral language and literacy skills at home and at the preschool (ECD center)?

### **Delimitations**

This study focuses on how the children socialize at home and in the pre-school environment. The study explores the use of oral language and literacy skills in relation to local languages, values/ norms, beliefs and attitudes of teachers, parents and children during the process of learning of two locations in Nepal. The literacy skills in this study included activities involved in the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing with young children.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

The thesis is organized into seven different chapters. The first chapter is about the introduction of key issues related to my study. In this chapter, I discuss the outline of the study and the context in which the study was designed. The second chapter elaborates my theoretical understandings to show the relationship between language and literacy and the importance of oral language in young children's literacy acquisition or learning. With the help of different literatures, I discuss the theoretical lenses that help explore the relation. The third chapter deals with the methodological aspects of this study. I introduce the study area and research paradigm through which I conducted my field study. Also, I describe the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation.

A detailed thematic discussion is presented in the fourth and fifth chapters. In chapter four I discuss the complexity of home literacy environment. This chapter presents the data related to home environments, especially how the parents' role is influencing the early language learning of children. Chapter five discusses the preschool environments. This chapter elaborates the activities at preschools and teachers' role(s) in enhancing children's oral language and literacy skills development. The sixth chapter discusses data presented in fourth and fifth chapters. In this chapter, I present my reflection with my experiences and understanding, and discuss the data with the help of theories and literature. The seventh chapter summarizes the entire research process and the findings of the study. This chapter also provides overall conclusion of the study. I also present implications of this study for research practitioners, policy makers and academicians.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter started with discussion of the importance of early childhood development. The chapter demonstrates that language and literacy learning start at an early age and is influenced by home and schools' learning environment where children grow and develop. These complex environments include parents' support, home cultures and the support of the teachers, and level of communication and interactions they have with children. The chapter shows that the language used at home and schools may be related to children's oral language development which is considered by some scholars to be the foundation of literacy learning and later educational attainment. To this reference, this chapter establishes the rationale of the study as there is no study undertaken, specifically on children's language and literacy skills in the diverse community of Nepal. Likewise, an attempt has been made to problematize the topic with respect to available data. Finally, the chapter concludes with the organization of the thesis.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

After, conceiving my research problem on language and literacy skills of the early grade students in the Chapter I, I have identified the research problem from two sources: first, my twenty years of experience of working in the ECD sector and second, literature I read and reviewed in relation to my study purpose. In this chapter, I succulently present major literature which offered insight and meaning to problematize issue, and explore meaning of the language and literacy skills of the early graders.

Here, I discuss about the importance of oral language and literacy skills in learning. I also used theoretical lens which explains the relationship between the oral languages and literacy skills of the early grade student. Further, I argue about the social environment that influences the learning process. In doing so, I have tried to prove that that oral language and early literacy skills are the prerequisite of literacy development in the later subsequent years.

#### **Language: Oral Language**

Language is one of the primary means of communication for all young children. Cregan (1998) emphasizes the importance of oral language stating, “Oral language is the child’s first, most important, and most frequently used structured medium of communication” (as cited in Shiel et al., 2012). By the age of one-two months, children start verbal responses in general. By the age of 12-18 months children start to form small sentences. Though they have difficulties to construct complete sentences, they put their efforts to make their feelings understandable to the audience. By the age of 36 months, when the children are enrolled in preschools

(ECED centers), their language and communication skills will have improved a lot. According to Shiel et al. (2012), oral language is the mediator of culture in which children are able to structure, evaluate, describe and control their experiences. Children, with their oral language, define and locate themselves within their communities, in their world.

Although language learning begins at birth, the quantity and the usage of the vocabulary depend on the children's experiences as they grow and progress in grades and mental ages. Language learning is a continuous and prolonged process. For example, young children start with a limited vocabulary at home, and by the time they reach adulthood, they accumulate enough vocabulary and competency to use the language precisely. Considering that language and literacy develop during a child's first five years, parents and early childhood educators need to be aware of providing an enabling learning environment, where children could acquire positive attitudes, skills, and opportunities to develop language. Research shows that the home environment is critical to a child's language development and that parents can support children's language development supporting their verbal and non-verbal expressions during the everyday communication (Dahlgren, 2008).

Proficiency in oral language provides children with a vital tool for thought (Dahlgren, 2008). I believe that without fluent and structured oral language in the mother tongue, children will find it very difficult to think to reference a new language, which will ultimately delay children's language processing and understanding. It also affects the reading competency of the children. It is found that those children who speak latterly are more likely to have difficulties in reading (Connor & Connor, 2008). Limited vocabulary can result in limited oral and eventually limited written language development. Oral language builds children's vocabulary knowledge

(Konza, 2011). Children's vocabulary in the early grades is related to reading comprehension in the upper grades (Scarborough, 1998). Therefore, language proficiency is a predictor of vocabulary and the vocabulary is a predictor of reading comprehension ten years later (Konza, 2011). Children with limited vocabulary have declining comprehension scores in later elementary years (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Chall, Jacobs, Baldwin, & Chall, 2009).

Parents' interaction is the key for the early language development. As parents interact with their young children, they shape the foundations of language development (NELP, 2008). These interactions are important in increasing vocabulary, supporting the expressive language skills and also the quality of language. For example, if children participate in rhyming games, singing songs and word play, their language skills are further enhanced (Konza, 2011). There are practices in the family that grandparents tell the story, and sing the songs to their grandchildren. These are the indigenous practices in many cultural groups in Nepal. However, it is not documented well. Therefore, family culture and parental support in everyday interactions provide foundation for language development.

Children live in their own cultural context and they construct their knowledge and understandings based on this context. They are also influenced by their immediate environment, which is the family and the immediate community. Their learning is based on the opportunities they get within their family and the community, and they bring these learning experiences and understandings with them to school. Typically, by the age of five, children have extensive knowledge of oral language, intuitively known syntactic patterns, and inflections for tense. Some children, especially those with limited opportunities to verbal communication can have this type of knowledge through their receptive language ability, where they don't be able



to repeat through their verbal language skills. In the home environment the children are not necessarily expanding their vocabulary and literacy skills. When they enter the more formal school environment, there is greater opportunity to expand both oral and written language and literacy opportunities. The schools offer reading and writing opportunities, which many of the families do not offer. The children's oral language proficiency, knowledge of vocabulary, knowledge of words, and pre-school experiences with literacy will impact their formal literacy instruction. Those children who come with a higher level are more likely to be able to initiate the construction of complex processing systems (Doyle, 2013).

Children learn their first words in the context where they grow up. They learn many words in connection with the situations, events, and interactions, learning to relate these experiences to meanings. This is the same pattern that should take place when learning a new language so that children are able to understand words in their own familiar contexts in both languages. Beyond oral language it has been shown that if children have opportunity to learn the alphabet, and letters representing sounds, they are more likely to do well in formal schooling. Children may encounter difficulties if they do not understand the basic principle of alphabetic writing or because they do not know the words they are expected to be reading (Tabors, 1998).

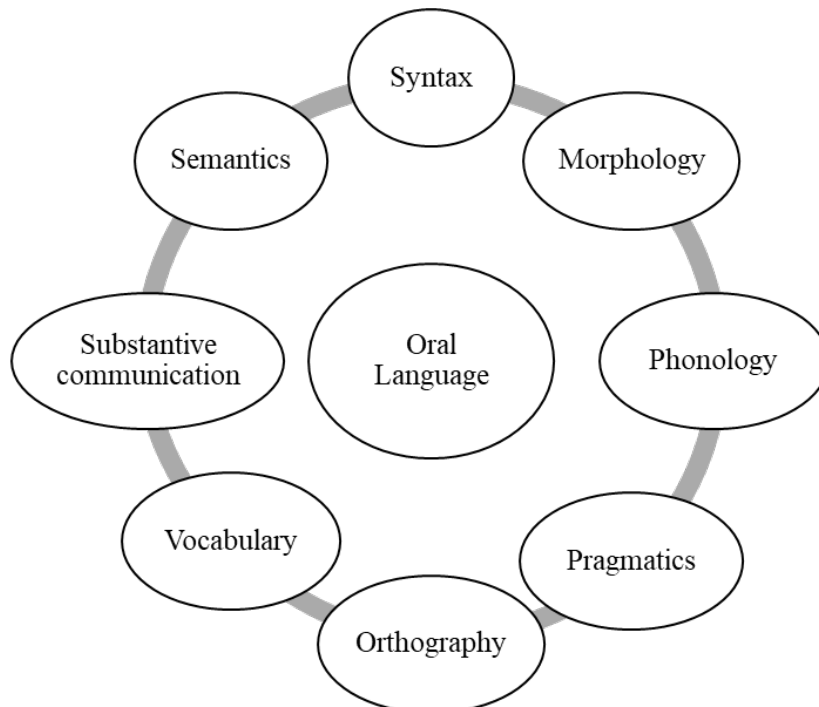
### **Oral Language and Literacy**

Language is one of the basic requirements for developing literacy skills (Pandey, 2012; Joseph, 2006). Many people believe that oral language is a skill that is naturally developed, whereas reading and writing are skills that need to be taught. However, oral language also needs to be taught in a sense because it does not develop as naturally as one may envision (Joseph, 2006). Children develop language skills by the continuous verbal interactions with parents and caregivers (adults). Children pick

up new words naturally, but an astute teacher or parent plays a vital role in assisting children in their ability to be good conversationalists. The quality and quantity of the verbal interactions are critical to establish the foundation (background knowledge) on which children can build their language skills (Joseph, 2006).

According to oral language and early literacy in preschool, the basic language skills are talking (speaking), reading, and writing (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009). Apart from these three basic skills there are eight components in the language system. The skills of oral language and conversation are interrelated with the components of language. Both skills and the components are important for children to practice and develop during the day. In Nepali context, there are eight different components required to develop their language. They are presented in the figure (1) below. All these components are equally important for language and literacy skills development.

Figure 1. Essential Skills for Oral Language



Adopted from (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009; Dahlgren, 2008)

Children need to learn and be able to apply these components appropriately in the process of language development. The components are introduced as follows:

1. Syntax: Phrase and sentence structure –what makes sense (grammar)
2. Morphology: Units of meaning within words; the way words are formed (morphemes)
3. Phonology: The basic sound units of language (phonemes)
4. Pragmatics: Appropriate word choice and use in context to communicate effectively
5. Orthography: Spelling patterns
6. Vocabulary: Knowledge of the meaning and pronunciation of words (lexicon)
7. Substantive communication: use of appropriate words during conversation
8. Semantics: The way language conveys meaning

As the proficiency of language leads to the literacy skills it is important to help children in enhancing their language proficiency.

### **Learning Literacy Skills**

Children begin to use verbal and non-verbal language (gestures, devices, signs and picture symbols) to communicate for multiple purposes (e.g., to express wants, needs, ideas, feelings and to relate personal information and experiences). Apart from daily conversation, children use language as a part of pretend-play to create roles, to establish and maintain relationships, to initiate and engage in conversations, and describe experiences and create and/or retell simple stories. Children ask questions and make comments related to the topic of discussion. Children communicate messages with expression, tone, and inflection appropriate to the situation which develops with practice and over time. Thus, they use increasingly complex and varied language structures, sentences and vocabulary.

Spoken language is the foundation for reading and writing (Strickland & Shanahan, 2004). Speaking, listening, reading and writing are interrelated and affect one another (Adams, 2009; Berninger, & Richards, 2002). In the early years, while children participate in the conversation they learn sound patterns, word meanings, and sentence structures. This learning is further developed, becoming more complex in the preschools. Initially reading and writing are dependent on oral skills as young children use their oral skills to learn how to read. Eventually, children use reading to expand their learning. These conversational abilities are critical foundations for future reading and success in school (National Institute for Literacy, 2009). Beginning readers use their language knowledge they have acquired through speaking and listening, and apply it to the written word. Research has shown that students with competence in oral language are at an advantage in learning to read.

Vygotsky's theory underscores the vital role of teaching in cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1934/1986), when children communicate with children who have a higher skill development, they engage in "verbalized self-observation," reflecting on revising and controlling their own thought process (Sullivan, 2005). In this process, children gain experience that is critical to the development of language (Lui, 2012). Play is most common way children learn from other children. The parents' and the teachers' engagement with play also supports the complexity of children's thinking, which later forms a positive foundation towards reading and writing. This process of developing language which leads to literacy is found at home and in the schools.

Preschool children play with the sounds and rhythms every time they recite nursery rhymes and poetry, sing songs, do role plays, and/or listen to stories. This use and awareness of the sounds of language (phonological awareness) helps children

match alphabet to phonemes (i.e. letters to sounds) as they learn to read and write (Adams, 1990). The similar letter sound relation is found in Nepali language. Though Newari language has own alphabets, it is not widely used. In Awadhi language, they do not have their own (different) alphabet. There are also rhymes in Nepali alphabet which children recite and learn. Language comprehension, which young children gain through conversations with peers, families and teachers, contributes to their reading success (Scarborough, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1999). Given this information, literacy development is critical for teachers and primary care givers (parents and/or families) to consider during the formal and informal learning and play of children. Imitation is an essential learning tool for children to learn as they observe and develop their language and literacy skills.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2004) defines literacy as the,

ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society (UNESCO, 2004).

Literacy skills are the foundation for learning through print materials. Literacy skills are significantly important for learning in all the content areas, which impact the children's learning and desire to learn. Early literacy is considered one of the most important parts of the learning and development of children. Children need on-going opportunities to engage in literacy, so that they will be able to use these skills in social and emotional learning as well as academic content learning.

Talking with young children encourages their development in spoken language, early literacy, social skills, and emotional maturity. The two-way conversations with children help them understand complex sentence structures and learn different ways of thinking. Vygotsky (1968) suggests that by listening to the adults, children learn to talk, increase their vocabulary and actions (Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). In this process, children internalize adults' words and these words (that express adults' thoughts) become part of how children think. When teachers and parents encourage children for conversations, for example, by asking open-ended questions to reflect about, children are more often able to express curiosity and in-depth thinking. Therefore, one of the roles of parents and teachers is to pose thought-provoking questions and give positive responses to the curiosities of the children. Adults' encouragements or scaffolding of the use of words (new and complicated) can help children to think positively and develop their language, and early literacy skills.

Children manage to learn by themselves in various settings and act accordingly. Play is an area where children tend to learn by themselves. According to Van de Ven and Polley (1992), children try to express themselves according to the reactions they receive from the external environment. The reactions could be positive or negative, or a mixture. Kolb (1984) mentions, "learning is the combination of experience, cognition, perception and behavior" (as cited in Yilmaz-Soylu & Akoyonlu, 2009, p. 43). It is established that the children who attend school from literate societies have higher cognitive capacities and the literacy (speaking, listening, reading and writing) skills compared to minority children from tribal and village background (Berk, 2009; Strickland, 1990).

Research reveals that early literacy (pre-reading and writing) skills are influenced by the responsiveness of the environment (Konza, 2011). The pre-reading and writing skills are best understood as a developmental continuum than as an all-or-nothing phenomenon. They are grounded in an understanding and use of oral language, both receptive and expressive. Literacy-rich environment at home includes frequent conversations between parents and family members. The amount of talk children hears from birth to age three is critical. For example, Parents can help children by involving them in everyday activities and communicating with them along with stories, songs and rhymes, and reading regularly. Ideally, when parents read and write for a variety of purposes, children see them. By providing children with age-appropriate toys and books, parents can make a literacy-rich environment at home which can be carried over to the school/ classroom.

Classroom climate and activities encourage talking and conversation, recalling and retelling of stories, making up stories, and taking turns, among others. Children engage in activities that promote pre-reading and writing skills (drawing, scribbling, telling stories, looking at pictures etc.) (Ball, 2010). Like piano cannot be learnt only from listening to or watching others play, children learn to read only through books and not through listening others read (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Therefore, learning activities are extended by reading books, learning new words, and discussing ideas. Play promotes authentic contexts for acquiring and practicing early reading and writing, which support to enhance literacy skills. These sorts of activities extend throughout the world. Specific to the Nepali context, we have practices of early reading; chanting religious stories, and playing roles based on religious stories.

Different traditions and cultures are practiced in families, which provide unique early experiences to the children. Each society is formed with their own

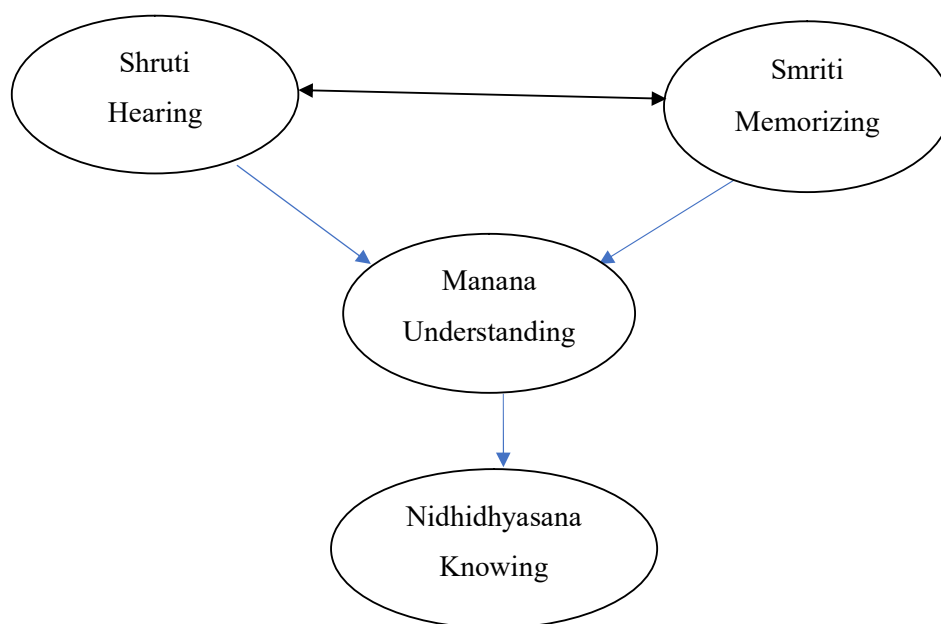
cultural norms. In the Nepali society, the family system itself has some “customary education” (Kisanji, 1995) in which each and every member learn together. Family is regarded as the institution to provide early education to the children. The teaching learning in everyday life at home is, most often, based on the religious (*Holy*) books which mostly follow listening (*shravana*) the (holy) stories (Prasad, 2004). *Shravana* is actively listening to the text through adults (parents or the teachers). “*Shravana*” is hearing the truth (Gangadharan & Jena, 2016). The Nepali society encourages two-way communication in the teaching and learning process: oral (a self-study) and meditation (with reflection). The oral self-study focused on the right pronunciations (phonemic appropriateness). The efforts are made to pronounce sound (*Dhwoni*), words (*Shabda*) and verses (*Chhanda*) as an original form (Gautam, 2009). In an ancient teaching learning approach, the pedagogy was dependent upon three major activities, *shravana*, *manana* and *nidhidhyasana*. By *shravana*, knowledge transfers from one person to other or one generation to the other generation. According to Kapur (2015), by *shravana* knowledge origins, *manana* is contemplating the truth and *nidhidhyasana* is a deep and intense contemplation, to know the ultimate truth (Venkatesananda, 1981; Gangadharan & Jena, 2016). *Nidhidhyasana* is the practice of self-inquiry, self-investigation, self-scrutiny or attentiveness (*atama-bichara*). It is the state of consciousness where there is no longer mind, duality and a subject-object relationship or experience. This is the ultimate achievement of the knowledge.

From the ancient time, knowledge is transferred to the followers (disciples) from two modes, that is *shruti* (by listening) and *smriti* (by remembering). Students or the followers of the knowledge listen to their teachers (*guru*, the expert) first then memorize the chant they listened to. The memorizing is the most common practice followed in the schools these days. By memorizing the chant, one can develop the



awareness in the phonemes. Such activities support the oral language development of the children from the very beginning of education in eastern society. Figure 2 below explains that *shruti* and *smriti* (that is, hearing and memorizing) happen simultaneously, and starts *manana*. Children start understanding whatever they have heard or memorized. As a result, they know the fact (the knowledge created).

Figure 2. Learning Patterns as per Eastern Literature



Even though many curriculum and teaching methods are shared throughout the world, I believe it is important to ensure that Nepali culture teaching traditions are not diminished, misunderstood, or lost. It is critical that the blends of teaching strategies are developed, where the child is in the center. Of critical importance, the Nepali culture is diverse and complex, and it is vital to recognize and respect the nuances and differences across the variety of languages and regional cultures of Nepal.

### Early Learning of the Children

Development and learning are interrelated. Learning is a continuous process and is essential for development (Vygotsky, 1978). Home and schools are the environments which affect the learning process (Dahal, 2013). Learning is mostly

understood as a process of acquiring knowledge skills and change in attitudes. According to Vygotsky (1962), “our social environments influence the learning process,” which is similar to the African proverb “It takes a whole village to raise a child”. Learning for the children takes place through interactions with their peers, teachers, and other external environments (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers are responsible for creating learning environment to increase the ability and interest of the learners in the school where learning formally takes place.

Vygotsky (1962) also notes that culture is the primary determining factor for learning new knowledge. “...Children are active seekers of knowledge, which emphasizes the profound effects of rich social and cultural contexts on their thinking” (Berk, 2009, p. 264). Children learn through the cultural experiences by interacting with others and following the rules, norms, values, set by the culture they are brought up in. Therefore, language plays an important role to set a learning environment where the children learn reading and writing. Sharma (1997) explains that environment is one of the affecting factors for children’s learning. He argues that the teaching-learning approach, instructional materials, and use of motivation and reinforcement are also the factors affecting the learning process.

It is assumed that the learning of children is inherited from parents and mostly influenced by the adults at home (Snow, 2013). However, Gregory (2001) questions this assumption of parents’ inheritance and argues that the children’s learning does not necessarily involve scaffolding by an adult (as cited in Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2010). According to socio-culturists, a child’s culture determines what knowledge and skills are needed and the culture of people provides the tools to obtain this knowledge (Lanter, 2009). Similar to Gregory’s postulations, the development of child’s speaking, reading and writing abilities is related to their social

and cultural capital. Therefore, the culture (language and the values) of the family influences the learning and literacy skills of the children.

In Nepal, more than 100 languages are spoken with their many dialects. These languages have similar sounds with different meanings. Language, sound, and meanings are the products of social, cultural, physical, context where the speakers live. In such context children need to keep their oral language competencies and develop their literacy abilities. Therefore, the “dichotomy at school literacy and at-home literacy” and the children’s language and literacy practices reflect “syncretism” as children borrow some words from home, school and communities (Gregory, 2001, as cited in Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2010). Children develop positive attitudes and feelings about school and learning. They bring their own experiences from home to the school and take experience from school to home. They develop supportive social ties with teachers and classmates and feel comfortable to learn. If they fail to make good relations with teachers and peers, the risk increases that children will drop out from class and eventually school.

Children from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds have different habits, attitudes and skills. They have their own ways of learning and understanding. It is very important for the teachers to understand children’s background and family situation to best address the classroom diversities and make available the optimum teaching-learning process for the students (Lesaux & Harris, 2016). Teachers cannot assume that the children will naturally adjust to new learning environments (schools) and follow the teacher’s instructions. When the language and culture of the school is different than that of the children, the complexities in learning increase. The teachers must be prepared to “address multiplicities” from the very beginning (Koirala, 2008) to support them in acquiring literacy skills.

### **Socio-constructivism in Learning**

Socio-constructivism is one of the applicable pedagogical foundations for learning. It provides opportunity to children to learn within their socio-cultural context, understanding the diversity and culture, while interacting with families and society. According to Vygotsky, socio-cultural approaches emphasize the interdependence of social and individual process in the co-constructions of the knowledge (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). They are based on the concepts of the human activities that take place in the cultural contexts, and are mediated by language and other symbol systems (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992).

Social constructivism is based on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. Social constructivists believe that there are multiple realities and are constructed through human activities. Knowledge is created through the understanding of social and cultural process. Knowledge is a human product and learning is a social process shaped by external forces. Learning occurs with the engagement in social and cultural activities/processes. Interactions with each other and the social environment help create new meaning and understanding (Wenger, 1998).

Social interaction is important for learning. Learning depends on the nature of the social interaction with knowledgeable members of the society (Jackson, Karp, Patrick, & Thrower, 2006). Young children develop their thinking abilities by interacting with social contexts. Social constructivists see both the contexts in which the learning occurs and what learners bring to their learning environment. Without the social interaction with more knowledgeable others (adults), it is impossible to acquire social meanings of important symbol systems and to learn how to use them. Social constructivist framework postulates four general perspectives for learning

(Gredler, 1997 as cited in Sohel, 2010). They are: Cognitive tools perspective, Idea-based social constructivism, Pragmatic or emergent approach and Transactional or situated cognitive perspectives. Social constructivists with this perspective assert that the implementation of social constructivism in class should be emergent as the need arises. The knowledge, meaning, and understanding about the world can be addressed in the classroom from both the view of individual learner and the collective view of the entire class. This perspective focuses on the relationship between the people and their environment. Human beings are a part of the constructed environment (including social relationships); the environment is in turn one of the characteristics that constitutes the individuals. Learning is a social construct and never takes place in isolation from the environment.

Education is the process that occurs in an everyday context of the children. Children, at any time, learn through the environment and the people they interact with, enabling them to do a specific kind of action. Learning takes place in the social and cultural context of the everyday life of individual, and children imitate such process quickly in their life. This makes learning an essential and natural process necessary for the development of social and cognitive skills of the child (Vygotsky, 1978). Two principal agencies, the family and the school create the learning environments for the children. The influence of these two agencies is constrained by the wider social and cultural systems into which they are embedded. For example, many parents in Nepal want their children to learn English and believe that rote learning is the best way to do this. They expect homework, even at the age of four and five years of age. Even if teachers do not believe that young children learn best through rote learning and homework, there is great pressure to provide these. The influences of family and societal culture are strong influences on teachers, even if

their pedagogies and methodologies are based in research (Bassis, Gelles, & Levine, 1991).

According to Vygotsky “... learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when a child is interacting with people in his/her environment and in cooperation with peers ...” (as cited in John-Steiner & Mann, 1996, p. 196). Learning is sum total of all what is known, as that which is handed down by learned men. It is something external, an accumulation of cognitions as one might store material commodities in a ware house (Dewey, 1916 as cited in John-Steiner, Panofsky, & Smith, 1994, p. 109).

The knowledge exists in society and we come to know this knowledge through social processes and interactions with older members. This is the natural process of learning from the very beginning of life (Sarangapani, 2003). According to Vygotsky (1962), “our social environments influence the learning process” (Smagorinsky, Hansen, & Fink, 2013). Teachers and parents are responsible for creating learning environment to increase the ability and interest of the learners. Children learn through the cultural experiences by interacting with others and following the rules, norms, and values, set by the culture they are brought up in. Therefore, teachers play an important role in developing the learning environment and activities to facilitate learning. The quality of teachers is directly related with their teaching-learning activities. Effective teacher–child interactions play an active and crucial role for children’s social and academic development (Hamre et al., 2012). Effective, engaging environment with plenty of interactions created in the classroom supports children for quality learning and success in school. In everyday life, knowledge is created and exchanged with the purpose of forming beliefs and acting in the world. Thus, pedagogy is developed according to the individual and societal need based on

the curriculum framework in the schools. However, the cultural way of learning provides ground for the experiences as a curricular framework in the traditional way of education.

### **Policy Significance on Literacy**

All educators, researchers and policy-makers recognize the roles of parents to develop literacy skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) at school (Meyer, 2001). Early childhood development centers (preschools) can play an important role for the development of literacy specifically reading skills of the children (OECD, 2016). There is increasing pressure on primary education to ensure that all children succeed at school (Meyer, 2001) and be able to read and write as early as grade one, and Nepal is not an exception. In Nepal, the enormous expansion in early childhood programs has focused on preparing children for grade one and developing sound foundation for primary school (van Ravens, 2009).

The 8<sup>th</sup> amendment of the Education Act has recently been put in effect. This revision brought ECD centers (preprimary schools) under the school structure. However, the act is still not clear in terms of operation of the ECD centers. Though the education policies and regulations are in the process of revision, the quality of the education system with equity and accessibility for all is still missing. These periodic revisions of the education act and policies could not address the issues of different socio-cultural minority groups. National Education Commission (NEC) report in 1992, mentioned that the situations of teaching learning in primary schools are not supporting to develop their competency. Instead, teachers are focusing on rote-learning and ignoring the child-centered individualized instructions. Following this report (NEC, 1992), many quality education programs have been launched. Still the quality of education is in question. The quality is an abstract term. “As such, the

concept of quality cannot be conceptualized to accommodate complexity, values, diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives, and other features of a world, which are understood to be both uncertain and diverse. The “problem with quality” cannot be addressed by struggling to reconstruct the concept in ways it was never intended to go (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007, p. 105).

In the 2009-2015 period, Nepal reformed its education structure with the new policy, ‘School Sector Reform Program’ (SSRP). SSRP has emphasized on the education in mother tongue up to grade three and flexible learning opportunities for the children of diverse groups (MOE, 2007). Apart from this, an ‘ECD Strategic Plan’ was developed in 2004 and implemented in 2005 by the then Ministry of Education and Sports for supporting the learning of primary grades.

The Tenth Five-Year Plan, and the three-year interim plan have clearly mentioned that the ECD center is one of the strategies for increasing school enrollment, retentions and reducing the repetition and dropout rates of the children. The DOE/ MOE, with the increase of significant numbers of ECD center (preschools), have now started to focus on improving the quality of these ECD centers. For the quality improvement in the ECD centers, DOE is supporting learning materials, infrastructure and facilitators (teachers) training. However, the preparedness for literacy (reading and writing) and numeracy in the ECD centers is still not the priority of the facilitators (teachers). There are minimum standards (MS), and the early learning and development standards (ELDS) of children aged four years. But most of the ECD facilitators (teachers) are not aware of these standards.

School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) (2016-2020) is implemented by the Government of Nepal under the new constitutional provisions. Even after SSRP, there was no positive report and the significant achievement in the learning. The



SSDP is prepared within the broader framework of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG, 2030) aiming to improve the quality. The SDG goal number four is targeted for children's education and is responsible for early literacy skills. Other goals (11 out of 17 goals) are also related to the ECD. Among the seventeen goals of SDG, child's literacy and holistic development is targeted.

The education Act (8<sup>th</sup> amendment) has been revised and amended recently providing plenty of grounds for the revision of the previous practices in terms of quality ECD programs. However, there are still limitations in the implementation process.

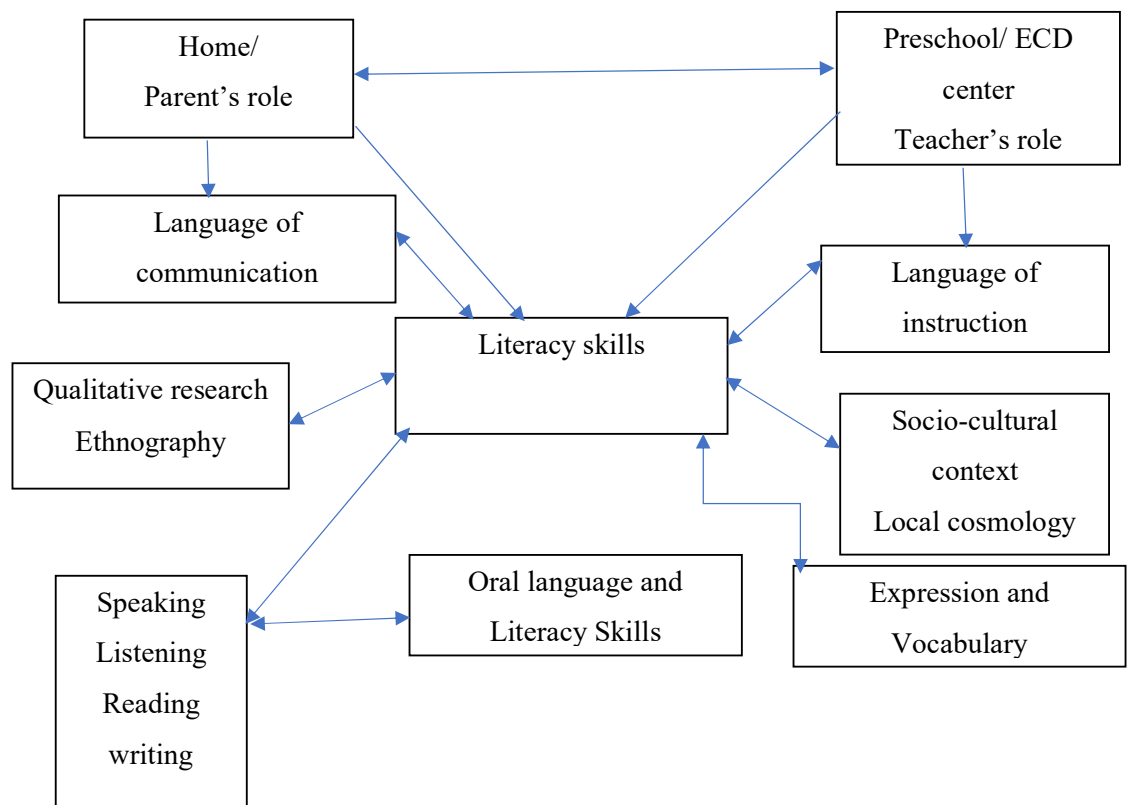
According to the Constitution of Nepal 2072, the authority to manage and operate the schools (Preschools to grade twelve) is given to the local government. The present education system has not completely transitioned to this new local structure. There may be a lack of human resource for developing, supporting and monitoring at the local level for the quality ECD programs. No research has been done in oral language competency and literacy skills. Due to this, the education policy is still lagging behind on addressing the issues related to oral language and literacy skills.

### **Theoretical Referent**

The literature studies have shown the relation of early language and literacy with home and preschools environment (Joseph, 2006; Silverman & Hartranft, 2015; Pandey, 2012). However, the research done in this area is limited and no study has been undertaken in the Nepali context. This study emphasizes the relationship of oral language and literacy of the children in available social and cultural environments with the help of interpretive paradigm. The environment for learning and development are none other than family, home, school and community. The study

explores the available environment for children to develop their oral language and literacy skills and analyzes it with the help of socio-cultural constructs and the local cosmological perspectives. The methodology adopted for this study is qualitative and interpretive paradigm.

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework



### Research Gap

There are researches (Snow, 2013; Lanter, 2009; Gregory, 2001) to find the children's socio-cultural relation in the learning process. Such research claiming to demonstrate the importance of parent-child relationships in children's early reading has number of gaps. There are researches (Lui, 2012; Konza, 2011) that trace children's learning achievements in relation to economic and socio-cultural context. Only a handful of studies examine other aspects, such as social behavior of the children that may affect children's learning. Hence, there is very little evidence

concerning family-based interventions during the pre-school period that could help children meet the new challenges of entering school successfully. However, more recent research suggests that school is also responsible for children's learning and literacy development.

The literature discussed shows that there should be a combination of efforts focusing on the family, school, community, and child (Woodhead & Moss, 2007) for the language development and learning of the children. But there is still a need to explore how the social and cultural contexts of the children, parents and teachers influence the children's oral language development in relation to their literacy skills.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I reviewed the literature related to oral language and literacy of the children. The thematic review has been done based on different literatures from around the world. The literature highlighted that although oral language is foundational to literacy development, these two develop simultaneously in some cases. What children learn from listening and talking contributes to their ability to read and write and vice versa. For example, young children's phonological awareness (ability to identify and make oral rhymes and manipulate the individual sounds - phonemes- in spoken words) is an important indicator of their potential success in learning to read. Phonological awareness begins earlier than formal reading and writing, when children engage in rhyming words, games and songs at home and in the preschool. Without proper support, oral language and literacy skills of children are less likely to develop, and their achievement lag is likely to persist throughout the primary grades and beyond, making them poor readers.

The empirical studies and policy-related literatures were also reviewed in relation to children's oral language and literacy skills. These literatures and studies,

included from various countries (like UK, Canada, Australia, USA), have contributed extensively in the area of early literacy. It has been understood that children acquire language through home and early educational environments, and that this early learning impacts literacy learning in the primary schools. It is established that the literacy skills start with the language skills and are included in four key areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Finally, educational policies are reviewed to determine how they impact the educational practices in the context of Nepal. Thus, the discussion in this chapter assimilated various studies carried out by the scholars, including ongoing dialogue and theories focused to oral language and literacy skills in relation to socio-cultural environment. Finally, in this chapter, existing research gap is discussed and a conceptual framework of the study was presented to guide the study further.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology applied in this study. The chapter starts with an explanation of the philosophical considerations of this study. Then, it describes the qualitative research design and ethnography. The chapter provides with a detail description of research sites and the participants. In this chapter, data generation methods, tools applied and the process of data analysis are described. The chapter further elaborates the steps taken to ensure quality and trustworthiness. It also describes the reflective stance and situating position as a researcher within a social constructivist framework (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The chapter concludes with the ethical considerations followed throughout the study.

#### **Selection of Topic**

ECD has been the area of my professional interest and expertise for over 17 years. My interest was further supported by the reality that limited research-based information on aspects of ECD as available in Nepal. So, I decided to investigate the area of oral language and literacy in ECD Nepal after numerous readings and consultations with my supervisors and other professors, ECD professionals, and peers. My focus is on oral language learning of children which is important because of its interrelatedness with literacy. Oral language is considered the prerequisite for success in many aspects of reading and writing (Shiel et al., 2012). This study particularly focused on the understanding of oral language development in children in a multilingual and multicultural context. This study explored the environments that exist for oral language and the literacy skill development of children at home and in the preschools (ECD centers).

### **Philosophical Consideration of the Study**

Methodology is the broader philosophical and theoretical framework to conduct a study that follows techniques and/or procedural rules (Brewer, 2000). The philosophy of social research can be defined as the study of the theories of knowledge which validate particular research methods. According to Brewer (2000), the study of the broader methodological context to research methods has been called the philosophy of social research. It consists of the following components: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Scotland, 2012). Paradigms are toolboxes full of theories, practices, and ways of thinking, and all these tools can be useful and destructive in their own ways (Tracy, 2013). Social science research investigates human behavior through a systematic plan.

Ontology is the worldview of the researchers. Researchers need to take a position regarding their perceptions of how things really are and how things really work. My ontological position in this study was based on the multiple realities developed through my 17 years of work in the ECD field here in Nepal as well as in other countries. I believe children in my study areas had different experiences, stories, and perspectives, different cultural and contextual situations. Given this diversity, each child's reality is dependent on their own personal experience and each of them brings different viewpoints to the study. These realities are constructed through human activities and are created in a local context.

Epistemology concerns the ways knowledge is created, acquired and communicated. It is about how the knowledge is created and how to know it. Epistemology questions the relations between the knower and the known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108), and the nature of the relationship. I believe that knowledge is a human product and is constructed socially and culturally, and research can never be

totally value-free or objective (Griffin, 2004). Therefore, knowledge is dependent and can be generated through the interaction of people within the multi socio-cultural context they live in. Knowledge of the reality is, therefore, always mediated through the researcher (Tracy, 2013). Thus, epistemology is the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Snow, 2013). I worked together with participants and formed a partnership trying to understand one another's thoughts. Throughout this study, as a researcher, I have maintained an open line of communication, collaborative conversations, and trust with my participants (Stake, 2006). I stayed in the class, played with children, and participated in different activities with them. This developed trust between each other and to share our views without hesitation.

### **Research Design**

This research followed a qualitative design to better understand the meaning of people's lives, under real world conditions. It represents the view, narratives, and perspectives of the people (Yin, 2011). According to Litchman (2013), qualitative research is a way of knowledge generation where researchers engage in gathering, organizing, and interpreting the information. The qualitative approach supports exploration of meaning covering the contextual conditions within the people's lives, and contributes to insight to explain humans' behavior. I used in-depth interviews and observations of research participants in natural social settings. In this process, I used multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone for exploring the real situation. Thus, through interviews and observations, I explored parents' and teachers' roles and perceptions regarding oral language competency and the ways parents and teachers support early literacy and reading and writing of the children. The qualitative techniques required me to describe, understand and appraise the environment and its culture. This process gave me a deeper understanding on how

the preschools/ ECD centers, teachers, and parents engaged and encouraged oral language development of children.

I follow an interpretive research paradigm for this study. The paradigm relies on dialogic methods (Norms & Sawyer, 2012), methods combining observations and interviews, with approaches that foster conversation and reflection. Therefore, the reflective dialogic approach has been followed to question the participants in their 'natural' state. Based on this framework, the study has been designed within the natural environment of the people where they live. I agree that learning is a social process that occurs when children engage in every day social activities. Thus, I followed an ethnography as a methodological approach for this study.

### **Ethnography**

Ethnography is a distinct type of research process where the knowledge is produced from the extensive fieldwork (Christensen, 2004). It incorporates multiple perspectives for collection and interpretation of data. Ethnography is not only a method of data collection, but also a methodology based on direct observation of the field. It allows “multiple interpretation” of realities and “alternative interpretations” of data through the study (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p.86).

I have used ethnographic research methods for the collection of the stories of participants, which deal with social, cultural, and psychological aspects of the community. All people have a story, a narrative of their unique circumstances and lived experiences. Sharing stories and noticing, cataloguing, and analyzing the corpus of narratives is different than simply listening to the stories itself (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). Collecting stories alone does not complete the research; they need to be interpreted or meaning must be drawn from the stories (Lichtman, 2013, p. 95).



Ethnographic research provides an exploration of the depth of the participants' daily life stories trying to get meaning out of those stories.

Ethnography is an important methodology to use when researching children as it allows the researcher to spend times with children, providing them recognition and developing relationship (O'Really, Ronzoni, & Dogra, 2013). Living together with a community and understanding their daily lives is the key feature of ethnography. The prolonged relations help to explore the inner realities of the community practices. Patience and tolerance are required in a considerable amount for conducting good ethnography (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p.138) as the researcher has to spend a long period of time in the field.

In ethnography, the role of the researcher is to gradually change from "outsider" to "insider" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p.137). The cultural context of the research participants plays a significant role to allow access, rapport, and trust to the individual researcher. Thus, in the process the researchers gradually change their initial role as an outsider to the part of the community as an insider. The insider-outsider position is sometimes seen as an epistemological principle centered on the issue of access. The values of shared experience, greater access, cultural interpretation, deeper understanding, and clarity of thought are closely tied together and inform one another in a variety of ways. As I moved to the insider position, I was able to interpret their local culture; having a shared understanding of the normative rules of the community, contributed to minimizing marginalization. My research questions were the guidelines used within each context; the way I uncovered the information as the methodological focus was. I found that the ethnographic paradigm was appropriate to investigate the factors regarding the relation of early language and literacy learning.

In an ethnographic research methodology, the language and culture are viewed as embedded together (Robinson-Pant & Wolf, 2016). When the research is in a multilingual and multi-cultural context, the researcher should consider the language and the culture while planning the research methods. The primary aim of ethnography is to understand the socio-cultural contexts, processes, and meanings of a cultural system from the perspective of the members of that system (Whitehead, 2004). To achieve this understanding, I, as an ethnographer, maintained both ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ approaches, while I was with my research participants (Olive, 2014). An emic approach attempts to understand components of a cultural system from the perspective of the group being studied. The etic approach analyzes a cultural system with research paradigms brought by the researcher from outside of that system. It is especially useful for gaining an understanding of the complexities of a particular intact culture. Being an ethnographer, I analyzed the socio-cultural contexts and the everyday lives of the people with both etic and emic perspectives. Ethnography approaches the interrelationships between socio-cultural contexts, processes and meaning systems as they contribute to the complexities of human realities (Whitehead, 2004).

The ethnographic works not only emphasize description and interpretation of the information, but also contribute to theoretical understanding based on the insight drawn from fieldwork. Ethnography captures social meanings and ordinary activities of people in naturally occurring settings or fields of study through the collection of data. Using this process, I became involved in the field study in order to collect data in a systematic manner without imposing meaning externally (Brewer, 2000; Gobo, 2011). This study not only used in-person open-ended interviews and observations but also the focus group discussions.

## **Entering the Field**

In this section, I am introducing my research sites and the participants in detail. I have already mentioned that my participants are parents, teachers and children. Here, I am introducing the community, along with the reason to select them and the preschools in that particular community. Included is a brief introduction of the children and the preschool teachers whom I have interviewed and observed.

### **Research Sites**

The study area was selected purposively from districts where culturally and socially diverse populations reside. Initially, I had planned to select Banke and Pyuthan, districts from Province 5 (then Mid-western region) in Nepal. Later on, because of the political and economic crises (fuel crisis) in the country, I had to replace Pyuthan with Lalitpur (central region). I selected Banke as the district is highly populated with children speaking different languages. According to the district education status, the district is poor in literacy and student drop-out ratio is remarkably high. As I planned to study the oral language and literacy skills of the children, I chose children having mother tongue other than Nepali. Banke was appropriate from this perspective, too. I was also interested to learn about the oral language and literacy with monolingual (speaking a single language) children. For that, I chose Lalitpur for my study. As Lalitpur is close to my residence, it is easier for me to observe frequently and communicate with my study participants without any external support. I selected three preschools in each district despite having visited many schools in both the districts.

Banke has one of the most diverse populations in the Province 5, (then Mid-western region) of Nepal. Nepalganj, one of the oldest municipalities in the country, is newly declared as a sub-metropolitan city in Banke. Establishment of industries,

markets and construction of wider roads, facilities of hospital, schools and people's requirements made it busier and highly populated. But, in the heart of the city there are still impoverished and highly populated settlements of the ethnic Awadhi communities. The community has their own language and cultural practices. The community is socioeconomically poor and developmentally, in terms of modern development, deprived. They are poorly educated in formal education; most of the adult members were never in formal schools and many children have dropped out. I selected these communities for my study. The detailed description of the two selected communities is given below.

#### Paraspur, Settlement 1 (Awadhi domination with Muslim and mixed group)

Paraspur is a community adjoining the main city center of Nepalganj. Earlier it was in a separate village development committee (VDC), but now it has been merged into Nepalganj sub-metropolitan. Paraspur is densely populated with many communities (cluster of settlements). I selected one of them. This community has semi-urban characteristics and is a mixed settlement of Muslims and Hindus. The main language of communication in the community for both the religious groups is Awadhi. According to the village profile, the population of this community is 3765, where 71.63% are Hindus and 28.10% are Muslims. There are 12 preschools (community-based ECD centers) in Paraspur (within the earlier VDC). I selected two preschools from this area. Among them, one of the preschools is in the middle of the community, running in a personal house. Majority of the children in this preschool belong to the Muslim community. The other is in the outskirts of the community running inside a school compound (having religiously mixed children). People in this community have mixed occupation. Some of them are involved in vegetable farming.

They sell vegetables in the local market. Some of them are engaged in rikshaw–pulling and working as daily wages labor in the market.

Bulbuliya. Settlement 2 (Kebati domination mixed with other caste groups)

Bulbuliya is a densely populated settlement in the middle of the city. It has a mixed group of people, but the majorities are Kewat. Kewat is a caste that belongs close to the god, an incarnation of god and supposed to be in a higher level in the societal caste system. However, they lost that identity at present and belong to a lower middle class among Awadhi community. Most of the people in the settlement are Awadhi speaking Hindus. Females in this community are engaged in grass-cutting and they sell grass in the market as horse feed. Mostly males work as rickshaw or *tanga* (horse cart) runners. A few are also engaged in tailoring. The community is named *Ghasiyara Tole*, after the dominant occupation of cutting grass. According to the voter's list of the Municipality, there are 600 households in Bulbuliya community (in one such settlement).

The community is in a cluster of closely attached houses with shared front and backyards. The number of children of age 1 to 5 years is 313 (according to health volunteer's data). There are two private schools and a public higher secondary school in Bulbuliya. Two community-managed ECD centers are operating near the community. I have visited the community and discussed with the members to understand them. Below provides a background of one community I have explored.

**Female participant.** We are the descendants of the one who helped Lord Ram to cross the river (Ram is known as an incarnation of the god, Lord Vishnu) when he was going to forest (at his *Banbaas*) leaving his royal identity (kingship) (when he left palace) she shared proudly.

I nodded, and asked, you are called Ghasiyara, am I right?

Participant: Oh! yes, yes. You know why?

I stayed quiet, looking at her face. She understood my ignorance and clarified it for me.

Participant: Because we cut grass and sell it. (In Nepali, Grass is known as *Ghans* and so the grasscutters are named as *Ghashiyara*). People are confused on our identity, because they don't know we are the Kewat, she added.

Sharing this, she was showing their importance at that time.

Researcher: Then you are close to *Bhagawan* (Lord) Ram.

She smiled and started sharing their troubles at present.

Participant: We are here with no facilities. No place to construct toilet, so we have to go to the open field. The road extension project has marked at our doors, and we have nowhere to live when they come and break our house. No drinking water supply; those who have space, they have made tube-well supported by the project. But again, we were left behind.

I could see open drain and dirty road in front of their house. Most of the children were playing outside, in the road with no or tattered clothes. (Field note 1, December, 2014)

While communicating with community people I found they have their own cultural heritage. Considering their rich cultural characters and their own Awadhi language, I selected this community for my study.

Lalitpur. Lalitpur is one of the three districts in the Kathmandu Valley. Being a neighboring district to the capital city, it has dense population. I selected three preschools (ECD centers) in Lalitpur Metropolitan (earlier one preschool was in the Karya Binayak Municipality and two were in Lalitpur Sub-metropolitan) of Lalitpur

district for my study. Among them, two ECD centers are in the schools and one in the community.

Sainbu. Sainbu is currently in the Lalitpur metropolitan city. Earlier, it was in the Karya Binayak municipality (former Sainbu VDC). According to CBS (2011), the population of Sainbu VDC is 19721. There were five preschools in Sainbu. I selected the school where majority of the children were Nepali speaking. The preschool is inside the secondary school in the center of the community. The children in the school are not from that community; they are mostly children of immigrants from other parts of the country.

Bholdhoka. Bholdhoka is near to the center of Lalitpur. It is rich in cultural and traditional heritage (Patan Durbar Square). This is one of the places registered in UNESCO heritage. This is the residence of Local *Newar* ethnic community. However, children in the school are mostly from families that migrated later. This preschool is being run in a secondary school premise.

Nakhkhu. The preschool in Nakhkhu is run by Lalitpur Metropolitan city. It is in the middle of the community with its own building. The children here also come from outside the valley.

Unlike in Banke, where children and their families were in clustered settlements, the case of Lalitpur was different. In all the selected pre-schools in Lalitpur, most of the students were children of the migrant families staying in rented rooms (often in only one room), who were involved in different types of labor works in different parts of the city. As they were scattered around the city, I had to visit their rooms to talk with them. In most cases, both parents were engaged in work. Few children had single parent (mother), where most of the fathers were out of the country as migrant workers.

My field work started in November 2014 from Banke. The first two visits were more focused on the selection of sites and building rapport. I visited District Education Office (DEO) at Banke and met the authorities. I informed them of my research objectives and requested them to facilitate me in getting information of the preschools. The DEO provided me with the list of preschools both running inside schools and outside the schools (school-based and community-based) in the Nepalgunj Sub Metropolitan City. There were 150 preschools in the Nepalgunj Sub Metropolitan area. I visited many centers and focused my study at three preschools (name changed). They were:

1. Soniya Preschool, Paraspur
2. Jhumaru Preschool, Paraspur
3. Holiya Preschool, Bulbuliya

In the beginning, I visited the centers as suggested by the DEO. I talked to the head teachers, met preschool teachers, observed classrooms, and scanned records and documentations. I also visited the communities within the school catchment and talked with several parents and other community members on their understanding of the schools and the preschools in the community.

Similarly, in Lalitpur I consulted officers from District Education Office (DEO). I visited schools and the preschools as per their suggestion. The DEO resource person (RP) supported me to reach the schools and introduced me to the head teachers and the preschool teachers of these schools. After preliminary visits of the schools, I selected the participant schools.

I have focused my study in the following three preschools in Lalitpur:

4. Lukla Preschool, Nakhkhu
5. Langtang Preschool, Sainbu



## 6. Gaurishankar Preschool, Bholdhoka

### **Selection of Participants**

I interviewed six preschool/ ECD center teachers and eight parents. There are ninety children in my research preschools and ECD centers. Among them eight children were closely observed at their respective preschools as well as at their homes. However, I interacted in one or other way with all the children in these selected preschools.

Participants for this study were purposively chosen in order to obtain the greatest amount of information. In qualitative research, there is no set rule regarding the number of participants to interview because the purpose is not to generalize, but rather to be descriptive (Lichtman, 2013). I observed the preschool teachers and children. The parent participants were identified after closely watching them and their activities with children in the preschools.

### **Teacher Participants**

All the preschool teachers (six teachers) one from each preschool selected for the study were interviewed and observed during their teaching-learning activities in the classroom. The teachers gave consent and completed teacher information forms. The teacher information form included general information about educational level, years of teaching, and trainings related to the preschool activities. All of the teachers were females with Nepali, and/ or Awadhi language background and teaching experience in preschool ranging from 2 to 15 years. The qualifications of the teachers ranged from secondary school education to college degree. Among them, two teachers were with college degree, three of them passed the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. All of the teachers reported that they had previously received ECD (preschool) teacher training.

### **Child Participants**

Each preschool had 15 to 20 of three to four-year-old children who participated in an all-day program. In Banke, the number of children was higher than in Lalitpur. The classrooms contained play materials, wall painting, hanging alphabet charts, vegetables and fruits charts. The daily schedule included three to four hours' session of structured activities such as circle time, music, small group activities, story, reading and writing (literacy activities) and day meals (snacks).

As I mentioned, eight children were closely observed both at home and preschool. One child from each preschool was selected for the study except from Bulbuliya and Bholdhoka. Bulbuliya and Bholdhoka preschools had children with diverse language backgrounds and involved in more activities-based teaching learning methods. Two children each were observed from these two preschools. A brief introduction of the participants is given below. Apart from these eight children, I also observed and talked with several other children in the preschools. At times, I have referred to them. All of the names given below are changed.

Ranjan Bohara, Bulbuliya, Banke: Ranjan is a five-year old boy. His family migrated from Doti (one of the remote districts in Western Nepal) to Nepalgunj. He has different dialects, so he speaks different than his other friends in the preschool. He follows neither Awadhi nor Nepali but actively participates in the class activities.

Saroj Kewat, Bulbuliya, Banke: Saroj is a four-year old quiet boy who understands but is not able to speak Nepali. He only speaks Awadhi. He lisps (stutters) and his voice is not clear (baby talk).

Rubina Khatun, Paraspur, Banke: Rubina is a three-year old girl, does not speak much but can follow the instructions. If asked, she speaks in a low voice. She

only speaks Awadhi. She likes quiet environment and cries when there is any loud noise.

Ramesh Chaudhary, Paraspur, Banke: A four-year old boy whose family migrated from the hills of India. He speaks Hindi mixed Awadhi language (Dehati). He lives in a rented house in the community. He actively participates in the class activities.

Neeta Lama, Bholdhoka, Lalitpur: A four-year old girl who lives in a rented house with her parents. She has an elder brother who studies in the same school. She comes to preschool walking about 25 minutes from her home. She is confident and speaks Nepali clearly.

Radha Rai, Bholdhoka, Lalitpur: Radha, a four-year girl, lives in a rented house in Lalitpur with her family. She speaks Nepali.

Lokesh Waiba, Nakhkhu, Lalitpur: A four-year old boy who lives near the preschool at a rented house. He lives with his mother, as his father is out of the country. He is shy and speaks slowly. He speaks Nepali.

Anjana Thapa, Sainbu, Lalitpur: Anjana, a four-year old girl, lives with both parents. Her mother is a street vendor, so she joins her mother after preschool in the street. She doesn't initiate speaking on her own but once we start, she answers. She speaks Nepali

### **Parent Participants**

Eight parents from the study communities (Sainbu, Nakhkhu, Bholdhoka, Paraspur and Bulbuliya) were included in this study. They are either Awadhi or Nepali speaking parents, and they could speak both languages. In Banke, some of them could not speak Nepali. In Lalitpur all the parents were working class; some parents were daily wage workers and some were street vendors. In Banke, mostly

mothers were house wives, while some were grass-cutters and vendors. However, the fathers were engaged in income-generating work. Some parents were rickshaw pullers, cart drivers and some were tailors or small shopkeepers. The families (parents) of the children were interviewed and their home environment was observed during this study.

During the study process, I also shared with community leaders, local people, NGO and INGO members working for the education and early childhood development, government authorities, school teachers and managements, and other stakeholders about my research and the study process. The discussions I had with them later helped me to understand and interpret the context and more specifically to generate and analyze the data.

### **Data Generation Process (Collecting the Stories)**

I started my field work in November 2014 and continued till February 2016. I visited Banke seven times and stayed for 15 to 20 days during each visit. I interacted with teachers and parents, and observed preschools classes during the visit. Similarly, in Lalitpur, I interacted with many parents, preschool teachers, children and other local people regarding the language, school and the children's literacy. I also consulted government authorities, local authorities and I/NGO representatives who were working in the area of early childhood and (early) education.

As ethnography is a "multimethod approach", I applied multiple methods for data generation during each visit (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Christensen, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). All data gathered from the field were taken with explicit permission of the participants. The study adopted participant observation, in-depth interviews and group discussions for data collection. According to Christenson (2010), three elements are the core of the ethnographic fieldworks. They are

participant observation, interview, and the researcher herself/himself. I used all three of the elements for the data generation.

I also developed stories and interpreted and applied them to narrate the data. The cases presented here not only emphasize the description and interpretation of the information, but also contribute to theoretical understanding.

Field notes and daily journal were maintained after each formal and informal discussion. Field notes are one of the important processes of data generation in ethnographic research designs. The field notes are the “backbone” of the ethnographic study and are in many forms, “including detailed observations and general interpretations, reflections, and summaries of recorded interviews” (Suter, 2006, p. 319). I myself was involved in the field in order to collect data, and prepared field notes in a systematic manner, without imposing on the meaning externally (Brewer, 2000).

According to Lichtman (2013), collecting data from multiple sources allows the researcher to paint a more detailed and accurate picture and decreases biased views. Different tools are applied for the data generation in qualitative research tradition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In ethnography, a broad set of techniques is often applied like observation in natural contexts and interviews (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). In this study, I used different tools including non-participant observation and participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, records and documents, took pictures, and recorded video. I spent extended time periods on the field interacting with community people regularly, this is recorded in my research journal (Litchman, 2013).

## **Participant Observation**

Participant observation is a key method that distinguishes ethnography from other qualitative studies (Christensen, 2010; Gobo, 2011). Ethnographic methodology comprises two research strategies: non-participant observation and participant observation (Gobo, 2011; O'Really, Ronzoni, & Dogra, 2013). I applied both strategies during the process.

Initially, I was a non-participant observer and I maintained the distance without interfering in the interactions between the teachers and the children. I also did not interact with teachers or the children. My passiveness without making any critical comments and/ or interference in their works won teachers' trust towards me. After a week of observation, I found teachers conducting classes as usual and were confident in their work. It made it easier for me to follow participant observation quietly by staying in their natural settings. Slowly, I started interacting with children and teachers and participated in their daily activities. I took few sessions like singing and dancing with children, telling stories, playing games, and reciting alphabets to understand the meaning of their actions. I used the Hindi language (as it is closed to Awadhi) as a medium of communication in Banke and Nepali in Lalitpur.

Similarly, I also spared time for observing children's activities at their homes and the parents' support. I conversed informally with parents (both mother and father) while they were doing their household chores. Sitting with them and talking about the child's activities, I got opportunities to keenly observe and understand their home culture, language and communication.

Observation draws on direct evidence of the eye to witness firsthand events. I captured firsthand information about my participants. It allowed me to gather data in the natural settings, such as "physical setting", "human setting", "interaction setting"

and “program setting” (Morrison as cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2001). I observed the home environment, parents’ everyday activities, their interactions with the children, and also everyday activities of the children. The parents and the children’s temperament were also observed keenly.

I spent two to three hours a day for almost six months in a classroom during my observation. During the observation, I saw the classroom activities, basically teaching learning process, interactions with children and use of materials during teaching and learning. I also observed the students’ and teachers’ behaviors, classroom interactions between teachers and the children, and also amongst the children to see whether they were supporting individual children and listening and responding to them. I also observed the children outside the classroom while they were playing, having their tiffin (day meal), and at the times when teacher was not present.

### **Interview**

I used interview as one of the tools for data generation. For this, I talked with the teachers (schools and preschools), parents and other community members. It took several sittings to get in-depth information. My presence in the ECD center as well as in the community was taken as that of knowledgeable outsider. Mostly teachers seemed self-conscious while giving information during the interviews as they were familiar with me as a teacher trainer. While I was asking questions, they felt doubtful and tried to make sure that they were not following wrong concepts. So, I used both formal and informal time to interact and interview with teacher participants. Instead of using structured questions for the interview, I followed unstructured open conversations.

Interviews and observations were conducted throughout the study as these are the main tools in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The use of these tools provided a way for me to obtain an insider, or emic, perspective regarding the issues being studied. The interaction between the researcher and participant through the interview was, “the establishment of human-to-human relation with the respondent and the desire to understand rather than to explain” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 366 as cited in Sullivan, 2010). The flexible way of interactions was followed for consistent investigation of particular cases with the participant and basic introductory questions. It also allows flexibility to engage in natural conversation that provided deeper insight. This made the interview more honest, morally sound, and reliable.

I performed open-ended interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I followed the participatory interaction during the interview rather than considering the participants as merely a conduit from which information is retrieved. I discussed their activities, challenges and daily life. As participants in Banke spoke the Awadhi language, I used Hindi. I took support from one of the members of the community who could speak and understand both Awadhi and Nepali. In some cases, he helped me in interpretation of the meaning during the conversation. Treating the respondents as equals and allowing them to express their personal feelings helped me a lot to present a more “realistic” picture (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 371 as cited in Sullivan, 2010).

All the interviews were audio-taped, video-recorded, and transcribed. At the same time, handwritten notes were also made for the purpose of extending questions. These notes also supported me for further exploration.



### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research amasses huge amounts of data; therefore, it is essential to maintain the data in an organized and timely manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Preliminary data analysis starts immediately after the collection of data. “The right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection” (Merriam, 1998, p. 162). It is an iterative and reflexive process in which data are continuously interpreted (Stake, 2006). While being reflective, the researcher is committed to deliberate, recollect and record the data, and continuously interpret it. More specifically, Leedy and Ormrod (2005) outline a detailed procedure for data analysis aiding the simultaneous nature of the work. However, in ethnographic research the organization of data, its categorization, interpretations, identification of patterns (classification of related data) and synthesis and generalization of the information takes place simultaneously.

According to Merriam (1998), data analysis must be organized in a careful manner creating a descriptive picture by: (a) including instances and stories; (b) developing themes; (c) creating justification when needed; and (d) connecting all the data together. While these procedures were used in multiple cases, I used similar format for my data analysis. In particular, I collected the data, and transcribed information derived from both interviews and observations. I wrote field notes (both typed on a computer and handwritten in a notebook). Also, I made summaries, memos, and reflective notes, for my understanding. Sometimes I had to record (write) in Hindi and/or Awadhi and translate it into Nepali. While transcribing the data (voice record), I consulted local friends (interpreters) for translation in Nepali for some cases in Banke. I translated the data into English. It helped me organize the data; and also made it easy for the analysis simultaneously with data collection. All

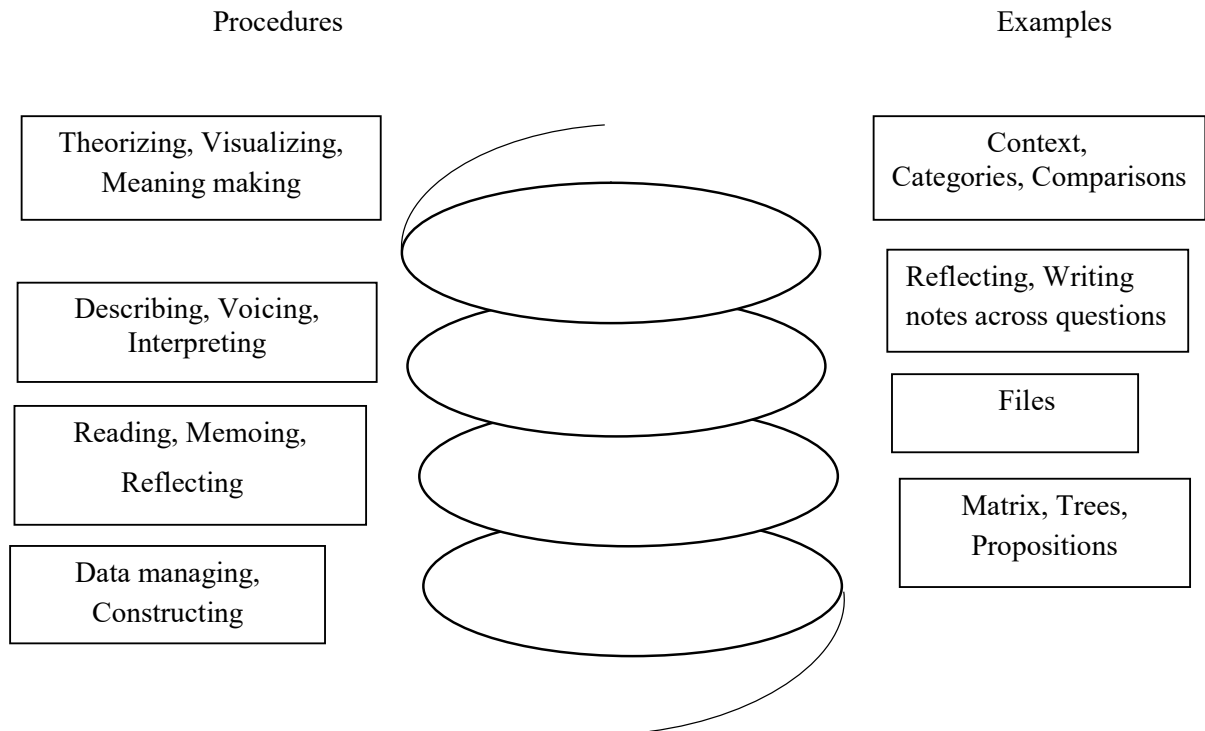
the data sources, the materials (interview, transcripts and follow-up notes, observation notes, video and audio records, and physical artifacts) were reviewed manually, coded, and preliminary meaning generated. The data analysis proceeded from noting patterns and themes to analyzing comparisons and contrasts, and determining conceptual explanations of the study (Lichtman, 2013). I followed the rigorous empirical thinking along with the sufficient presentation of evidence at the time of data analysis (Yin, 2014). I also considered the alternative interpretations which involved data deduction, feedback and alternative explanations in the process (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

The field notes and interview transcripts go simultaneously as the qualitative analyst jots down ideas about the meaning of the text and how it might relate to other issues. This process of reading through the data and interpreting them continued throughout the study. During analysis, I identified the essential features and started with systematic description of these features. I searched the interrelationships among them. I frequently questioned myself in the process and sought the meaning of each aspect in relation to the contexts. As qualitative analysis represents three “I’s” that is; “insight, intuition, and impression” (Dey, 1995 as cited in Creswell, 2013), it is a rigorous process where researcher is engaged.

According to Merriam (1998), data analysis needs to be organized in relation to researcher’s observation and interaction with participants and/or what researchers research (study) in order to internalize and make sense of the phenomenon. To make my data effectively work, I created descriptive pictures by: (a) including instances and stories; (b) creating justifications, when needed; (c) posing schemes; (d) developing themes; and (e) connecting all of the data together to form a story (Snow, 2013). As Creswell (2013) mentioned, data analysis is not a separate process - it is interrelated

and often goes simultaneously with data collection and report writing. Therefore, data analysis is represented by the ‘spiral image’ in which researcher is engaged in the circular movement rather than a linear approach (Creswell, 2013). The process I followed for data analysis is presented in figure 4.

Figure 4. Analysis Procedure



Based on (Creswell, 2013)

I categorized commonalities, synthesized information, searched for patterns, interpreted the data, and created themes (Merriam, 1998). From the information, I made description and interpretation, and personalized it with the help of the theory (Creswell, 2013). For this, I consulted different data sources to maintain the quality during data analysis. I also reviewed the interview transcripts, observation notes and narrative texts. In line with Yin (2003), I worked with emphasis on quality during the analysis of the qualitative data.

To avoid the misrepresentations and misinterpretations of the findings, I made detailed descriptions of the information, understanding the multiple realities of my

research subjects. Similar to Fetterman's (2010) approach to multiple forms of analysis, I followed the 'four ductions' for the analysis: they are: "deduction, abduction, induction and retroduction" (Saldana, 2015, p. 22). These four elements were considered and followed during data analysis to ensure its quality.

### **Quality Criteria**

One aspect of the quality of the qualitative research is trustworthiness. For maintaining the quality and credibility of the study, I followed rigorous process through all stages of my research from its design to carrying out field work, generating data, understanding it, drawing meaning and finally writing. I maintained the methodological rigor while designing and implementing the tools. When completing my analysis, I checked in with the respondents to ensure I interpreted the intended meaning.

I myself involved as a researcher in the process of maintaining quality of the study. My values, beliefs and identity became a part of the process. I found my stories also similar to their stories and internalized their way of living in the process. As Lichtman (2013) said, "reflexivity is the bending back on oneself" (pg.164). Therefore, I found myself involved in every aspect of the research. Reflexivity is the self-awareness and analysis of the practice achieved by self in the process of understanding the dynamics between researcher and participants" (Gobo, 2011; Ibrahim & Edgley 2015).

I critically reflected upon the practice, process, and my roles during the research process. I demonstrated the research objectives to the participants during my conversation. To maintain trustworthiness, I gave vivid description of the research which represented my research process with detailed interpretation (Merriam, 1998). The credibility of the research was maintained by rigorous field exploration, in line

with Merriam (1998), who emphasized that the study should be, “Rigorously conducted. They need to present insights and conclusions that ring true to readers, educators, and other researchers” (p. 199). I conducted interviews and observations in the natural setting. All the interactions and the observations were well- documented and carefully analyzed. I was well aware of how my gender, social class, ethnicity, culture and personal values influenced my positionality in relation to this research and my participants.

### **Researcher’s Positionality**

Ethnographic study requires an ethical commitment from the start of the research and through each step of the research and writing (Suter, 2006). Initially, it was difficult for me to position myself as a student (researcher). I worked many times with these preschool teachers and they all were known to me. They knew me as a teacher, an ECD teacher trainer (expert). Since I was recognized as teacher trainer, there was clear power dynamic when I began the research. I owe power because of my knowledge, skill and years of working in the ECD field. I worked hard to equalize the power in our relationships. After two or three visits, the teachers recognized that I was not there as a teacher but as a colleague learning together how we best can serve the children. I presented the purpose and procedures of the study to the participants. The participants interpreted the process as an exam so I needed to further explain the purpose. I obtained necessary consents from the teachers as well as the parents to document my observations.

It was also difficult to position myself as a student researcher rather than an early childhood professional as I was studying from the research perspective. It was difficult for me to be indifferent and non-judgmental in many cases. I tried as much

as possible to make myself aware of the situations and continued holding myself as a knowledge-seeker rather than the knowledgeable (as the participants thought) one.

My positionality was both as an insider and an outsider in this study. My role as a researcher was one to observe, explore, interpret and understand the data. But I am also inside the actual research process. Given my previous (long-term) involvement in preschools and early childhood development (ECD) programs, I found myself as an insider. I was familiar with the daily activities in these preschools, the curriculum and the teaching learning activities followed by the teachers. So, I interacted with the teachers, observed children and talked with their mothers (parents) being as an insider. However, I did not interfere with their works. I didn't give my opinion while observing and interacting with the participants.

During my participatory observation (Gobo, 2011), I used to play with the children, sang their songs, listened to their stories and took part in the discussions. Likewise, I also used to share my observations and clarify my confusions through the series of conversations and communications with the teachers and the parents. This supported me to build rapport with them. It took me several days to develop a comfort level of my presence in the classroom with the teachers. Eventually, the teachers did feel comfortable to conduct the class in my presence as they normally did. I clearly observed their consciousness and hesitation as to whether I would notice and comment on them. However, I kept to my role of student and learning. At first, I observed the preschool classes and children in the classroom. Then, I visited the individual child's household with the teachers. Later, I visited myself, spent a period of time observing them and talking to them. In Banke, especially in Paraspur, I took support from a local person to interpret the language. I introduced myself as a student and clarified to them the process I would follow for the next few months. I

frequently visited the community, stayed with the families, observed their daily routines at home and also visited preschools and spent plenty of time in the classroom with the children. I was personally involved in the field to get information and generate more knowledge on the subject matter. I maintained professional relationship with the community members, parents, and teachers throughout the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To maintain the ethical responsibilities, I introduced myself and shared the purpose of my visit to the research participants. I took consent from the research participants for interview, photographs, and audio-visual recording. The names of the people and places involved during the research process have been changed. The conversations and interactions were interpreted with reflections and understanding of the context. I ensured them that I would maintain their dignity, privacy and safety and received consent for talking to their children, taking photographs, recording the conversations and observing them.

I followed the ethical codes like openness, transparency, and confidentiality of the information as noted by Madison (2004). As mentioned by Hammersly and Atkinson (2007, p. 209), ethical issues are dealt under the following four headings, which I followed throughout the study:

1. Maintaining Privacy: In order to ensure the privacy of the respondents, I changed their names and did not disclose any information directly related to their privacy.
2. No Harm: I did no harm to the respondents and other stakeholders during my stay. I behaved in a friendly manner and respected their sentiments.
3. No Exploitation: I did not use community people, including my respondents for any personal purpose.

4. Consequences for future research: I have not raised any issues, which create conflict in the study area. I maintained good rapport, and the study areas are accessible for future research as well.

I took consent on behalf of interpreter (the local community member) as well. I also made him commit for maintaining the privacy of the participants. He agreed to follow all the ethical codes as applied for the researcher.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter discussed the qualitative research methodology used to explore the oral language and literacy skill and development of the children at home and in the preschools. I also described and discussed my philosophical social research assumptions. My ontology for this study is subjective and my framework is based on multiple realities. My research followed ethnographic process for data generation and was constructed with interaction between the research participants and the researchers in natural settings. The observation and the interviews were applied as tools for data construction and generation. The quality of data and the trustworthiness of the data collection and data analysis procedures were followed in a systematic way. For example, my role as a researcher was included, along with the methods. I followed the guidelines for ethical considerations. My biases were outlined to provide context for the study. All research sites in Banke and Lalitpur and the research participants, parents, children, and the teachers have been described in detail.



## CHAPTER IV

### HOME LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

This chapter presents information based on the home environment of the children. I discuss the opportunities of language and learning of children at home and the contextual socio-cultural environment of the children. The discussion is based on my observations of the daily home environments and interviews with parents. The data generated were categorized into various themes. The major themes identified and discussed in this chapter are learning environment at home, learning and development of the children, and parents' support in learning.

As elaborated in the previous chapter, the data was taken from the identified communities/ preschools in Banke and Lalitpur, and in both the areas parents were from the working class and mostly worked on daily wages. While observing the home environments, I found that in general parents were busy in their own work from early morning to late evening and they had little time for their children. There was little time to ask and/or support their children about their studies related to school. The children were asked to study at home without guidance. Moreover, I did not find parents who were directly supporting their children on reading and writing activities. Therefore, I tried to explore the 'home oral language and literacy environment' which can be explained by elements like family-child interactions, the way they interact, the time they spent together and how this time was spent; activities like storytelling, practices of reading together, the availability of printed materials at home, and parental and family attitudes and beliefs about reading and writing, which may influence a child's success in the school.

### **Learning Environment at Home**

In Banke, the community is densely settled and all the houses are closely connected to one another. In such settlements, children have freedom to roam around and socialize with other families and their children. They live in small houses, which are congested and do not provide enough space to play inside the houses. So, children are free to play outside the homes, mostly in the streets within the community. In Lalitpur children are living in one-room rented houses. These are also congested, but they do not have such close-knit community or open spaces to play outside. They cannot play in the street as there is high risk of road accident due to the traffic. Therefore, in Lalitpur, children play outside in a safe place or open ground with parents' consent or remain inside watching TV. Therefore, the similarities and differences are: in Banke children were free to play outside whenever they wanted to, while children in Lalitpur had limited space and time to play outside and needed permission.

### **The Learning Environment in Banke**

In Banke, the study communities were in the heart of Nepalgunj Sub-Metropolitan. However, these communities are still far from the reach of modernization; they are within their own cultural premises and systems. Exploring around the community in both Paraspur and Bulbuliya one can have the feeling of village life, isolated from the modern city culture. The houses are small and attached to one another. The challenges that families were facing different than those living in metropolitan areas such as Lalitpur. An example of this is quoted below:

Shanti Kewat, age 25, is a mother of two sons. Her elder son goes to preschool and she stays at home with the younger one. Her one-room house at the side of the road has uncertain future as the road construction committee has marked half of her home for demolition so as to extend the road. She has no place to construct a toilet, and therefore, uses road or a nearby field for disposal. (Field Note December, 2014, Bulbuliya, Banke)

In Banke, most of the families do not have toilet at home. The roads are dirty and smelly as drain is flowing in front of their house. They dump their daily garbage on the roadside. They use an open place in the middle of the field for toilet; but the children use the roadside. The community has a common water source, which is a tube-well for drinking water.

The Banke communities are religiously (Hindu and Muslim) and culturally mixed. They appear to have more cultural influence from India as they speak both Awadhi and Hindi (Indian) as the home language. In Paraspur male members work outside of the home to earn money typically as laborers and women stay at home taking care of the cattle and babies. In Bulbuliya, female members are engaged in grass cutting work and male members pull rickshaws or carts on daily wages.

Home is the first school of the children. Whatever they have learnt when entering a formal school environment is the culmination from the home environment. There are sufficient learning opportunities at home. 'There are natural learning settings at home', told one of the NGO members in Banke. There were rituals, feasts, and festivals that adults participated in, and children learn from these activities. Mostly in the Terai, like Banke, there were joint families or closely settled communities, so children had sufficient learning opportunities from among the family

members. The context provided by families (parents), and their consistent support in oral language through frequent interactions, provide a rich environment for learning oral language. Research shows that early childhood years are key for brain development, and providing the foundational elements for future learning. Therefore, the learning that takes place between 0-3 years of age, usually at home, is key for foundational learning in language and literacy. However, this is not recognized by the parents.

The participants of Banke are the indigenous local people having their own language and culture. All houses are closely constructed, attached with each other. Most of the households are relatives, living in the same neighborhood, and spending time together during mornings and evenings. They have similar cultural practices and share and celebrate their festivals. Children have no restriction in moving around or going to each other's houses within the community. I found that the community people share the watch over the children's activities in the neighborhood and support them in the socialization process.

Since the children learn naturally from the community, learning environment and opportunities at home seem more nurturing in Banke compared to Lalitpur. This was observed through the number and quality of interactions during the study. However, for migrant children (families) the case is a bit different. Even in Banke, there are a number of migrant families. These families do not send their children outside (neighborhood) to play with their friends. They want their children to be indoors and study in their free time.

**Sanjana.** Sanjana migrated from western hills to Banke and stays in a rented house in Bulbuliya. Sanjana goes to the nearby preschool (ECD center). Her mother told me that Sanjana loves the preschool and likes to share with her mother the

activities she participates in the preschool. “She imitates the activities we play and enjoy together,” shared Sanjana’s mother. Parents’ involvement in children’s learning has numerous benefits, mostly in the “greater skill acquisition, greater confidence and self-esteem, a better parent-child relationship, and increased engagement with learning” (McCoy & Cole, 2011). However, when I was in the center, I found Sanjana quietly performing her work alone.

When I met Sanjana at the preschool (ECD centre), she was shy and hesitant to speak. She did not look at my face and tried to hide herself in a corner. I talked to her but she did not respond. I thought she understood whatever I was saying. Earlier, Sanjana was in Doti where she had learnt their local dialect, Doteli. It was different from the Nepali, Awadhi, and English, the dialects used where she is studying now. As she came to Banke and got enrolled in preschool, she found most of her friends speaking totally different languages, which she had not heard or learnt earlier. In addition, her mother wouldn’t allow her to mingle with the local children. While at home, Sanjana’s use of the new languages was limited. Playing with other children at home could provide opportunities for her to learn the more dominant languages. The opportunities of learning the local language in the community were minimized due to the constraints of her mother protecting her. This could be the reason why she seemed quiet and hesitant at school. Children learn language and culture naturally while they are playing, but as a child who migrated, Sanjana was limited in natural play learning opportunities. It is paradoxical that her family members seemed unaware of this fact, hence limited the learning opportunity from her while trying to protect her.

*Sanjana likes to play outside with her friends in the community. But her mother Saraswoti does not let her go outside. When I asked the reason, the mother*

*told me that in these communities' children are dirty and play with mud. My daughter does not understand their language. Therefore, I don't feel comfortable in sending her out alone. Instead, I stay with her, play with her and support her in study. Thus, I protect and also teach her at home. (Interview, August, 2015)*

**Sangam.** Sangam stayed calm and quiet in the center whereas other children were moving around. He spoke slowly, and appeared to be a soft-spoken boy. I asked the teacher why he was so calm and gentle. Teacher responded, "All the members of his family are gentle. His grandmother is a smart and forthcoming woman. Sangam lives in a joint family. His grandmother works in a private school. His grandmother has a lot of influence in his life". "Whatever their family was doing it was because of her (grandmother)", One of her neighbors also responded the same.

Sangam's grandmother works for a private English Medium Boarding School. She tried to take Sangam with her but he did not enjoy there. So, she enrolled Sangam in this preschool. She thinks children need more reading and writing activities so that they can learn faster; children need homework to understand and memorize their learning.

Sangam's grandmother demanded more reading and writing in the preschool. She was not satisfied with the teaching learning approach of the preschool. She told me, "*In my school these small children are so smart that they can read books and write. But here my grandson doesn't know how to read books or write something. The teacher does not assign him homework as well. I teach my grandchildren at home, tell stories, and read books for them. I do not allow him to play outside with neighbors*". (Field note, 2015 July, Bulbuliya)

Sangam has seven members in his family. He has grandparents, parents, aunt and a younger brother. He is sharp and smart. He is neat and clean when going to the

preschool. He always brings snacks and water with him from home. He is the only one who brought snacks from home to the preschool. His house is clean and has some reading materials like story books for children and adults. I noticed that Sangam's family is the only family who had books at home among my participants. Sangam's parents are involved in his literacy activities at home. When parents involve in their children's literacy activities it will benefit their children, and I have found this in Sangam's case. He is a fast learner and he actively participates in the classroom activities. However, Sangam's parents are not much satisfied with his academic progress. As he receives support from his aunt and grand/parents at home in reading and writing, they expect more homework and reading writing activities such as reciting book chapters, writing alphabets from the preschools. As they focus mostly in reading and writing, Sangam is not allowed to play with other children in the community. This hindered Sangam's language learning as well as his ability to communicate and adjust with his peers, thereby causing him to be calm and quiet in the classroom.

Sangam's families speak Awadhi at home. However, they were aware of the need of Nepali dominant language for formal school. They encourage Sangam to speak in Nepali and not to use Awadhi at home. As Sangam Grandmother works in the private school, she speaks Nepali fluently. She prepares her grandson for the ECD center and follows the way the children come to the private schools.

**Rihana.** Mothers (in my study areas) are found mostly busy in the household works if they aren't working outside. Rihana does not work outside; she has to stay at home looking after her small son. "I am always busy with him", told Rihana showing her young child.

*“I sometimes ask Salim about the activities he does at the preschool. He shares whatever he does at the center. He talks a lot and sometimes he uses typical Nepali words, which we cannot understand”. She further added, “We tell our son to read and write at home but we can’t help him in study as we haven’t studied up to the level”.*

In both Paraspur and Bulbuliya, parents shared that they participated in the classes on parenting education offered by nongovernment organizations. At this program, they learned how to make toys at home. When asked about the toys, most of the participant mothers told me that they rarely bought toys from the market. Instead they make dolls, balls, and puppets mostly from old cloths. In response to how often they played with their children, they shared that they would not have time and interest to play with them but they would provide toys to play with and also would allow them to play with their friends. As children in Banke did not get homework, they had plenty of time to play with.

### **The Learning Environment in Lalitpur**

In Lalitpur, all the participating parents are migrants from different parts of Nepal. They mostly reside in single-room rented homes and send their children to the nearby preschools as convenient. They have weak or no relations with the other members in the local community and other tenants (in the same house), where they are residing. Most of these parents are daily wage workers and some are abroad as migrant workers. The languages are varied; some speak Nepali and some other speak languages other than the dominant Nepali language at home. Family members tend to have less interaction with their young children given the constraints of daily living, and that they do not have relatives living in close proximity to help out.



Laxmi, (from Lalitpur) starts her day very early in the morning. Cleaning, cooking and fetching water are her daily morning chores at home. She drops her daughter in the preschool as early as possible (before 8.30 am). Then she goes to her work and comes back home by 6 pm. *“I am too tired; I only can cook meals. I can’t help them in study and even my daughter has no homework. So, it is fine as she is studying in nursery, she doesn’t need help. But when she goes in higher classes, she needs additional support in her study. And I am worried about my daughter’s study”* shared Laxmi.

Laxmi, as with all other mothers in the study seemed worried about her children’s education. However, Laxmi does not involve herself in the child’s education at home. Research suggests that parental involvement in their child’s literacy practices has positive effects in their later academic performance and success (McCoy & Cole, 2011). However, parents in my study area do not express the importance of their involvement in their child’s education. Most of the mothers think that reading and writing are the basic components for literacy and can be learnt in formal schooling. I observed and heard that parents have little or no practice of being involved in their young children’s formal education; however, I found them involved in their children’s learning in an informal manner. In the interviews and in the focus group discussion with parents both in Banke and Lalitpur, with the exception of Sangam’s grandmother, I heard similar stories as Laxmi’s. Parents were concerned about their children’s higher education (school) and not the preschool years. I believe focus on higher education like this has an influence to why parents are less likely to help their young children with reading and writing at home.

In addition to the concern of higher education, parents’ confidence of teaching their young children was quite low. *“I have never been to school and I do not*

*understand what the teachers teach in the school. Sometime they call us but, I have no idea what to share with them. I do not go to school. I cannot help my child in reading and writing at home. My daughter brings homework at home, but I cannot support her in the homework”.* (Interview, Radha’s Mother, Lalitpur, September 2015)

The parents in both communities expressed their reluctance to teach since they were not educated. In Lalitpur, participants had low education levels, no parent had passed more than level 6-7. However, research shows that parents of young children simply need to interact with their children with positive shared emotions when it comes to learning. This sets the foundation for the love of learning, which is more important than the content (Williams, Clemens, Oleinikova, & Tarvin, 2003; Parsons & Bynner, 2007; McCoy & Cole, 2011).

In Lalitpur, no mothers were part of any parenting education programs. They did not know how to make toys but some of them bought toys from the market. Parents of Lokesh Waiba in Nakhkhu, Lalitpur shared that,

*If there is no homework then our children start quarreling and moving here and there at home. If the children are not engaged with some type of activity, they disturb the whole family. So, I have requested teachers to provide them homework. Homework not only engages them but it also helps the children to learn something at home.*

I found Bibek doing his homework when I visited his home. He seemed in a hurry to just get rid of the task and was not concentrating. The homework was to write a, b, c, d up to z and Nepali *Ka, Kha* up to *Gya*. I asked Bibek why he was writing so fast. He smiled at me and continued what he was doing. His mother shouted, “He has to go to play so that he is in hurry. I told him he cannot move

without completing his homework”. When I asked Bibek about his interests, he shared that he liked play time the most and homework the worst about the preschool. (Observation, November, 2015, Sainbu, Lalitpur)

The parents in Lalitpur confided in me during both interviews and focus groups discussions that they think playing distract children from learning. They do not agree that children can learn while playing. When asked about the learning of language that happens during play time, Radha’s mother said *“I don’t think children learn while playing, instead they forget all the lessons. I can’t support her in study. But her elder brother helps her on it”*. Even parents who have provided toys at home also do not believe in the importance of play. The children living in Lalitpur were found doing their homework after school, mostly in the evening, not in the morning. The focus of parents from Lalitpur was for children to do homework, not going into the community to play as children in Banke typically did. In addition, since the both parents are working out of the home, they are migrants to Lalitpur, and therefore, parents did not want their children to go outside and play to help keep them safe. Children play with toys and/or outside only when they have no homework, which rarely happens. Parents, mostly mothers, think homework is the best option to engage children after school. *“Playing is not good as it distracts children from the school works (reading, writing and memorizing)”* shared one of the mothers, Neeta from Lalitpur.

While observing the home activities it was found that these children did not have a fixed study time at home. However, it was understood that they had to complete homework first after coming from the preschools. Without completing their homework, they were not allowed to play (or go outside for play). All the children in Lalitpur were having the same routine after school. They finished their homework

first, and then most of them had no time to play after school. All parents in Lalitpur wanted their children to be busy with the homework, especially the writing homework. However, parents did not provide other reading materials apart from course books such as story books to read.

### **The Home Environment in Banke and Lalitpur**

I found that children in Lalitpur were more regular in attending the preschool in comparison to those in Banke. According to the teachers, one of the reasons was that teachers were also regular and would get to the centers on time. The second reason is that the preschool is inside the school compound and the children come with their elder siblings at time.

In Banke children were not regular in their studies but the parents' demand for quality education was very positive. One of the teachers from Holiya's preschool said *"They (parents) demand us to teach English"*. Most parents take English as the standard for judging the quality of education throughout Nepal. However, in other two schools (in Paraspur, Banke) parents have no complaints about the preschool education. *"They are not regular to send their child to the school. Every day I have to go to their home and remind them to send their sons and daughters to the ECD/ preschool"* said a teacher from Paraspur. Children in Paraspur seemed irregular and untidy in the school. I found teachers are regular in all the study preschools except one in Banke. She usually arrived late in the preschool. However, the parents blamed the schools saying that the teachers in the schools did not care about the wellbeing of their children and did not set high standards.

*School has to give knowledge. They have to teach what is right and what is wrong. But the teachers have permanent job. They are careless towards children of the poor. They are not serious towards the education of our*

*children. They neglect us. We are uneducated; we can't teach our own children at home. Knowing this fact, they have to provide extra support to our children. But they discriminate against our children. My son failed four times in grade nine. Now he has discontinued school. Teachers are biased and they care only for the rich children but ignore poorer ones. Sister, please don't feel bad. No one supports us.*

Guddi shared her dissatisfactions towards teachers in Banke. This can be understood as her dissatisfaction towards the education system.

I found some contradictions in the statements of the teachers and the parents. Teachers said that parents were not aware of the benefits of early learning and were careless about their children's future. They did not send their children regularly and on time. However, parents complained teachers were irresponsible and were not taking good care of the children. The problem of irregularity of children in the preschool is accepted by both teachers and the parents. Such complaints are more in Banke than in Lalitpur, though parents in Lalitpur are also not happy with government schools. Radha's mother (Lalitpur) shared, *"If I have money, I can send my children to a private school. Now since I am poor, I am forced to keep my children in this school"*. I found the parents think private school better as they offer instruction in English.

English medium education has strong roots in the communities, where people have high ambitions for their children's future. This is the developing phenomenon and as Ministry of Education has allowed English as a medium of instruction in the schools. I found people were interested to enroll their children in private schools due to the English as the medium of teaching. Government school does not teach in English medium. However, in the ECD center and preschools, teachers have started

teaching English alphabets and simple conversations such as thank you, excuse me, May I come in etc. All parents wanted their children to be fluent in English rather than in Nepali or their home language (in Banke). One of the mothers in Banke shared, *“My neighbor doesn’t speak Awadhi with their children at home. He speaks Nepali and English. Because of this their children are good in school, and they understand Nepali as well”*. But in many cases, this was only for grade one and above. All the parents thought the ECD centers and the preschools prepared their children for later formal schools, or it could be called as habit formation. They were sending their children to familiarize them to the future school environment, rather than learning and development. Most of the parents planned to send their children in Nursery in private schools next year.

I found parents more concerned on structured (formal) reading and writing approach from very early age rather than informal ways of learning. They do not believe that play is important in learning and development of the children. However, studies have proven that play does not only help children to be physically fit, but also benefits in the “areas of creativity, language, social skills, socialization, social understanding, coping and emotional regulation (White, 2012). It is a powerful tool for learning.

### **Activities of the Children**

Home is the first school for the children. Children learn when they interact with people and the objects (Vygotsky, 1978). Children imitate the adults they interact with in their daily lives. Children also learn things by observing others. They do not have to understand what the parent is doing in order to learn (Kazdin & Rotella, 2009), learning takes place naturally.

I found children showing diverse characteristics (personal character/ behavior) within the ECD center in Banke. Some children were hyperactive (could not stay at one place peacefully). They made noises, moved around, and could not sit still. And some were quiet and scared of noises. The teacher shared that children showed the behavior according to their home environment. This is a common assumption as most of the Nepali families believe. One of the teachers in Banke said,

*Home environment has the relation with children's nature. This is all because of their home environment. They don't listen to me; they don't obey me as they are used to scolding and beating. It is very difficult to make them quiet and make them listening to me.*

During class observation, I noticed that the children in Holiya preschool (Paraspur) were fighting with each other in the classroom. However, in the other two centers (Soniya and Jhumaru) though the children were hyperactive they did not quarrel with each other. Nevertheless, it depends on the nature of the individual child as well. When asked, teachers were not aware of the temperament of the children. Teacher shared that this is because of the parent's behavior and the lack of discipline to the children. Some of them do not like noise and prefer to sit alone in a quiet place, as Rubina in Banke.

*Rubina sits quietly in one corner with Manisha (a mentally challenged student). She just follows the directions of the teachers but never initiates conversation with friends and/or teachers. If other friends make loud noise, she starts crying. The teacher has to speak softly and cautiously with her. At the time of the group song, she just moves her lips without making any sound. According to the teacher, she understands but cannot respond as other children. (Field note, July 2015, Bulbuliya, Banke)*

While digging deeper into Rubina's life I found that she is the only daughter of her parents. She is three years old and her parents think it is too early to force her to speak. *"When we ask, she responds slowly. So, I think she will learn to speak fluently later on. It is natural"* replied her mother when asked why Rubina was not speaking like other children. I also found that they did not interact much at home, with Rubina as well as others.

When I reached Ranjan's home early in the morning at 7 am, he was ready to go to preschool. As it was the summer, all the preschools in Banke opened at 8 a.m. and closed at 11 a.m. After preschool, most of these children roamed around the community and played in open spaces like roads with other children. The games they play are hide and seek, driving and shopkeeper.

Teachers shared that children used foul language with friends while playing. They quarreled and fought occasionally. One of the teachers (Arpita) in Jhumaru preschool said, *"Parents do not use good language at home either, they either use slang or threatening languages. They shout at, quarrel with and scold the children. Therefore, these children also imitate the same and use similar language"*. Teacher being in a same community from the same cultural, ethnic and social background, shared the community experiences.

In Lalitpur, as the children are from migrant families of diverse backgrounds, they were seen to be quiet, and suppressed (controlled) in the classroom. In these preschools, children did not talk loudly in-front of the teachers and they sat quietly following the instructions of the teachers. *These children are slow in learning as parents do not support them at home*, shared the teacher (Goma) from Langtang preschool in Lalitpur. But when I was in the class, children participated actively in songs and dances.



Children learn from their parents. Parents help children to be clean, to eat, to speak and many more. There are many children getting good support from families. However, there are some children whose parents leave them early in the morning, to earn for the family. They have less time to spend with their children due to the day to day work. This is not only their priority, but also the necessity.

There were children who were left unattended as parents had to leave them for work early in the morning. I found children were playing in the streets with/without clothes and with dirty faces waiting their mothers to come back from work and feed them. These children were irregular in their attendance at the preschools and some of them were also dropouts.

*“Their house is in the middle of the community. All the female members in the community go for grass cutting and the male members for Rikshaw (pulling) driving”,* told Mandira, the teacher. *“I have called them many times but they do not come to the center. Instead they play outside”* shared teacher. Partigya being sincere comes to ECD center on time.

Pratigya’s (a 4-year-old girl) mother works as a grass-cutter and sells grass in the city. She goes to cut the grass everyday early in the morning. Pratigya comes to preschool without having breakfast before her mother returns from the fields. She comes to the center even in the night dress (without changing cloth) and without even washing her face. No one else beside her mother is there to help her prepare her for school or feed her at home. Pratigya is, however, a nice and clever girl. She is smart and good in school. She can tell and retell the stories, recite poems and draw beautiful pictures. She is also good in generating conversation. (Field note, September, 2015, Bulbuliya)

Partigya is an example among the children in her community. Pratigya's mother was supportive towards her daughter's education. She asked about Pratigya's daily activities at preschool at home. She shared, *"Though I can't support her in reading and writing, I do tell her stories and encourage her to read and write at home"*.

*"Pratigya is very curious, she keeps asking questions,"* shared both the mother and her teacher. Those children who were talked too often at home were found more expressive than others.

Discussion with parents revealed that those parents who mostly shout at home have hyperactive children. They also shout and bully their friends in the preschools. Relationship between parents, not only affects interactions between parent and child but the child's behavioral and cognitive outcomes (Jones, 2016). Parents with more supportive relationships have children with fewer behavioral problems (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014).

Research shows that when children observe the conflict and hostility between their parents, they model those behaviors in their interactions with others; especially with peers (Jones, 2016). So, I asked the families how often they quarreled and what the reasons were for their arguments. Most of them responded that they fought frequently. One of the teachers added that the parents also quarreled in front of the children at home and in the neighborhood. *"Parents use bad language at home even in a normal situation. They use slangs and filthy words with children,"* one of the teachers shared. Thus, arguments and quarrels between family members and within the community are found to be more in Banke than in Lalitpur. It was observed that the children in Banke were more aggressive than those in Lalitpur.

The home, family, neighborhood as well as the economic, social, and cultural status of the parents' influence learning and development of the children (Agrawal, 2007). Children learn to behave by imitating other's behaviors, specially parents, family members, and caregivers. Doing so, children learn new words and practice it in their own contexts.

### **Parents' Support in Learning**

During my observation and while talking to mothers in Banke, I found that there is a lot of interaction between the parents and children. Children are allowed to ask questions, listen to the adults' discussions. There is culture of making a common fire-place outside for the community members to gather around and chat. Males and females mostly sit separately. Children are allowed to go around in both (male and female) places. In this gathering time, they ask riddles to the children. Children also enjoy playing riddle with adults. It helped children to be creative, logical, and practice deductive and inductive thinking. Therefore, parents are the 'silent partners' (Irvine, 2005) in children's every day learning. Parents and adults in the community are the mediators of the learning while children interact with the environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

I did not find such community events and interactions in Lalitpur. Children were mostly engaged in homework or watching TV inside the room as they were not connected to the local communities. They had limited interactions with parents; as the parents were engaged in work and had limited time to spend with their children. However, these children had lots of opportunities to play, interact and read with their elder siblings.

*"We play together after schools. Our mother comes in the evening. We mostly play outside and wait for our mother. It is always fun to play outside. But when our*

*mother comes, she doesn't allow us to play outside. We enter inside with mother and start our study,"* Neeta's brother shared.

When I reached Neeta's home, they were playing hide and seek. I tried to explore the level of interactions between the mother and children at home (her father is out of country). I found limited interactions between them, instead it was more directives. The mother asked children to help them in household chores and the interactions was just about keeping children engaged in some sort of work or complimenting, correcting or commenting on their accomplishments. In the context of child-adult interactions, there could be plenty of opportunities for cognitive development. However, parents were complaining about a lot of screen time (watch TV) for the children rather than engagement in reading books. Many studies recommend that learning through electronic media is more effective than the traditional texts. Children show an increased level of reading engagement, phonological awareness, comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition when electronic devices are used (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). However, the programs that Neeta and other children watch are animations and adult-focused drama series, which may not help as much as children-focused programs. It is mostly for the entertainment purposes rather than learning.

According to Weizman and Snow (2001), interactions between mother and child depend on their socio-economic class (SES). If mother had time to interact with children at mealtime, or played and shared reading to support children, this would help them to increase vocabulary. It would be the foundations for the literacy development of the children. However, the amount of interactions varies with the SES of the parents which I found true in my study. Lower SES found in my participants showed that interactions with their children was limited and were also

affecting their everyday household activities. They did not have time to play with children as they have to work for long hours. Children did not have additional reading materials such as story books and there was no habit of shared reading with children. Even though the parents were not able to read and write in Banke, there was interaction between family members and in neighborhood in Banke. Though parents in Lalitpur were partially literate, there were no such interactions which increased vocabulary of the children. And also, there is no culture of taking children to library or purchase books and other co-curricular materials for supporting learning and play.

A gentle and smiling face has pulled my attraction. He was quiet and obedient. He did not speak on his own, but when asked, his answers were always right. Ritesh is the eldest son of his four-member family. He has a small sister.

When I reached Ritesh's home, and knocked the door, Ritesh opened the door. Seeing me in front of his door he smiled and welcomed me. Ritesh didn't speak a word but was watching my and his mother's faces. The family was preparing for lunch. Ritesh's mother served rice in a plate. She put rice, vegetable and dal (lentil soup) in the same plate. Ritesh received the plate and sat in the mattress. He quietly went out, washed his hands and started eating. He didn't speak a single word; neither did his mom. His mom was holding his small sister and sitting beside him (Field note, July 2015).

I observed Ritesh playing alone, at home as well as at the preschool. "*He plays whatever he has, and never demands anything new*" teacher explained. "*He is introvert in nature. He knows a lot but does not share without asking for it. His parents are also shy in nature. I think he has his parent's nature*". Like at home, he is also quiet at preschool. Family interactions help children build confidence in communication. So, I asked Ritesh's mother how much they talked at home. She

said they did not. *“I tell him to study, but he enjoys playing toys, playing with sister and watching TV. I have never been to school, so I can’t help him to read and write”* she shared. I further asked her, whether she told stories, played games and sang songs to the children. She said she sometimes told stories. About the type of story, she said it was about god, evil, witches, animals etc. She would not play with the children. She shared that she never sang songs. The reason behind the quietness of Ritesh might be the limited interaction at home. As he heard limited words at home, there was a chance for him to have limited vocabulary and less confidence to speak. I did not find the parents sharing religious stories with their children; however, during the group discussions they reported it.

Children initially acquire words at their home through everyday conversation. “Parents and caregivers who use more language expose their children to greater diversity of words and a greater complexity of word use” (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015, p. 7). Later, children use these words when required.

When I reached in the community during the holiday, group of children were playing ball together. They were passing ball here and there, and were trying to throw it as far as possible. They were speaking in Awadhi, however, they were using some Nepali and English words together. While throwing the ball they were saying words like; ‘pass’ me, ‘run fast’ together with their own language. (Observation, May, 2015, Banke)

Awadhi and Hindi mixed language was the language spoken at home by most. Ritesh’s mother spoke Hindi as she was from India. People wanted to learn and teach Nepali to their children as it is a national language and the medium of study in primary and other higher grades in school. Children in the preschool understood a few Nepali words. I asked whether their children spoke Nepali at home. Many

parents shared that their children spoke a few words that they learnt in the preschool. They could speak few words like, sit down, eat, and wash your hands. This might be because teachers used lots of directive language in preschools. One of the mothers told me that her son could sing Nepali songs. *“My husband understands Nepali as he works with Nepali speaking community. But no one else in our family speaks Nepali”*. Limited vocabulary and switching of language between home and preschools may confuse children while using words during communication with family members. However, research suggests that repeated exposure to words over time helps children to have deeper knowledge of the words (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015).

*“In this class, most of the children do not speak but understand Nepali”* told the teacher in Bulbuliya. However, in Paraspur no children spoke Nepali during my fieldwork. I noticed their response. They would smile or point something in gesture. Teachers used both Awadhi and Nepali for the instruction as there were two language speaking (bilingual) children in the class. Sneha and Rubina were the quietest girls in the class. They would sit together. Sneha was always smiling at me. She could not speak. The teacher told me she was mentally challenged. I found that Sneha was slow learner and she followed slowly all the activities that other friends were doing. Rubina was also slow and quiet in the class. She was scared of loud noises. She did not leave Sneha alone. In everyday activity in the classroom both Sneha and Rubina were accustomed to the routine and followed their teacher and friends slowly, at their own pace.

Teacher made children in small groups of 3-4 children. She provided materials to the children to play in informal way. At the time, teacher provided materials to the Sneha and Rubina separately. The informal sitting arrangements and

materials-based learning were found supportive for Sneha to engage in. No one could say how much she was learning. When asked, the teacher shared,

*“She was inactive and could not follow any direction at the beginning. But now, she follows the instruction, understands what we are saying or talking about, and tries to do some simple activities”.*

I asked Rubina’s mother, how do children learn to speak? What do you do to make your child speak clearly?

She replied, *“They speak naturally at the right time. When they speak unclear, I will make it clear. I speak in a right way and correct her”.*

As Rubina hardly speaks, her mother says it is too early to make Rubina speak. She will learn naturally. But she emphasized teaching her daughter Nepali. When I asked, *“Why do you think your child needs to learn Nepali?”*

She replied, *“I think she must learn Nepali. When we come out of home, we need Nepali. Therefore, they have to learn Nepali. I requested teacher to teach in Nepali, but....”.*

I further asked, isn’t it easier to learn in your own (Awadhi) language?

*“Yes, but we have to change our habit. We need to teach them in Nepali. Our Neighbor doesn’t speak Awadhi with his children even at home. His children’s Nepali is also good. They can speak and they can learn easily”.* She added *“When they go to a big school, they need Nepali”.* (Field note September, 2015, Bulbuliya, Banke)

I asked Rubina, “What is that in your eyes?” My expectation was that she would not understand me. She responded with smile, “Kajal” (black eye liner) and she looked towards her mother and said “Ammi” (mom). My presumption that children did not understand my language, especially about Rubina was proven wrong. Though



the children did not interact or reply verbally, they were able to understand the conversation and responded in their own way. In the language learning process children learn language listening to others, mostly adults, around them unconsciously. The difference in the language environments results in mismatch between the home and preschool language, resulting in differences in children's vocabulary (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015).

In Lalitpur, all the children spoke a single language (Nepali only) and were clear and fluent in speaking. They were good at conversation and communication. Despite being in families isolated from the community culture, these children were good in verbal communication. I found them to be confident in interaction and more expressive in the school and at home. Parents shared that they never read the story books to their children. As they did not have the habit, time or knowledge, and remained busy in their own works. They also could not read or write for the children (they don't have formal schooling). I asked one of the mothers how much they talked with children at home. She shared, *"I come home tired from the work. Their (children's) noises make me irritated and I always tell them to be quiet at home. We rarely have communications at home."*

The day-to-day interactions between infants and young children and their parents help to develop their emotional, physical, and intellectual development (Mulyadi, Rahardjo, & Basuki, 2016). When parents are sensitive and responsive to children's verbal and nonverbal cues, it contributes two-way communication between parent and child (Jana, 2017). Engagement of parents and other family members in everyday learning activities helps them to develop lifelong motivation, persistence, and a love for learning (Seigel & Hartzell, 2013). Parents can also help children

identify the objects, naming them, reading for them, and telling stories. This is the best practice for literacy skills development.

Anjana stays with her mother at her street shop after preschool. She helped her mother to give goods to the customer. When I reached the street Anjana was receiving money for the peanuts and her mother was telling her the values of the money and the exchange she has to give back to the customer. (Observation, October 2015, Sainbu)

Ramesh was copying alphabet in his exercise book. He had to color the pictures initiated with the alphabet he had written. He called his father to see it. Father did not go to help him. Parents assume children can work independently. “*We don’t want to interfere in their works. Our participation disturbs them*”, shared a father from Paraspur, Banke. This is good for developing children’s confidence. However, children seemed willing to receive their parents’ support and wanted their parents close to them while they are at work. Similar response was received from the parents in Lalitpur as well. Parents were not involved in children’s work as they thought of participation in child’s work as interference.

When children were very small, the parents loved to play with them. “We like to play with children but we don’t have time to play with them” shared one of the mothers in Lalitpur. Unscheduled play was natural in the families. Mostly daughters preferred in-house games and parents also encourage girls not to go outside to play with boys. The types and natures of the games were different to boys and the girls in Banke. Boys mostly preferred playing outside of the home. They played balls, cricket, thief and police, running etc. However, girls played indoor games, like role plays, hide and seek etc.

Children need a certain level of cognitive maturation or need specific pre-literacy skills before they can learn to read and write (Senechal, Lefevre, Smith-Chant, & Colton, 2001). Variations in home environments (e.g., parents' education, parents' own literacy habits, and family income) may be associated with differences in children's school literacy preparation (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2010; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005).

When I reached early in the morning, all four members of the family were in the room. There were two beds and a small table in the corner. Anjana's father was holding her small brother in his lap, and mother was cooking food in a stove. Anjana was sitting beside her father. Anjana's father worked at a construction area so he has to go early and comes late from work. Anjana's mother prepares Anjana for school, collects stuffs for her shop and takes her to school. Anjana looks after her brother while her mother is doing household chores. (Field note, October, 2015, Sainbu, Lalitpur)

In Lalitpur, I met Anjana's mother. She is a street vendor. Her small bucket was full of materials to be put for sale on the street. She had peanuts and fried chickpeas. She told me she keeps seasonal fruits like orange in winter, and mango in summer. Her shop is on the way to Anjana's preschool. Anjana goes to the preschool and comes back alone on her own. After school, Anjana stays with her mother. *"I give her some peanuts to eat and she stays here. No one is there in the room, so I have to keep Anjana here. I will tell her to read and write here and if she has homework she completes it here"*.

I asked her whether she told stories or sang songs to/with her daughter. She said, *"No, I don't. Sometimes my husband (Anjana's father) shares some stories. But mostly he comes home late from work. By the time he returns, they go to sleep"*.

All the child participants (both in Banke and Lalitpur) have no reading environment within home or community as majority of the community members are busy with their own farming and daily wages work for the survival of the families. When asked about extracurricular (reading) materials, all of the parents responded that they did not have them. They only purchase books for the children and no other miscellaneous reading materials. Some parents told me that they had some religious books instead. There was no culture of shared reading in the families. However, they have culture of dinner time conversation. Moreover, if they have elder siblings, the younger (preschool child) get support from the older ones.

All the participating parents considered themselves to be a socio-economically poor member. In my conversation with them, they put emphasis on their poverty and because of which they had to work hard with low pay job. Most of them were daily wages laborer. Some were street vendors and others grass sellers. They said they were uneducated as they had never been to school and could not support their children in the study. All the parents think education is the capacity to reading books and writing in the papers. Therefore, parents hesitated about their own capacity to support children in their education. They did not seem to realize that parents are the model for oral language development and support for increasing children's vocabulary.

Parents are not aware of what themes (topics) and words are being taught in the preschool. This knowledge could help them to follow and support their children in learning new words. In my study area, parents did not have the knowledge about the themes and activities of the preschools. Also, teachers did not inform or request parents to support their children. Except Sangam's house, none of the other participants had similar learning environment at home. Some of those who had elder siblings had also left school very early and most of them were working now. The

children did not experience the positive environment at home. Many parents would fight among themselves. There was a lot of scolding and carelessness in using words during the interactions between parents and children. In reality, parenting is actually a tough job. It requires a lot of “effort, fore-thought, and self-control for most parents” (Krisbergh, 2016). Children watch their parents all the time. So, whatever parents do should create a model for the children.

### **School as a Community and Community as a School**

School is a miniature community as it gathers a diverse group of children from the community. These children grow and learn together within a common, broader curricular framework and with common spirit. They learn from each other and they also bring to schools their learning from their home, community and society. School is the place where diversity is embraced, where children learn to respect, understand and support each other.

Me: What is your name?

Ramesh: Ramesh

Me: What do you write in your family name (caste)?

Ramesh: Hindu (He told his religion instead of caste)

Me: Why?

Ramesh: Don't you know about it?

Me: No. Tell me, why you are Hindu?

Ramessh: People in the community say so. You know, I don't go to Madarsa (Muslim religious school) and on Friday praying (Jhuma). My all friends always go there. And my mother and father said we don't go because we are Hindu.

Me: Who else says you are Hindu?

Ramessh: Hmmm... uncles from other houses and also in the shop. (Class observation, February 2016, Paraspur)

Children grow and learn within the community. As Ramesh did not know about the surname and religion, he learnt that he is Hindu as he is not allowed to go to Madarasa. In a community like Paraspur, where the population is dominated by Muslims, Hindu children are easily identified. Though children do not know the meaning of the religion and not have any faith-based rigidity, adults create some divisions among children. Those who played in the street together during the day are separated in the morning (some of them go to Madarasa and some of them to the school).

*“We have Muslim children here. Why don’t we start our prayers and songs (rhymes) in our own Muslim (Urdu) language”* one of the parents (father) asked me. He further added, *“They learn Allah at home but here teacher teaches different things. So, in my view it will be easier for children to learn whatever they listen to at home”*. He further suggested me to relate alphabet in the name of Allah. *“Let’s start teaching A for Allah, B for Bismillah...and so on.”* This is the community practice where religious identity is forged from the very beginning of the age.

In my opinion, if children are familiar with some terminologies, they can use and reuse those terms. Learning with the name of the different belief systems (as in Muslim told by one of the participants) creates religious gap within children on the basis of the faith system. Learning has to be a cohesive element rather than the reason for isolation.

I observed that the community had many day-to-day interactions. They love to share their everyday experiences with other community members. They discuss national, international and local politics. They talk about how everyday life is

becoming harder and more expensive. They gossip about any of the current issues, movies, markets, farming and everyday works. However, these interactions take place among the adults only. Parents do not talk and share things to the children about their daily life. Parents-children interactions are limited. They do not think it is an important part of our daily tasks. The interactions with children mostly gravitate towards instructions, suggestions and directions.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter is based on the discussions with parents and observations at home. In this chapter, I discussed the role of parents and their daily activities. I explored home environment as a foundation for developing vocabulary and literacy skills. The discussions here are related with the children's learning process and the activities that support them to learn language and literacy skills. Parents play key role in supporting children's language and literacy skills. Parents can influence children's values, engaging them in multiple conversations. The community provides opportunity to learn cultural and linguistic diversity and social harmony to express themselves in relevant contexts. Children learn basic literacy skills at home if they have interactions. Home environment supports children to recognize signs and symbols, which are the foundation of the literacy skills. However, the opportunities to develop such basic literacy skills depend on the situation of the home and the behaviors of the parents.

## CHAPTER V

### LITERACY ENVIRONMENT AT PRESCHOOL

In this chapter, I mainly carry out a detailed analysis of the learning process of children at their preschools. The information in this chapter is based on preschool environment and teacher's role observed during the study as in my conceptual framework. I present the perceptions and experiences of my research participants on the socio-cultural environment for the language learning of the children. The discussions are based on my observations of day-long preschool activities and on the interactions carried with them during my study.

#### **Everyday Preschool Activities**

Preschools (ECD centers) are mostly considered optional programs in Banke. Most parents do not consider this as the important place for learning and development of the children. Parents mostly send their children for habit formation and preparation to go to school. Therefore, children were not punctual with their attendance at the preschools. However, the preschools are supposed to make their efforts for the holistic development of the children and to enhance basic literacy skills (DOE, 2004). The setup of the preschool varies according to the place and management. The learning materials and activities may also vary accordingly. The variations are in terms of classroom, outdoor spaces and learning materials.

According to the Ministry of Education/ Department of Education, children from three to five years (26 to 60 months) can enroll in the preschools. Preschools running in the schools (primary, secondary or higher secondary) can enroll children only after they are 4 years old (48 months). There is minimum standard for the classroom size and the materials available in the preschools.



Children's songs/rhymes are an important activity in the preschools. Teachers keep children in a circle and sing a song. The class follows the songs (rhymes). Children sing rhymes/songs with actions as the teacher demonstrates. I found that children can imitate the words without understanding the meaning. They remember few of these words, independently. However, when one starts singing, they can join and sing. Everyday practice enables them to remember the words. This was seen during the national anthem as well as in other rhymes in preschools. Children were singing national anthem with teacher, but when they were left to sing on their own, they could not.

When I visited the Holiya preschools in Banke, children's noise was coming out of the small window of the center. When I peeped in from the window, I found children enjoying Nepali rhymes. They were shouting loudly.

*'Hey Saraswoti, bidya data, timi nai mero gyan bidhata.....'*

.....

After praying in Nepali, the teacher changed it to a rhyme in English and all the children followed her cue. It seemed they were familiar in these rhymes.

'Head shoulder knees and toe', 'knees and toe', 'knees and toe'

'Head shoulder knees and toe', 'knees and toe', 'knees and toe'

.....

Children were reciting the rhymes without accurate pronunciations, simply following the teacher. However, the teacher's movements of hands as per the word helped children move their hands to the parts of the body with rhymes. It showed they were familiar with the rhymes and the hand movements. (Class observation, 2015, Bulbuliya)

It was in the morning that the teacher had just started class. The daily activities were different than in the other centers. Children were enjoying jumping and showing their head, shoulder, knees and toes while reciting the poem, Head, Shoulder, Knees and Toes. However, they were not knowledgeable about words and the corresponding body parts. The teacher was not helping children to pronounce properly and with proper movement; the children were simply following the sound.

Then the teacher started another rhyme:

*“I have ten little fingers; I have ten little toes.”*

*“I have ten little fingers, I have ten little toes*

*One little mouth and one little nose*

*Two little eyes and two little ears*

*Smile and tears*

*One little head and two little feet (jumping)*

*One little head and two little feet {as many times (3/4) as teacher’s wish}*

*(here children were enjoying jumping)*

*One little chin that is world to greet”*

Children were following their teacher and trying hard to catch the words and move the body together. Some steps were missed repeatedly as they were excited by the moment. (Class observation, 2015, Bulbuliya)

In my discussions with the teacher, I found that these were everyday activities of the children in Holiya ECD center. The classroom had 18 children; among them, 15 spoke Awadhi as home language, one spoke Newari as home language, and two had Nepali as home language with different Doteli dialects. The teacher was from Nepali home language background and she used both Nepali and Awadhi languages

in the classroom. The English curriculum was very limited, this included the English alphabet, some rhymes and some short phrases such as excuse me, thank you etc.

Children sang English rhymes, a Nepali prayer and the national anthem before formal class started. I asked the children to show me their heads. All the children showed their heads. I asked them to show their shoulder, they were confused. While observing them, I noticed that many of the children were not pronouncing name of the body parts correctly and some of them were not even speaking. However, I noticed children following their teachers rhythmically. When I asked teacher why rhymes in English, she answered that she had learned these rhymes in teacher training. Therefore, she is using it.

*“I found that children enjoyed reciting rhyming words in the class.*

Aama, Mama, Taama, Jaama, Saama.....

Gaai, Bhaai, Raai, Saai, Maai.....

Rhyming words are easier for the children to learn. It is not always necessary for children to understand all the words they are using. But it is important to have some connections of meaningful words with rhyming words if children are to learn more than sound. In order to understand the words, they are reciting/rhyming they need to have an understanding of the meaning of the words. Nevertheless, though the children were repeatedly enjoying the rhymes, many of them did not know the meaning of the words.

The positive learning environment and the positive shared emotions that existed when learning the rhythms provided the children with a positive foundation of learning different languages which could then be extended to learning to read and write. Perhaps this would help bring to light the importance of social emotional relationships in the learning process. I did not see the teachers explaining the words

either. This is one way how children construct meaning from the words. But teacher did not recognize that doing so is important for learning. As children learn new words in the form of rhymes by listening to them, they use information about the words such as what they mean and how they sound to store and retrieve words in/from memory (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015) enabling them to build meaningful vocabulary.

Soniya ECD center is also situated in the middle of the community at paraspur, Banke. When I reached the center, the class had just started. When I reached the class in the morning, the teacher was singing a greeting song and children were following her.

*Namaste, Namaste Guru Aama*

*Namaste Namaste Saathi haru*

*Aja vetera khusi lagyo,*

*Namaste! Namaste! Namaste!!*

*(Greeting teacher, greeting friends. I am happy to meet you all today.*

*Greetings, greetings, greetings).* (Class observation, 2015)

This song was in Nepali and the teacher and children were singing with the gestures (joining hands). I guessed children understood the meaning of the song as Namaste is the greeting common to both Nepali and Awadhi languages. In Soniya preschool, there was only one teacher and 27 children. All of the children had Awadhi as their home language.

I asked the teachers in Jhumaru and Soniya ECD centers, whether they started class with prayer and national anthem similar to Holiya preschool. Both of them shared that they occasionally started with Morning Prayer and national anthem, but it was difficult to set a routine as children did not arrive on time (they keep on coming from 9.30 am till 11:00 am).

Teachers were allowed to be flexible with regard to the content with which the class was to run. In Banke, all three preschools were in the community and all of them had different morning songs, prayers and activities at the beginning of the class. I did not find them singing national anthem in Jhumaru and Soniya ECD centers (Preschools). Among the three, only in Holiya preschool class started with the national anthem, exercises, body movements and the songs.

In Lalitpur, all classes started with the national anthem. As the two preschools were within the high school compound, they had to follow the school schedules. The outside activities, physical training (PT), national anthem and school prayers were conducted with all the students of the school. Only then the preschool children entered their class. All three preschools in Lalitpur had children with Nepali as their home language. Teachers used some English interspersed for communication with the children.

There was no similar routine in the observed preschools. Their settings were different in many aspects. There were differences in the language of instruction, materials used in the teaching learning activities, the way the children pray, as well as classroom decoration, the inside environments. Each preschool had different setting and interior. Some preschools had adequate materials and some had nothing at all. The competencies of the teachers were also different. The standards of trainings received by the teachers were also different. All teachers in my study area were working as grade teachers; this means that one teacher spends the entire day with the children in the same classroom. In all six preschools, a single female teacher was assigned for the daily operation of the class.

The daily schedule and teaching learning methods/ approach followed by the teachers were different among the study preschools. The children's competencies and

confidence were reflections of the teacher's role and activities they conducted in the preschools. The teacher, when very strict, and did not allow the children to talk among themselves. When I tried to talk to the children when the teacher was in the room, they would not talk to me. But when the teacher left the classroom the children would talk to me. The other two preschools (one in Banke and one in Lalitpur), even when the teacher was present, the children would talk and share with me their stories and lives. Children's competencies and confidence were found different as I visited different centers. Some of them were vocal and active in the class while some were passive and less expressive. Some classes (in Holiya and Lukla) the children were active and interacting with each other and in some of the classrooms the children were passive, quiet, and less expressive (Makalu). All the study preschools started at 10 in the morning during winter. However, during summer the preschools in Banke ran in the morning from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. Under the normal schedule, the preschool closed from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. depending on the management. Mostly in Banke all the study preschools were in community (community managed), ran for 3 to 4 hours (opens at morning 10 a.m. till afternoon 1 p.m. or morning 10 a.m. till afternoon 2 p.m.). In Lalitpur, all the study preschools were managed by the secondary or higher secondary schools and were run from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. (five hours a day).

I found that the teachers prepared their own schedules in all the study preschools and let the children follow accordingly. Teachers mostly emphasized on reciting alphabets rather than other activities. When I was in the classroom, one child was in front of all and reciting the letter (English alphabet) by pointing the hanging in the wall. Other children in the classroom were following him. The process is common as I have found in almost all the centers. The teachers do this to teach both English and Nepali alphabet.

Only two teachers, one in Banke (Mandira) and one in Lalitpur (Reena), carried additional creative activities during the teaching-learning process. They conducted activities like sharing stories, playing games, drawing, coloring, singing and dancing in the preschools.

*Teacher: Now I am going to tell you a story.*

*One of the students from the side asked, a thematic<sup>1</sup> story?*

*Teacher: Yes. Thematic story. Do you know which story? Today I am going to tell you an elephant's story. Have you seen an elephant?*

*Student: "yes ...yes.... I have seen it. I have ...." (Shouted children)*

*Where did you see it? Asked the teacher*

*In the forest (Jungle), shouted the children.*

*Teacher: Yes. Elephant lives in a forest. (Ban)*

*Do you know what forest is? Forest is the place where we find big trees.*

*Only trees, no houses.*

*Children: "We can find monkey there, no ma'm?" (Bandar rahate hey didi).*

*Teacher: Yes, monkey also lives there (Ho Bandar...badar pani baschha). But today we are listening to elephant story. Okay? (Children did not respond)*

*There was one elephant in the jungle. In one of the trees there was a crow. It made its home in the tree. Do you know the name of the crow's home? What do we say? (Without waiting the children's answer, teacher started again), it is called nest.*

*How does crow make its home? It gathers small pieces of grass and builds its home called nest. And there were baby crows (baby birds) in that nest.*

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<sup>1</sup> ECD center and preschools curriculum is based on thematic activities. Teacher select a theme and based on that theme conduct activities like story, rhymes, drawing etc.

*One-day the crow brought food for its children. It brought Haluwa (a kind of porridge) from the temple. There was a Diyo (a traditional lamp, which is lit in the temple) with it.*

*Do you know from which temple was the food brought?*

*Children shouted, Bageswori (a famous temple in Banke).*

*Yes, Bageswori temple. Then while baby birds started eating Haluwa (porridge), the candle fell down and started fire in the nest. Then all the baby crows fell down from the nest. They cried like ....chwa...chwa... And mother crow shouted save us, save us (Guhar, Guhar).*

*In the meantime, an elephant heard the noise and went to the tree. It saw the fire in the tree and the baby crows screamed down the tree. The elephant went to the river, brought some water and sprayed water from its trunk (fwaa... fwaa....). Then fire stopped and baby birds were saved. (October, 2015, Observation Holiya Preschool)*

After telling the story, the teacher started discussing it with the children. She asked, how had the elephant brought water? “It brought with fu.... fu...” one child replied.

“How? Was it in a bucket? How did it hold the water? Does it have hands?”

Teacher asked.

Children tried to answer, but they did not know the word. Few of them held their nose and showed to the teachers.

Teacher asked, what do you call that long nose?

One boy (Saroj) looked at me, “Trunk” (*Sundh*).

Then children shouted .....*Shondh...Shondh (soth)* (mispronounced)

Yes, it is trunk (*Sundh*) teacher nodded her head (corrected in Awadhi).



Then she showed the picture of the elephant and the burning nest (it was in the cover of the book) and explained again in mixed Awadhi and Nepali. Then she again posed some questions for discussion.

How did the fire catch? What happened to the baby crows? How did the fire stop? Who brought the water? How did the elephant spray the water?

Then she provided that picture to the children and asked them to retell the same story. Individually, the children came in front of the class and shared the story. The teacher helped where the children were not confident while narrating.

The process of telling and retelling stories made children familiar with many new words (help to increase vocabulary). Telling (explaining) story in both languages (Awadhi and Nepali) also helped children to learn them. Making children practice retelling stories helped them be confident in storytelling, and their imagination through the making story and their creativity was enhanced. Teachers, often encourage a playful and personal atmosphere, often asking funny (or silly) questions about the story they are telling and making sure that the vocabulary and stories reflect their understanding. Children were enjoying the retelling session. They were talking to each other and helping friend to make story better. Everyone in the class was having fun.

Multiple exposures to words that offer definitional and contextual information can also support children's depth of words knowledge (Senechal, Lefevre, Smith-Chant, & Cottom, 2001; Suggate, 2010) and if done with positive emotions, learning will be higher.

Writing is another activity which occurs in the preschools. Teachers provided children an exercise book and a pencil individually and gave the writing task. The class followed instructions. Children copied the alphabets written by the teachers on

the board or in their exercise books. I found that most of the children were copying the alphabet from the wall or teacher had written it in the first line of their exercise book. Some children were coloring the shapes.

*“Today is the turn for writing. Now you have to write in your copy”*, Teacher (in Gaurishankar, Lalitpur) directed the children (mostly children wait for teacher’s direction). I saw children writing in all three preschools in Lalitpur and only in two schools in Banke, Holiya preschool being the exception. Children started writing in their exercise book. The books were kept in the preschool and given to the children when they were asked to write. The writing schedule was different according to the preschools. The level of writing was also found different. However, I haven’t seen that children being encouraged to draw or writing texts (words) on their own. They were copying the letters and words; which teachers had written in the first line.

In Soniya Preschool, children were writing English (A, B, C, D, ...) and Nepali (Ka, Kha, Ga, Gha,.....) alphabets. Children were copying alphabets from the wall. In Holiya Preschool, few children had started alphabet writing. Many were still drawing shapes. The teacher had given them shapes to make (circle, oval, rectangle, triangle and square) and color in.

Similarly, in Lalitpur, in Lukla and Langtang Preschools children were writing Nepali and English alphabets. In Gaurishankar Preschool, children had completed alphabets and started writing words. The words used the letters of the alphabet as a guide, A (apple), B (ball), C (Cat) and D (Dog) in English. Similarly, Ka (kalam), Kha (Kharayo), Ga (Gamala) and Gha (ghar) in Nepali. The teacher said that she made them practice writing after lunch every day. Though the teachers shared thematic approach in daily activities, they had not followed it in writing practices. In the preschools, the writing exercises were conducted in a more rote way of learning.

Children learn words from an early age as infants and young children. They listen to the words, use information about the words such as what they meant and how they sounded. Children in my study preschools tried to separate the rhyming sounds like; hear and tear, right and light, feet and meat, cow and now. There are words which sound similar in Awadhi, Nepali and English. So, these children in my study preschools not only differentiated the sounds, they were increasing their vocabulary in three different languages simultaneously. However, in my study preschools I did not find such learning. Children's interaction depends on the storage of the words and the techniques of using them. Vocabulary helps children to be expressive and interactive (Joseph, 2015; Silvermann & Hartranft, 2015; Pandey, 2012). However, to achieve it both teachers and children require time to repeat the words and practice using the words.

Children need systematic and clear instructions to learn new words in a formal setting. "Systematic and explicit instructions serve as a more efficient way of supporting vocabulary" in formal school settings (Silvermann & Hartranft, 2015, p. 17). When the teacher introduces new words in an organized way, it helps children to understand the word's meaning and they can relate the words in context. It can be done in storytelling and thematic discussions in the classroom. Thus, systematic vocabulary instructions can enhance the vocabulary skills along with reading, writing, speaking and listening ability of all the children. The process is especially effective for those who have different home language and limited vocabulary due to cultural diversity (Silvermann & Hartranft, 2015). Providing children with opportunities to listen and retell stories helps increase their understanding of word and also supports them to be comfortable with the language they are using.

### **Language in the Preschool**

There were three different languages used in classrooms in my study area. The first language classroom was one in which the child's home language (mother tongue) was the only language used in the classroom. This type of class was found in Banke where children used Awadhi as their home language. The second type of preschool was having bilingual classrooms, the classroom where two languages are used in parallel for the instruction. In such classes, both the Nepali language (the national language) and the home language (Awadhi) of the children were used simultaneously. For a classroom to be truly bilingual, however, there should be a plan for the use of the two languages - home language and Nepali - so that children are exposed to appropriate language models in both languages. This type of classroom was in one of the preschools in Banke, where the children's home language was Awadhi and the teacher's home language was Nepali and the language of instruction was both Nepali and Awadhi.

The third type of classroom was one in which children used Nepali in their home as well as in preschool. Though the children were from other language backgrounds, Nepali was the primary language for communication and instruction at home and preschools. These types of preschools were in Lalitpur. There were four schools where children came from a variety of first-language backgrounds, one in Banke and all three schools in Lalitpur.

I observed the children using their first language to play with each other when playing in small groups in these four schools. During the school time, the teachers in Lalitpur used Nepali, so during the class time the children interacted using Nepali. In Banke, in two schools where children would speak Awadhi both at home and at school, they spoke the same language in small groups, with the teacher, and during

their interactions with other children in the classroom. In one school in Banke, where children used both the Awadhi and Nepali languages in school, the teacher used both languages. They used both languages for small group interaction and classroom interaction.

The use of home language in the preschools (ECD centers) helped children to develop their first language (both Awadhi or/and Nepali). Supporters of first language classrooms (Fillmore & Snow, 2000) believe that teachers play a critical role in helping children maintain their first language, using it as a language of instruction or/and language of communication. In Banke, classrooms are mostly culturally and linguistically diverse, representing more than two different languages and ethnicities. Children use their home language while the teachers' use of language is as per their prerogative (Nepali or Awadhi) during the classroom activities.

One of the contributing factors for the language of instruction of all six teachers was the teachers' abilities in using various languages. In Banke, some of the children could follow the instruction provided by the teachers in the Nepali language and some could not. What I observed is that the children from families who had more interaction at home in terms of oral language were able to interact more at school even when the teacher spoke Nepali. The children who came from families with little oral language interaction were not able to follow the teacher when she spoke Nepali in the classroom. In Lalitpur, the children whose mother tongue was not Nepali, they displayed similar behaviors as those children from Banke. I asked the teacher (facilitator) about language of communication and the language of instruction she used. The teacher responded,

*I use both, Nepali and Awadhi. But I feel easier to teach in Awadhi because children are familiar with it and they can respond to me. She further added,*

*Earlier, in training we were told not to use other languages. We had to use only children's home language and here it is Awadhi. Now in the training they (trainers) say we have to add Nepali and English as well. Parents also request me to teach Nepali and English. They are happy when their children speak in Nepali and English. Therefore, I use both Nepali and Awadhi in the classroom.*

When talking to the children, I found that most of the participant children in Banke had limited vocabulary in Nepali. However, they could speak fluently in their own Awadhi language. What I observed was that the vocabulary in the children was limited to everyday communication and tasks. Neither language, Awadhi or Nepali, were children being introduced to new vocabulary words to increase and stimulate an expansion of vocabulary either at home or at school.

As Vygotsky (1978) noted, language is the key tool for learning which assists children to develop their thinking skills and reasoning. In the other two preschools in Banke, teachers were speaking in their home language, Awadhi (they are not able to communicate in Nepali). So, children used Awadhi both at home and in the preschools. The daily activities followed in all the preschools were reciting the alphabets, storytelling, poems, songs, games and drawing. However, the children didn't know the meaning of the rhymes (English). Still, most often, rhymes were recited in Nepali and English. In two ECD centers it was done in Hindi (at Banke) as well. Children were becoming familiar with new words (both Nepali and English) used in the preschools (ECD centers). However, they were not able to know the exact meaning of the words used. While reciting English rhymes, 'twinkle, twinkle, little star', children could not tell what twinkle means. Therefore, they were not using these words in their daily conversations with families, peers and teachers. Children had to

be fluent and confident in their home language. When children are fluent and confident in their mother tongue language then learning another language can become easier if introduced in ways that support the development of the child (Pandey, 2012). It helps them in reading writing and comprehension. However, in my study area, for the Awadhi speaking children, the environment to learn new words in Awadhi (mother tongue) are found limited. I observed that the use of dual language in the classroom was effective. It not only made the classroom environment friendly because the children were able to converse in their familiar language and try out the new language for the children, but they were also learning both languages at the same time.

In Lalitpur, for the children who spoke Nepali in their homes, they spoke Nepali very fluently in the preschool. Children whose home languages were Nepali and where the dominant school language were Nepali, they were privileged, as they had access to the concepts both at home and at school in their mother tongue or dominant language. The children who wouldn't speak Nepali at home were disadvantaged. And perhaps here one can make a case why home language is important in preschools, to help level the field so all children can succeed in understanding the content delivered at schools. Here, I found children participating in the class activities actively.

When I reached Gaurishankar preschool, Lalitpur at around 11 am, children were playing freely in the room. I entered the classroom and sat in one corner. The teacher was busy helping children and supporting them in their work. Children were divided in small groups of 3-4. Each group had different materials such as, building blocks, puzzles, domino, etc. to play. They were talking to each other and playing together and showing their work to the teacher. She was also asking children what

they were playing (making) and why. It was helping children to interact more while playing. Teacher was encouraging children to be involved. The language of communication was Nepali to both teacher and the children. (Class observation, October 2015, Bholdhoka)

Children's behavior is interdependent upon the teacher's behavior. The friendly behavior of the teacher encourages children to participate in the interaction. The positive reinforcement and support that teachers provide through their interaction with children encourages children to be interactive and more expressive (Elden, 2009). Hence, children become more confident to express themselves. This is foundational in language and literacy development since the main purpose of language and literacy are to express oneself and understand other's expressions.

When children become confident in expression, their creativity increases (Engel, 2009). Children can express their feelings more easily when they get positive interactions and reinforcement for their creativity and increased confidence in the use of language. The teacher can create a positive learning cycle. In addition, when children increase the opportunity to use their imagination, creating stories can become easier leading to enjoyment of literacy. I found this to be the case in Gaurishankar preschool in Lalitpur. Below is a story told by a preschool child,

*“There are two big trees (showing her two fingers). In one tree, there are many birds and in the other one there are no birds. Then some of the birds of the first tree say, let's go to the other tree as here it is too crowded. Some of the birds fly to the next tree. Then again other groups (flocks) of birds start flying to another tree. So, one flock after another keeps on flying to the other tree until both the trees have equal number of birds, and all the birds stay happily”.* (Neeta, Gaurishankar preschool, Bholdhoka, November 2015)



Storytelling and reading expose children to a form of language (Bloch, 2006), which is holistic, rich and complex. For storytelling from the children to occur, not only do teachers have to model storytelling, but teachers have to create a safe and child friendly environment for children to be able to express themselves. Furthermore, it is found that the children who are participating in storytelling and retelling, have significantly higher vocabulary and literacy scores than those who have not participated (Cooper et al., 2007 as cited in Silverman & Hartranft, 2015). In one of my study schools (Langtang) in Lalitpur, I did not find such child friendly activities including storytelling and the use of creativity. The teacher was more focused on formal reading and writing rather than creating spaces for interactions, play and storytelling to take place. She was strict. She did not deter from the books. She did not use soft tone to the children.

*“This girl is worthless, you never learn. Other children of your age can say all the alphabets and words. I have told you many times to recite all these, but you only play, no study at all. Tell me a, b, c, d.....”* shouted the teacher.

After a pause teacher again asked Bina to tell her ka, kha, ga, (Nepali alphabet). She was scared and didn't speak a single word. All the children in the class were silent and afraid. Bina's eyes were full of tears. (Class observation, December, 2015, Lalitpur)

The teacher can make the classroom enjoyable and friendly for the children, but in my study preschools teachers shared that the parents and management of the school prefer a strict, orderly, and rote method of learning. Teachers would feel pressure that they had to finish the course as per the management preparation without considering the children's development process. When teacher shouts at the children, the classroom environment becomes tensed or stressful (Duarte, 2012). In such

environment, children cannot learn easily or without stress. The teacher creates a fearful environment. Children learn best in a joyful and friendly environment.

Teachers' role and behavior is important to use teaching learning approach for making classroom joyful and the learning process effective. The teacher and students, together, can create a story in class using words which are familiar to the children. In such case, a medium of instruction does not play a major role. They can use words familiar to them in any of the language.

*"Today I will tell the story of the preschool children like you all; would you like to listen to the story?"* asked the teacher in Gaurishankar preschool in Lalitpur. *"I will read the story from the book."* Children were given an opportunity to talk about the story they had heard earlier. Children talked about the characters, which they liked or disliked. Between the conversations, the teacher prodded the children with questions to help clarify the context of the story. Children tried to answer using their experiences, and elder children supported (corrected) the younger children's learning. Here is a Story told in Lalitpur Preschool,

*"Once upon a time, there was a preschool.*

*Teacher: what was there?*

*Children: Preschool (shouted children)*

*Teacher: Yes, the preschool was like yours. Do you like your preschool?*

*Children: Yes miss. (All the children shouted).*

*Teacher: There was a boy Named Tanish. He always wanted to play swing. Who wants to play swing here?*

*Children: Me, miss, me, miss me, me, me..... (children shouted raising their hands up)*

*Teacher: Yes, we all like swing, right?*

*Children nodded.*

*Teacher: That day also Tanish was in a swing and he was playing swing not letting other friends come near the swing.*

*Reema and Jiya came to the teachers and complained about Tanish.*

*“Miss, miss, Tanish don’t let us play. He is there for a long time”.*

*Teacher asked Tanish to give turn to Reema and other friends. But Tanish didn’t want to leave the swing. Then teacher told Tanish, “Count up to 10. You play ten times and give it to Reema. Then Reema also plays for ten times then the turn goes to Jiya. And after Jiya, Tanish, your turn will come. Tanish agreed on teacher’s suggestion. Then he started counting. ...1, 2, 3.....1, 2, 3.....1, 2..3.....He only counted up to three and never made the ten. He didn’t leave the swing.*

*Jiya and Reema again went to the teacher and told that Tanish was counting only up to three and they were not getting the turn again.*

*Teacher went to the swing and asked Tanish, “Why were you not counting up to ten”?*

*Tanish slowly replied, “I don’t know how to count miss”. Humm...teacher murmured.*

*Then teacher started counting, 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10.....now Reema’s turn, said the teacher. Then Reema came in the swing. Again, teacher started counting.*

*1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10.*

*Teacher: now whose turn?*

*Children: Jiya*

*Teacher: Yes, Jiya’s turn. And teacher started counting. Can you follow me?*

*Children: 1...2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8.....9....10.*

*Teacher: good. And after this everyone in the school get the chance to play swing”.*

*(Observation, december 2015, Reena, Gaurishankar Preschool, Bholdhoka)*

This teacher exposed her students to repetitions of the words adding few new phrases or words in the story. Additionally, the teacher asked children to answer the middle of the story with an appropriate gesture or physical representation when they heard the new words. I found that the teacher was developing vocabulary while they were telling the story. Vocabulary was taught in context describing the main character of a story. Children were provided the opportunity to express their feelings and the class was interactive. I found children in this class confident to participate in the conversation without hesitations. At the time when children were learning language and literacy skills, they were learning numbers and were counting between themselves.

### **Teacher's Role in Reconstructing and Deconstructing Language**

Teachers can play a vital role in helping children to lose a language that they bring from their homes and learn a new language at the centers (Pandey, 2012). The teaching-learning activities differed in all the participating preschools, however there are some similarities in recitation of alphabets. There were variations on the approaches according to the social and community context of the teachers. The activities like storytelling, small group activities were different in all the participating preschools. The same activities like reading, writing and songs (rhymes) were widely used by all the teachers. Generally, all the teachers extensively used reading and writing focused activities such as reciting alphabets (both in Nepali and English), reciting numbers and modeled writing. However, there were some differences in the teaching learning methods and use of materials in the ways in which these activities were carried out by the teachers. It depended on the level of teachers' competencies and the training and exposures that the teachers received earlier. During the class observation, the teachers who received training (Gaurishankar and Holiya) were using

materials and interactive approach of teaching learning in the classroom. Though, other teachers also shared that they were trained, their teaching learning approach was more rote and teacher centered. Some additional activities were found in two preschools (one in Bholdhoka and one in Bulbuliya); they used picture-word domino, word cards, puzzle game, pronunciations of words (vocabulary and phonological awareness), story (use of picture books, puppets, models) and poems. Activities related to eye-hand coordination, building blocks, and arts and drawing were also conducted in these preschools. But stories and poems were not widely used by these two teachers during my observations.

Children were active and confident in the Gaurishankar preschool as they got opportunities to use varieties of materials, and played freely with their peers in the centers. The classroom was in an informal setting and children seemed comfortable inside the classroom, where the teachers were interactive. They conducted classes in informal ways. There were materials in the ECD centers in other two preschools in Banke but the materials were not used by the teachers during the teaching learning activities. However, in the two of the preschools in Lalitpur, there were no learning materials for the children. I found contrasting observations among other four preschools.

The Langtang preschool in Saibu has more loud, authoritative and strict approach to teaching. When I entered the class at 10.30 am the teacher was shouting at one of the girls in the class. The teacher did not see me coming into the classroom. I silently watched the event. Later, I found that there was an oral exam in the class and the teacher was asking the questions. Teacher was not happy with Seema as she was unable to reproduce English alphabets, a, b, c, d... After a while, when the teacher went outside the class, I took the opportunity to interact with the children.

The classroom wall was painted with alphabets (both Nepali and English). So, I tried to find whether they could recognize the letters. I randomly pointed towards the letter and the children answered correctly. Then again, I pronounced 'B' and showed the alphabet 'M', children corrected me loudly and happily. They were having fun while supporting me to find the right alphabet.

Teaching-learning process can be made interactive in the preschools. When I entered the classroom in Holiya ECD center in Bulbuliya, the teacher was preparing a game. It was an indoor game and all the children were standing in a circle. The teacher was holding four cloth strips of different colors- yellow, red, blue and green. All the children seemed happy and excited. The children had smiles on their faces, and were interacting with each other. The teacher first of all shared the rules and instructed the children to follow her. The children were listening to the teacher.

Here is the game played in an ECD center-

*"Let's play a game. Are you all ready?"*

*All of you come here at the center. Yes! Sanjog, Ranjan, at the center. Now I will keep these colored cloth strips on the floor. When I name the color, you all have to run towards it.*

*Red.....no no...red.....see.....this is red...*

*Laal (she said in Awadhi).*

*All of you come here....*

*Now... Yellow.....Saroj, is that yellow? Forgot? (Pila)*

*See.....yes.....go ... go ...run ....run.....*

*Now... Green....look here.....this is green.....come .....come.....(Hara)*

*Now blue.....where is white?*

*Go go go.....run ....run..... run....*

*Good job.....clap clap*

*Now I am repeating....everyone has to listen to me carefully and run towards color.*

*Red.....yellow.....green.....Blue.....*

*Good job. Clap ... clap... “ (Class observation, August, 2015, Holiya ECD center, Bulbuliya)*

Children not only enjoyed the game and learnt the colors. As the teacher was naming the colors in Nepali, many Awadhi speaking children were in confusion for the first time (not following the name). When she repeatedly showed the color, and pronounced it in Awadhi as well, most of them followed accurately. According to Vygotsky (1978), play supports developmental aspects in a holistic way providing higher level of performance and functioning motor, mental and emotional abilities in early childhoods (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

In Banke, the teacher communicated with children either in Awadhi or in both Nepali and Awadhi. The language of instruction was dependent upon the teacher's language background whether they were Awadhi speaking, in case of Banke or Nepali speaking in both Banke and Lalitpur. Out of the three participating preschools (ECD centers) in Banke, only one teacher spoke Nepali mixed with Awadhi, as Nepali was her home language. But, in the other two preschools, teachers used Awadhi as their home language was Awadhi (mostly they mix Hindi) and they could not even speak Nepali properly. Though, teaching learning activities were dominated by Awadhi language, they taught Nepali and English alphabets and words. Whenever they practiced reciting alphabets and numbers in both Nepali and English, their pronunciations (phoneme) differed (Hindi dialect accent). The rhythms and music of the rhymes were also different because of the different dialect and accent.

In Lalitpur, there was a single language (Nepali) used in preschools for both the instruction and communications. All the teachers spoke Nepali (two of them had Nepali as home language and one of them was from the local ethnic community, Newari as a home language) and children were also Nepali speaking (though they were from different ethnic backgrounds). However, for the children from other language backgrounds (Tamang, Newar, Maithali and Bhojpuri) the teacher just ignored their language and used Nepali in the class. Teacher didn't know these local languages as well. I observed that though the children were learning Nepali, they were not as expressive and confident as other Nepali speaking children.

In Lalitpur, children from the participating preschools used few English expressions in the classroom such as, "May I come in?", "May I go out?", "Excuse me" and "sorry" in the conversation. Such conversations are helpful to learn expressive language and to develop oral language skills.

A boy went out to bathroom. He entered the class without saying anything. All the children shouted at him, "*don't come inside*", "*don't come inside*", "*you have to ask for permission*". "*May I come in?*" and the boy returned back and asked the teacher, "*May I come in Miss?*" When the teacher nodded her head, he entered. (November, 2015, Class observation, Gaurishankar Preschool)

I observed that the teacher just nodded her head rather than speaking to the children. In a classroom situation, teacher is expected not to nod only but answer in full sentence like "yes, you may" or "please come in" etc.

Teachers can create literacy-related play areas, provide props such as memo pads, recipes, and cookbooks and help children incorporate print in their play in natural way. I did not see the teachers in all the preschools using print materials in the play areas. Use of name cards is one of the regular activities where children actively



participate in reading aloud. In Holiya and Gaurishankar Preschool, the name cards were hanged in one corner of the room. In addition to this, teachers created interactive circle times during storytelling. Teacher paused, asked questions, encouraged discussion of ideas; raised new questions based on the children's understanding, and created a participatory role in reading with children. However, no teachers in other preschools used any props in the conversations. The acquisition of specific teaching skills is the part of the socialization of teachers to the subculture of the school (Saville-Troike, 1978).

Teachers can make meal times interactive, as the interaction at meal time is important for contextual learning. Mealtimes could offer a unique opportunity for teachers and children to talk with each other for extended periods of time. I did not observe children talking at the meal time. Teachers mostly kept them quiet while eating. None of the teachers in the study preschools engaged children in conversation during meals and/or snack times. The back-and-forth conversations about the food, its taste and textures that take place before and after the meals could promote children's language abilities. Meal time can be the opportunity to have one-on-one conversations with children, to hear about their daily activities outside of the center, and to connect their home and center worlds. Such conversations are important for constructing language (Ostergren, 2013).

Children learn faster from their peers/friends than from the adults (Hetherington, Parke, & Locke, 1999). Language is the basis of learning (Halliday, 1993). In learning language, new modes of language provide new forms of knowledge. Therefore, language emerges from the child's understanding in early social relations (Snow, 2013). To learn language, children must be exposed to variety of new words and sounds. Teachers have the role to introduce children and make

them familiar with variety of sounds. While learning one language with phonology different than their home language, children may sometimes have confusions and sometimes mix the language (syntax) structure in the conversation. This happens because of the difference in home language and the language of instruction in the preschools.

### **(De)Learning Language**

The classroom environment provides opportunities to learn as well as de-learn the language that children were familiar with. When a teacher introduces new language or words in the conversations or in teaching learning process, children have opportunities to be familiar with new words. Most often, in my study area, teachers introduced and let children recite new words (vocabulary) from Nepali and English during daily activities.

In the meantime, children were not using their own language, based on their prior knowledge. This sometime provided wrong notion to the children in the process of learning language.

A teacher drew an umbrella on the blackboard and asked children to name the picture. Everyone in the class said Chhatari (An Awadhi term for umbrella). “Wrong” said the teacher and corrected, “Chhata” (a Nepali term for umbrella). Similarly, for kite, children said “Patang” and teacher corrected “Changa”. Then he drew mango and children said “Aam” the teacher corrected “Aap”. (Observation note, August, 2015, Soniya Preschool, Paraspur)

Here are few words from the list (below). These are the words having different pronunciation with same meaning in the chart. Both the teachers and the students were right in naming the pictures. However, the teacher’s demonstration in Nepali language dominated or replaced the children’s prior knowledge in Awadhi.

This process made children confused resulting delay in language learning. There are some more words frequently used at home as well as in preschools.

Table 1

*Frequently Used Words at Home and Preschools*

| Awadhi  | Nepali  | English      |
|---------|---------|--------------|
| Kohada  | Pharsi  | Pumpkin      |
| Kabutar | Parewa  | Pigeon       |
| Ganji   | Suthuni | Sweet potato |
| Lobaa   | Simi    | Beans        |
| Papitaa | Mewa    | Papaya       |

I asked the teachers as well as parent on how children learn a new word. A teacher from Soniya preschool, Paraspur, replied,

*“When they pronounce in their own language, I correct them in Nepali. I tell them you are also right, but this is called ‘Pharsi’ in Nepali and ‘Kohada’ in Awadhi. Remember, when you see ‘Kohada’ at home, you tell your mom it is called ‘Pharsi’ in Nepali”.*

And on being asked, one of the mothers shared,

*“My children tell me few words in Nepali. They say this is called this, and this is called this. They teach us. For Kohada (pumpkin), she said, ‘Mom my teacher said this is Pharsi’. And there were other words of which my children can tell the Nepali name”.*

The explanation of the teachers was important to learn new words. Children were not only learning new words; they were also relating it with their previous knowledge. In such cases, children were learning two languages at a time. I did not find a similar approach followed by teachers in other preschools. In Banke, children

were learning vocabularies in three different languages (Awadhi, Nepali and English) at a time. Children get confused at first, but when they listen to the same words multiple times (as shared by Sarita, a preschool teacher), they slowly start to relate the words in context. The teachers need to explain repeatedly the same words with pictures to make them clear. Otherwise, the kids start to learn Nepali forgetting its Awadhi equivalent. But then again, the question is why the teacher reinforces children to learn in Nepali and not in their own language or in both languages? This needs more time and effort.

In all the study preschools, I found that children were aware and able to read the pictures. They were familiar with the name of the pictures provided in the chart (animal, vegetable, alphabets). They recognized the text with the picture as it was repeated many times (they recite). They were aware of sentence patterns and knew how to read from left to right. However, they were not able to decode the text and read the words. They could merely respond to pictures and match with the printed text. It is always interesting and effective to learn new words. As I took few words and picture cards to the study preschools, they participated to identify words and the pictures with interest. Children were learning faster through pictures. Children with limited vocabulary needed to learn ample number of words, and for that they needed repetition of the words several times. Pictures and words games provided such opportunity.

Name cards were hanged in one of the preschools (Holiya) in Bulbuliya, Banke. In one side of the card, a picture (jug, flower, fish, umbrella, etc.) was drawn and the other side had name of the individual child. Each child had their name card with different pictures. So, at the time of attendance, they had to find their name card and turn it around telling their name and the name of the picture. This activity helped

children to find their name in relation to their picture, and to learn to read it. An example of the activity during attendance is given below;

*Teacher said, now it's time for attendance (Hajiri karo), go and see your name card. "My name is Sangam Kebat*

*No...first tell your pictures name? What is it? Teacher shouted*

*My Picture is Jug Kebat (he has given surname to his picture as well)*

*My name is Sangam Kebat*

*Syabbas (good job) clap to Sangam. (Observation at Holiya Preschool, Banke)*

Similarly, children can tell the name of the pictures in their own language.

When I went to the preschools during my observation, I found that there were plenty of print materials hanging in the classroom. These materials could be used to make children learn new vocabulary. Print awareness is an important part of knowing how to read and write. It is an early literacy skill. For these pre- and emergent readers, the pictures in the chart and books are important elements for developing their oral language and vocabulary. They can learn independently and develop print awareness. Although picture reading reflects a critical stage in literacy development, it is important for children to understand that print can be read. In developing print awareness, a child begins to understand what print looks like, how it works, and the fact that print carries meaning (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004).

When I showed the vegetable chart, they started naming the vegetable in their own Awadhi language. In this preschool (Jhumaru), the teacher used only Awadhi in the classroom. I told them to show papaya (Mewa dikhao) in Hindi, they were confused and looked at my face. I did not understand, but the teacher corrected me, "This is 'Papita' in our language. They do not say 'Mewai'; they say 'Papita'.

Children respond positively if we ask them in their language. Regarding the language of communication with children, a program manager of one of the NGOs opined:

*“When we speak in their language, they feel close and don’t hesitate to talk to us. They express and take part in the discussions as well. For example, when we show the picture of goat and ask them about this ‘Chhigari’ (in Tharu), then they start sharing, “We have also goat (Chhigari) at our house”. When we ask the color then they will say black (Kariya) or red (lal). They also share the numbers of goats they have. Therefore, learning begins from this point. They participate actively and understand fast”.*

There were more confusions and complications in the teaching learning process when the mother language was Nepali but of a different dialect.

*“My name is Ranjan Bohara. My mother’s name is Rama Bohara. My father’s name is Shiva Bohara. I live in Doti (he migrated from Doti to Nepalgunj)”.*  
*“Now you are in Nepalgunj, so don’t say Doti any more”, teacher corrected.*  
*“I live in Nepalgunj Sub metropolitan, Ward No. 17, Bulbuliya tole, Banke. My country’s name is Nepal. The color of my country’s flag is red (pointing towards the picture). Sister’s (teacher) name is Mandira Adhikari”.*  
*“Syabbass!! (good job), clap for Ranjan”, teacher said and all the friends clapped for him.*

He was happy and satisfied with this accomplishment. Though he was confused about the name of the place where he was residing, this is his (and his friends’) everyday task in an introduction session. He felt proud and listened to other friends introducing them (Observation, August, 2015, Holiya Preschool, Banke).

Ranjan left his place and parents to study in a good school. Though he was little older and bigger than other children in his class, he was staying with smaller

children to learn language here in Banke. He knew neither Awadhi nor Nepali. He was living with his aunt and cousins in Nepalgunj. His own language (Doteli) is one of the local dialects from far western part of Nepal. Almost all his friends were from Awadhi background in the preschool. The language of instruction and the communication in the center was both, Awadhi and Nepali (predominantly, Awadhi). Ranjan found difficulties to understand and decode both (Awadhi and Nepali) with his Doteli background.

Ranjan was passive during the class interactions. When he tried to share his views, his friends and teacher did not understand him. This may have made him embarrassed, leading him towards silence. As he was bigger than others, the teacher asked him to come to the front 'read aloud'. This was the activity in which one student came in front of the class and started reading (reciting) alphabets in both Nepali and English. Other children followed the reader. But Ranjan always hesitated. *"He is here to learn some basic words and vocabularies to enroll in grade one. But he is poorer than these smaller children"* shared the teacher. Ranjan, while reading and reciting, usually forgot the words in Nepali and used his own Doteli dialect, which made him uncomfortable in front of the friends. The teacher also scolded him for what she perceived as his negligence. She said, *"You have weak memory, you are forgetful and never concentrate in study"*.

During my class observation, I saw Ranjan trying many times to share his feelings to his teachers and friends. But he had to repeat it many times. He was embarrassed about repeating (3-4 times) the same thing to make them understand. I noticed that his excitements, interest and passions became low and sometimes disappeared. His expressions were changed, face blurred and humiliated. It led him to be quiet and isolated. In the meantime, he was learning few new (Awadhi) words

from his friends. He started understanding and speaking Awadhi. He tried to speak with his friends and mixed three dialects at a time, Nepali, Doteli and Awadhi.

Sometimes children try to figure out the appropriate words to use. In such case, teachers have to give timely constructive feedback with encouragement and support (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015).

Similarly, Gyanendra who was a part of Newar community (they have also their own language), enjoyed speaking Awadhi rather than Nepali and Newari. When I asked to Gyanendra's mother, what he spoke at home, she told me that he mixed all the languages. *"Sometimes even I don't understand what he is talking about. He has Awadhi speaking friends and we use Newari and Nepali at home. So, he has his own language,"* Gyanendra's mother explained smiling. Gyanendra learnt Awadhi from the friends while they were playing freely outside in the road.

The quantity and quality of two-way communications and verbal interaction between the teachers and children is important to develop language, which can establish the foundation (background knowledge) on which children can build their vocabulary understanding (Joseph, 2015). Corson (1998) observed that students who have limited vocabulary and struggled with 'language deficiency' must be provided ample opportunities to experience and interact with teachers and peers in order to catch up with their peers (Snow, 2013). Such environment helps children develop their expressive language skills. The teacher can play a key role to support using words appropriately for increasing their vocabulary and helping them develop their receptive and expressive language skills. As Kirkland and Patterson (2005) explained, oral language plays a crucial role for the child's literacy development, including listening, speaking, reading and writing, whereas the culture of the child



influences the patterns of language and the school environment enables children to use it effectively (Snow, 2013).

**Activities of the children.** I followed children at their home and community as well. In Banke, children were most likely to play outside in the street. After school, they went home, ate something (snacks, rice) and started playing. Some of them were playing without having any snacks. Some of the children were not allowed to go outside to play so they stayed inside the home and played whatever they had at home. Sometimes, they watched TV.

Children play a variety of games with their friends. The most common game that they played outside with friends in Banke was ball and hide-and-seek. Some children played with a wooden toy car by having ‘one or two friends sit on it and others pulling or pushing the car. The car could be a wooden box or a cardboard box or the big leaf of a coconut tree. Despite this, they mostly engaged in pretend play, like ‘teachers and student’, ‘doctor and patients’, shopkeepers etc. In such play children used wide range of languages. As Vygotsky interpreted, children develop their language acquisition during the role play; they bring their culture while using language (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). According to Vygotsky, children “Through their acquisition and use of language, come to reproduce a culture that contains knowledge of generations” (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Children had their own daily schedule in Banke. They came to preschools, spent 3-4 hours and went back home. There was no homework sent to the children. Children had plenty of free time to play. Parents were mostly busy with their own works. I asked Parbati what she did after school. Parbati, a preschool child came to my lap and shared her after school activities in her own Awadhi language.

*“I have my brother at home. I look after him, play with him. Now he drinks my mother’s breast. I would drink earlier, but now I don’t drink it”.*

“And what do you drink”?

“I drink tea”

I further asked what else she did at her home. She said she played with other children in the neighborhood. She helped her mother by looking after her brother, pulling crib to make her brother sleep. She shared that she also sang the song for her baby brother.

Ramesh, one of the preschool children in Paraspur, was silent and quiet in the class from the beginning. The classroom was small with 23 children. The age of the children was about three or/and four years. Ramesh was the only child who was older among them; he was 6. He looked bigger than other children. The room was full of locally made toys. There were cloth-made dolls, clay toys, small cars, balls, wooden blocks and plastic toys. Children, after entering into the classroom, started playing with friends. Ramesh always played alone. He just followed what the teacher said and listened to her carefully. He did not talk much with his friends. He played whatever toys he had. He caught my attention and I tried to talk to him many times. I could not make good conversation with Ramesh due to my language limitations (Ramesh didn’t feel comfortable to talk to me in Hindi as I was not able to speak in Awadhi but understand it). After more than a week of my regular visit and class observation, one morning, Ramesh shared his past days with me.

*It was a big school. I studied there. Everyone in the school loved me. They provided food, milk at school. I liked the place. We had goats and dogs there. All the dogs died and our goats were taken by other people. We had pear gardens, apple gardens. We left those gardens there. We couldn’t bring*

*single item from the place. I didn't want to come here. I remember the place and want to go again.*

Ramesh migrated from Himanchal Pradesh, one of the cities in Indian state (India). I found loads of sorrow, regrets and memories with him. He was upset and his eyes were full of tears, blinking and remembering the past. His language was different (dialect) from other preschool children (neither Awadhi, nor Hindi). It was mixed Hindi, Awadhi and the local Himanchal Dialect. I asked then, do you know alphabets? He sadly said, *“No, I forgot all. I knew, I could read and write but now I can't”*.

I talked to Ramesh about his memories. He told me that they were in Himanchal. He and his brother used to go to school there. His father worked in a factory. While asking with his mother at home visit, she told me that it was because of her husband that they came there. He was sick and not able to work in factory so they left the place.

The above example shows that new place, new environment and the new school systems also play both positive and negative roles in learning. Language is the base for interactions and because of the new teaching learning environment, when language and/or the dialect differs, the confidence of the children becomes low. I found a similar case in Ramesh and also with Ranjan as they were hesitant to make friends, talk to them and play with them. The differences in dialect were one of the reasons for Ramesh being isolated.

Children can bring their own speech patterns to the schools from their home, which can be quite different from the ones that are valued at school. These speech patterns inculcated in schools may not be essential for functioning effectively in their everyday home communities. Learning new communication patterns and acquiring

additional knowledge of language is an important part of the educational development of all children, but it is neither necessary nor desirable to promote at the expense of the language patterns children already have (Pandey, 2012; Saville-Troike, 1978).

Language is constitutive of meaning, not simply reflecting but actively constructing it. No knowledge can simply be transmitted. “It has to be constructed afresh” using previous experiences and strategies built up outside and inside school (Bloch, 2006). Therefore, language is “action and reflection” (Neuman, 2011). In this backdrop, it was clearly seen that children having opportunities to discuss, and play in their own language were more confident, expressive and vocal. The activities provided in the preschools supported them to develop their oral language and vocabulary. Those children who were made to follow formal ways of reading and writing in the preschools were less vocal, passive and hesitant in the expression. This I observed in Ranjan, Ramesh and Mamta. They were changing from active speakers to passive participants, and the active listeners in the everyday class interactions.

### **Bridging Oral Language to Early Literacy**

One of the major components of language skills is vocabulary. Vocabulary is increased only by the repeated use of new words. Children in preschools have opportunities to listen to new words when interacting with teachers, friends and materials as well. In their routine interactions, children express themselves in the language they speak at their homes which might not make sense to other children. It is a way of expression unique to the child. The language they bring from their home is mixed with other languages. During normal interactions children express on their own and the language does not matter. However, the question is whether the new words children learnt (heard) in the preschools everyday are used back at home or not. Those words which are not used frequently for communication will become useless

and children do not remember and cannot link these words at their everyday conversations.

When I asked one of the teachers (Sarita) about teaching (introducing) new words to the children, she told me that she explains the words in Awadhi.

Like when we say hair, it is 'Bar' to Awadhi and 'Kapal' in Nepali. *"I explain them this is 'Bar' but we have to say Kapal in Nepali. When you hear about 'Kapal', you have to understand this is 'Bar'. Both are same"*. She said, children understand it and when I ask them after few days, many of them answer.

Sarita used Awadhi as the language of instruction in Soniya Preschool. When asked why she needed Nepali while teaching in Awadhi, she replied, *"Even in Awadhi I teach them Nepali alphabet and the words starting from those alphabets"*. She further explained that these children need to know Nepali when they go to Grade 1 in formal school,

Mandira, another preschool (Holiya) teacher in Bulbuliya, also responded similarly. She said, *"I use both Nepali and Awadhi language to explain the meaning of the word and children understand both at the same time"*. Mandira uses both Awadhi and Nepali in the class. Learning new words in Nepali for the children whose home language is other than that may create confusions.

*"Our children are weak in Nepali. We do not speak Nepali at home. One of my neighbors speaks Nepali at home. They never talk in our language (their mother tongue) with children. Initially, we teased them for not speaking own language at home. Now we know he was clever. His children did well in school. Our children are always behind. So now onward I am also thinking to speak in Nepali with my children."* One of the parents in Banke shared.

Nepali is a dominantly used language in every field, but it is a minority language in the Awadhi communities of Paraspur and Bulbuliya. Both parents and teachers wanted to make children proficient in Nepali from an early age. UNESCO (2010) has recommended the provision for formal instruction in their first language throughout primary school and then gradual transition to academic learning in the second language. Same has been adopted by the Education Act of Nepal. Yet, there is use of mostly both, and sometimes only the second language (Nepali) as the medium of instruction in the pre/schools.

*“If children are forced to switch abruptly or transition too soon from learning in their mother tongue to schooling in a second language, their first language acquisition may be attenuated or even lost”* (UNESCO, 2010; Ball, 2010).

This results in losing their self-confidence and interest in learning. While asking teachers the reason as to why they were not using children’s home language, all the teachers responded that Grade one teachers expect these children with good knowledge of Nepali and English alphabets and words.

In the three preschools (Gaurishankar, Lukla and Langtang) in Bholdhoka, Nakhkhu and Sainbu, all the children speak single language (Nepali). The schools have introduced English language in the teaching-learning. When I asked the teachers how children learnt new words in English, one of the teachers (Lukla Preschool) told me that they provided charts and let children recite from them. She further added that the name of the animals, fruits and vegetables were written in English, which children would recite it at school and at home.

The difficulties were seen during reciting the alphabets and the words in both English (to Nepali speaking children) and Nepali (to Awadhi speaking children). When we showed the word-picture chart, there were words beginning from each

alphabet. When a word was pronounced (decoded) pointing to its corresponding picture, these children recognized the picture. They started responding in their own or familiar language. In such cases, the children did not relate between the alphabets and words.

There were some gaps in terms of language learning (phonology), pronunciations and vocabularies. A teacher with Awadhi background could pronounce neither Nepali nor English clearly (correctly), fluently, and in a right way. Two of the teachers from Banke (Soniya and Jhumaru preschools) were educated in India and therefore had a recognizable Indian accent. The other four teachers were from the Nepali language background, and they could not pronounce English words and alphabets correctly. However, they had proper Nepali accent. In such cases, phonemic awareness was found weak in both teachers and the children.

While reciting the alphabets, they did not consider the sound part- how individual children were hearing and reciting it. When the teacher was saying '*Putali*' some children were saying '*Tutali*' for the butterfly. The 'P' sound changed to 'T' sound but the teacher was not aware of this. Teachers were not correcting the pronunciation of words and clarifying the sound to the children. Owing to the lack of practice in pronunciations, they were behind the basic 'language skills' such as 'visual awareness' and 'phonemic awareness' (Gove & Cvelich, 2011). This delayed the child in reading, writing and comprehension.

Teachers support children to develop "word awareness" by encouraging and appreciating the use of new words (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015). Teachers can provide pictures to read/figure out its name. Word awareness is related to phonemic awareness. It is a more specific skill that requires attention and manipulation of individual sounds of spoken words (Joseph, 2015). Therefore, for the specific sound,

the way children and teachers (adults) pronounce certain sound or/and words depend on the social, (sub) cultural and geographical setting(s) (Duarte, 2012; Pandey, 2012).

On the basis of my observations, I have found different activities followed for supporting oral language (and reading and writing) in preschools. Children were mostly receptive to language. Teachers were not practicing on awareness of grammar, tone of voice and gesture to make children understand. Teachers had many opportunities to develop children's language competency by providing verbal and non-verbal cues that could be used to convey meaning. However, this demands competency and confidence from the teachers. I found that teachers were not competent or confident enough in using and teaching language be it Awadhi and Nepali in Banke, or Nepali and English in Lalitpur. The competencies in language teaching are important requirements for the teachers. There are limited opportunities to their professional development. These trainings were also found not providing enough skills to use in everyday classroom activities.

I could not see teachers following the curriculum and the curricular goals of the preschools. They think their role is only supporting children to be able to enroll in grade one. *"We teach them to read and write the alphabets and numbers in both English and Nepali. We make children able to say a few words in English as well. This is the demand of the parents as well as the primary schools"* one of the preschool teachers (Shova from Langtang preschool) shared.

*"In addition to this, we also teach words like greetings, expressing appreciation, expressing sympathy and concern, and welcoming visitors with confidence"*. Preschool classes demand support on expressive skills, oral language and vocabulary rather than reading and writing alphabets and numbers.



I did not see children engaged in activities like drama, role-play, and creative works which could provide them opportunities to share their feelings and express their learning through activities in Langtang, Jhumaru and Lukla preschools. As there is common Nepali saying- children learn by playing, cosmologically there are many stories on how children learn. Exploring everyday experiences and feelings through conversations, writing, games and drama, children generate understanding from experiences. This could, later, support in increasing vocabulary and enhancing oral language and literacy skills of the children. Such activities provide ground for oral language development, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge and comprehension, which are key components for literacy skills.

Many preschool children are able to name the letters of the alphabet by reciting the alphabet orally and singing the alphabet song. They learn through looking at the printed pictures, symbols and naming the letters. In such cases, even younger children (three-year-old) can name almost all the alphabets from the chart. However, they have limited word knowledge in relation to alphabets. In scaffolding children's use of language, teachers provide them with the tools necessary to develop individuality to express thoughts and ideas. Vocabulary growth provides a framework to enhance all areas of learning (Snow, 2013).

### **Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter is based on the activities within the preschools (ECD centers). The data presented here were taken from my observations of the class and children's activities and interviews with teachers in the preschools. In this chapter, I discussed everyday preschool activities, children's language teaching/learning procedures, and the role and behaviors by the teachers to support children's language and literacy skills. Information found included:

Teachers choose the language of instruction by three main contributing factors, (a) teachers ability in the language (b) parent and management interests and (c) the training the teacher has received.

Children were more engaged using oral language when teachers used warm tones, fun, and interaction between the children for the teaching learning procedures. As shown in the literature review, strong oral language is positively correlated with children's learning of reading and writing.

Children demonstrate their skills and knowledge through activity-based teaching learning procedures rather than rote style procedures. Rote styles include sitting quietly, writing in their books, and call and response in a strict way.

Revealed in the teacher interviews, the teacher training is not consistent. All six teachers had received training; however, the training content and style was different. Trainings are rarely provided to follow up with the teachers. The teachers liked more training, however, if they choose to obtain more on their own, it is very costly and they have to travel. They do not have time off of school to do this. They are not paid a living wage.

Teachers can build stronger foundations for language and literacy learning by creating classroom environments where activities, interactions through storytelling (and retelling), playing games, and providing a variety of materials are offered. The classrooms where more formal, rote teaching learning procedures, and strictness were displayed, children's language and literacy skills were less than the rooms with interactions and activities.

## CHAPTER VI

### ORAL LANGUAGE AND LITERACY SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

In the previous chapters, I presented the findings from my field observations (information) and experiences. I addressed the significance of oral language and the vocabulary of the children and the impact of variables at home and preschool in terms of development. I also discussed the role of language and culture in everyday learning activities of the children. In this chapter, I present reflections on the importance of oral language in the literacy learning process with available information and theoretical supports.

Literacy is a social practice as it emerges in the process of social interactions. It is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles (Street, 2003). It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address it and the process of developing the ability to understand it within the socio-cultural context. The child's potential doesn't develop in isolation, but rather in interaction with the surrounding world. Children incorporate the words they frequently use in their surrounding and construct as a part of their knowledge.

#### **Self-reflection on the Journey**

Children's early literacy, reading, writing and learning skill development are embedded in a larger family support system. This is also how I myself have grown, in my literacy rich environment from the beginning of my journey.

I was enrolled in grade one at the age of five. I received hand-me down course books from my brother and could read out loud all the stories and poems in the book, without anyone teaching me to read and write. Even my teachers praised my ability to read fluently and confidently to my father. My father asked the same of me

at home and I did it successfully. Proud, my father bought a new story book for me as a gift. To his surprise, I couldn't read even a single word in the book.

I had not recognized the alphabet. I had only listened to my brother read out loud and memorized the stories. My father sat me down from the very next day and started teaching me the letters and, more importantly, the text to the sound of the story I had memorized. My story I noted above was an example how children develop language first by listening to their surroundings and gradually they learn to read the text.

Research shows that children with greater word knowledge tend to have better learning skills, fewer behavioral problems and better academic outcomes (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015). Vocabulary is given priority in schools because of the strong connection between vocabulary and reading. Reading requires the mastery, integration and application of numerous skills and knowledge. Reading or learning how to read is a combination of all these skills. They are interconnected yet interdependent of one another, which makes it difficult to teach them in isolation. Without the knowledge of word and its meaning children are less likely to read fluently.

During my journey in the field of early childhood development for the past fifteen years, I have witnessed many positive changes in the perceptions and the participations of the people regarding early learning and literacy. Learning to read is a developmental process because reading skills are learned through everyday experiences and interactions in the environment. I myself received the similar environment during my learning. My own experience helped convince me that learning follows the patterns. However, this development process also requires smooth transitions from home to preschools.

When I was professionally involved in early childhood development, I was referred to Vygotsky. Vygotsky suggests that learning is a process which occurs anytime in everyday life and not just a formal activity. Children learn all the time and through the people who are more capable of doing a specific kind of action. Therefore, learning becomes the essential process and is necessary for development (Vygotsky, 1978).

I have facilitated a number of trainings with preschool teachers, trainers, and supervisors in teaching-learning activities in the preschools (ECD center). I have not been in any of these three roles in the ECD schools for this study. I have advocated early literacy and numeracy in the preschools focusing on early language development and the activities to support for the language development. This area has always been my professional interest. Therefore, as I prepared my thesis proposal on oral language and early literacy, I assumed that the study would be relatively straightforward. I had understood that oral language of the children was important because of its associations with literacy. Oral language is the prerequisite for success in many aspects of reading and writing (Shiel et al., 2012). Over the course of the study, I realized the complexity of language and cultural diversity regarding oral language and literacy skills. And there were ongoing compromises between society, community and the schools (institutions) in the process.

I found that most children follow a similar pattern and sequence of reading behaviors as they learn how to read: from appreciation for and awareness of print, to phonological and phonemic awareness to phonics and word recognition. I realized that without developing their foundation on oral language and vocabulary, children cannot follow the pattern of literacy. I found that children can learn many languages at a time. Their activeness, intelligence and participation affects their learning. At

times, I felt their limitations in learning language due to the disciplined framework of the schools, rote learning approach and pressure of homework and helplessness of children from both parents and teachers part. Similarly, teachers were also stressed, not able to address children's as well as parents' expectations of literacy learning. Their limited competencies in teaching learning approach and the external material support were not sufficient to address it.

In the beginning of my study, I thought that there were two contrasting environments at home and the preschools, and I needed to develop a framework to elaborate the context of early literacy and oral language learning in the children. But over the course of time, I found that these two environments were interrelated and complementary to each other. I found that family and the teachers facilitated children for their everyday learning. According to Vygotsky (1986), children learn from the spontaneous or everyday activities within human culture and experiences outside of academic settings (as cited in van der Veer, 1994; van Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

Literacy skills are foundation skills that children typically develop in the early ages and these are important because the skills and behaviors developed early serve as the base for later competence and proficiency in academia. Learning starts from home and depends on school's environment. They are the building blocks that children learn to utilize to develop subsequent, higher-level skills and develop their proficiency in literacy skills (Pandey, 2012). The learning of children is also influenced by the scientific concepts (Smagorinsky, Hansen, & Fink, 2013) that are acquired in an educational setting through the mediation and interaction with the environment and in communal activities with others such as peers and teachers (Samaras, 2002).

At the time of study, I was thinking that the home environment is the key for preparation of literacy readiness and was dependent on parent's literacy skills. The literacy and school readiness come autonomously and affect other social and cognitive practices (Street, 2003). However, I realized that literacy varies from one context to another and from one culture to another and is affected by the broader cultural backgrounds of the teachers and the children (Hull & Moje, 2012). Later, I realized that literacy is a social practice, not a simple technical skill that is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles (Street, 2003). I found that learning occurs through active participation in social community, which leads to educative experiences as opposed to "...non-educative and mis-educative experience" (Dewey, 1987, p.51). It is about gaining knowledge and skills the ways in which children learn reading, and writing. Thus, the effects of learning the literacy skills are dependent on those particular contexts where children are growing up.

### **The Influencing Factors of a Child's Oral language and Literacy Development**

Observing children in preschools and at their home revealed a number of important findings for early language and literacy students. Based on my observations, it was clear that all the children learn from their environment and from their teacher's and caregiver's support. The oral language of children that they bring from their home is the basis of learning other languages. There are three major components which influence the language and literacy learning process. Each of these components is described in detail.

1. Socio-cultural environment
2. Socio-emotional wellbeing of the children
3. Preschool context

### **Socio-cultural Environment**

Language of the children, even of the adults, cannot be understood in isolation of its cultural contexts and socio-economic conditions of the parents and school context (Jenkins, 2002). Children come to preschools, ECD centers, with different levels of language competency. Their language acquisition varies with the frequency of interactions at home. Teachers support to enhance children's language development at the school. The child's knowledge of letters and sound-symbol relationships are not complete (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004) during the child's initial learning from 0-3 years. Children continue to learn oral language development and fluency while speaking and communicating during their early childhood years and through their youth. The role of adults, both parents and the teachers, is instrumental to scaffold the child's language learning potentials.

Oral language development influences children's reading, writing, and numeracy skills in the later stage of their life. These influences include opportunities to access learning materials, amount of reading materials such as story and picture books, frequency of reading habits, support from the teachers and the parents, and festivals and celebrations. It is the "dialectical constructivism" (Schunk, 2012) where knowledge generation depends on the amount of interaction between the person and the environment. Children interact with the materials, people, and the environment surrounding them to develop their language and literacy skills.

In one of my study areas, Paraspur, children have their own mother language of Awadhi, which is not the medium of instruction in the preschools. Therefore, the language and literacy skills of these children in school depended on external environment, such as community language, teaching-learning methods, peer interactions, instructional design, and teacher's role. There were also the components



related to parents' background, including the levels of education, and their socio-economic conditions (Snow, 2013; Dahlgren, 2008). All of these factors listed emerged as indicators of the home environment in terms of promoting home literacy and the school environment to support and continue development of literacy.

### **Home Learning Environment**

Home is the first institution of learning for children where they are born and raised. Mothers and the fathers along with other adults and children can play a vital role in developing the literacy skills of children. When a large variety of sounds and words are used at home, this is considered a rich language and literacy environment. Home opportunities for language and literacy skills development take place during daily interactions at their homes. These interactions are the foundation of children's understanding of print knowledge. Hence, literacy begins at home. Most of the children have plenty of opportunities to explore the environment while roaming around the community and playing with peers in Banke. However, the opportunities in Lalitpur were limited.

The children had more interactions with the community in Banke as they had opportunities to roam around. In Lalitpur, the study families were migrants and did not have a communal relationship with their neighbors; they preferred keeping the children at home. This limited the children's access to the community language and cultural interactions. What I found was that these constraints and opportunities were carried over into the school environment.

I noticed that parents were communicating only for a purpose such as "have you done your homework? Go and bring some potatoes." I did not see them sharing their own days and asking how they spent the day. (Non-participant observation)

There are natural learning settings at home. Among my study areas, I found children had more freedom to play outside with peers in Paraspur and Bulbuliya than in Lalitpur. Children played freely with peers, roaming around the community and participated in the community gatherings and hence enhanced their skills in both receptive and expressive language, leading to a solid foundation for learning literacy. However, such natural learning environments were not acknowledged by parents as well as teachers in both the districts. I found that the feasts and festivals celebrated at the schools provided natural learning environment to the children. I observed that children talked with each other more freely and interactions among students and between students and teachers increased. Another important point about the celebrations of festival is that this provides a commonality between schools and home, helping to bridge the gaps. This I observed between actions in the home and actions in the schools. Mostly within joint or extended families and/or closely settled communities, children have sufficient learning opportunities from among the interactions with family members. The community people are closely concerned with the children's activities. The sense of a united community existed in Banke.

While I was in the community, I heard parents talking to the other children saying: "*where are you going? What are you doing? Who gave you money?*" The community members were not only observing the children but also taking care of their safety (non-participant observer).

This frequent and consistent interaction in the community support children in their social-cultural learning processes. This was found more strongly and frequently in Banke. In Banke, parents can leave their children in the neighborhood, and children can play with their friends at their free time knowing they will be watched by

other community members. In such cases, children get opportunities to demonstrate and develop their language skills.

Children learn much of the vocabulary from the natural interactions with parents, caregivers and other community members. They also learn from television, books and other incidental exposures and interactions with environments, without any instructions. In Lalitpur, children were exposed more to the television. However, when watching the television interaction is limited and the positive emotions shared between humans are lost. Vocabulary acquisition depends on the number of core skills they learn or acquire during the earliest years. The core skills for literacy are: phonological awareness, receptive language, expressing skills, and listening comprehensions (Pandey, 2012; Silverman & Hartranft, 2015). According to Silverman and Hartranft (2015), for the development of literacy skills, children need to be able to hear, see, and interact with caregivers to adequately receive the input necessary for a strong foundation for learning new words and meanings later in life.

### **Parent's Involvement and their Education Level**

Parents' engagement with children in extra-textual talks, i.e. every day conversation and during everyday household chores contributes towards children's understanding of words and their contextual uses. I have found limited interactions between parents and the children in both of my study areas when parents and other adults have to go out of the home for work. Though children got little time with parents, there were plenty of opportunities to interact with friends and other community members in Banke. This contributed to support children's oral language. Quality parent-child interaction is one of the best ways to support children's language skills (Reinnie, 2006). Sangam's parents and his siblings' shared reading (storybooks) boosted their language and literacy skills. Reading storybook at home

does not only foster children's vocabulary, but also other domains of oral language. Due to the situation of migration in Lalitpur, community members were not available to interact while parents were working, however children did have siblings to interact with.

In both of my study areas, about sixty percent of families had not read or write. However, children were engaged in more didactic activities, such as helping parents in the household works, singing rhymes, playing games like word games or find a thing. Parents and children can practice the alphabet, letter and sounds together which can impact children's early decoding ability (Evans & Shaw, 2008). These were the parents who expected more formal reading and writing exercises from the preschools. They wanted more homework. I found the parents in both study areas hardly having time to play with their children as almost all parents are working fulltime.

Another way that children were exposed to pre-literacy skills is through the sharing of religious stories and singing religious songs *Bhajana* together with the children in only one community in Banke. Furthermore, the practice of creating drama or role plays from religious stories helped children develop their literacy skills along with vocabulary development. This was observed in Banke in one community. This was not found to be the case in Lalitpur.

In this study, it was found that though the parents were not engaged in reading books, research has shown a positive correlation with positive early literacy skills when parents read to children and or share stories expanding vocabulary (Sénéchal, & LeFevre, 2002). However, those parents were engaged in talking, and provided daily reinforcement for reading, writing and support for language and literacy skills

development. As a non-participant observer, I noticed that the children of these parents were better in their early literacy activities in school.

Though Sangam was quiet in the classroom, he helped other friends in finding their name cards at the time of attendance. He actively participated in the activities and supported friends to participate in the activities. (Observation, July 2015)

Parents' interaction is important for early literacy development of their children by modeling an interest in the literate world and interacting with their child through talk, reading, and particularly shared reading (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

### **Family Socio-economic Environment**

Literacy skills of the children depend on the interactions between family members, children and the environment in which literacy is naturally used in home (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). In both of my study areas, parents-child interactions are influenced due to their socio-economic status and parents' cultural practices (Young, 2002). They have limited time for interactions as they are busy with work. In Lalitpur, all the parents were working for daily wages and leave home early in the morning until the evening. In all the three study communities in Banke, all the fathers were working outside the home returning in the evening. The mothers in Banke worked outside the home and worked inside as well. Due to the limited time at home, the children and adult interaction was reduced. In my non-participant observation, I attended the school to meet mothers. One mother in Lalitpur left her child (4 years old) at the school before the school teachers arrived. She left her alone at the school and departed for work. This is her everyday routine as she is a single parent, with her husband working outside the country.

In my study area, all the families were from low socioeconomic and diverse language backgrounds. They worked as daily wages, temporary or seasonal labor

jobs. So, the economics of the family was unpredictable during different times of the year.

Even though all the children were from lower income families, there were differences in the children's ability in terms of early literacy. I found that the children with higher amounts of interaction, either with family or community members, their child's early literacy skills were higher. In addition, both quantity and quality of interactions between family and community members correlated to children's receptive vocabulary, story concepts, and emergent literacy skills. The interactions positively influenced the children's oral language and emergent literacy skills at home and in the school. These influences go beyond the economic and cultural contributions (Bracken & Fischel, 2008).

### **Parental Education Level**

Children having exposure with literacy-rich environment and literacy-related materials at home and preschool have high levels of oral language development (Sim, 2012).

The parents in Banke and Lalitpur attended formal schooling no more than through the grade five except for Sanjana's mom who finished high school and is now preparing for the nursing school. The parents who did not finish schooling expressed low level of confidence in reading writing related topics. During my interviews, parents and other adult family members who did not complete their schooling shared with me, "I cannot read or write, so I cannot help my child." It was common reaction both in Lalitpur and Banke.

Through my participant and non-participant observations, I noticed that at times parents would engage children in activities that could strengthen their language and literacy skills. However, the parents who had not completed their schooling

shared with me that they had little confidence in their ability to support their children's learning except for Sangam's family. The grandmother's job as a helper at the local private school provided her with enough exposure to schooling that she was able to find the confidence to support her grandson. Sanjana's mother reported that she wouldn't allow her daughter with other community children as she teaches her daughter at home. Sanjana's mother finished the high school and her confidence to provide the necessary support for Sanjana was there.

An example of parent activities that could strengthen literacy skills was during my visits to families in Lalitpur. I observed that parents provided their children few rupees to purchase items at their local shop. The children purchased the items and calculated the money correctly. This provided evidence that the children have the skills for counting money and they can identify the label of the items. Literacy is about reading abstract symbols. Labels are symbols. However, when I talked with the parents they still believed that the children were not reading. This example was repeated. In the community, there were signs on the shops, at the schools, on the bus. The children were able to discern between the shops and buses. The parents did not realize that the community contained 'curriculum' for the children to learn. I found that parents were missing opportunities to support their children due to their belief they were not educated enough to do so.

The parents who did not complete their schooling had a stronger attitude around the importance of homework. It was more important than playing, and thinking. For them, finishing the homework would provide what the child needed to learn. I found that the parents were better equipped to support their children than their held belief in their ability.

Only two families from Banke reported that they shared riddles and songs with their children. Those children did better in the school. The parents who shared this were parents who recognized some of the ways they could support their children. However, they still reported that their education level had impact on their ability.

### **Socio-emotional Wellbeing of the Children**

Positive relationships with the children are the largest influences of the socio-emotional wellbeing of the children (Our Kids Network, 2014). Parenting plays a major role for the socio emotional development of the children. The interactions between parents and the teachers are important for healthy socio-emotional development.

The children were scared of the teacher and could not express their learning during oral exam in one of the preschools in Lalitpur. I noticed the difference in the children's response. Most often, their participation in the class activities was dependent to the teachers' behavior.

The teacher was scolding/ yelling at a child when she was not able to respond to her teacher's question in the class. The classroom environment was stressful and fearful due to the teacher's reaction. (Non-participatory observation, Sainbu, October, 2015)

The children's activities were dependent upon the teacher student relationship. Children were found confident and ready to learn, actively participating in activities in the preschools like Gaurishankar and Holiya.

Other influences in the healthy development include secure attachment, positive parenting practices, the child's temperament, environment's influence on brain development, opportunities for play, the environmental and mental stresses and



the impact on brain development, the resiliency of the child, and cultural contexts and considerations (Our Kids Network, 2014).

### **Child's Characteristics and Personal Qualities**

The relationship between teachers, parents, and students is important in the child's social emotional wellbeing. Social emotional wellbeing is a significant contributor to learning in young children, especially in terms of language development and attention (Russell, Lee, Spieker, & Oxford, 2016). When children are encouraged to speak at the preschools by the teachers, the children who are interactive at home are confident in speaking, as in Gaurishankar preschool (observation). Children's participation in the interaction shows their oral language development.

Young children communicate using various strategies. They use different skills with different groups, like parents, community members, friends and strangers. At home, children speak loudly and confidently with their parents and siblings. If they need to convince their parents, they cry and also show non-verbal cultural gestures as a language of communication (Observation). I observed that children were using different strategies for different purposes. Temperaments, the inborn characteristics of children also influence parent and teacher relationships with students (McClowry, 2014).

However, in preschools and in front of strangers, these same children speak slowly, hesitantly and politely (observation). This might be the fear of the outsiders in children. I also observed that the opportunities being exposed to outsiders also related to the confidence of the children to interact with them.

Children learn new words from listening to others and from the print symbols or signs while reading stories through words, alphabets, and/or pictures. Recognizing

and understanding the symbols is initial steps to decoding the rules and regulations in reading. With the support and opportunity to interact with people and materials, children develop their understandings in the concepts of print. These include reading from left to right, top to bottom, and letter composition to create words. As the social learning theory of Bandura emphasizes, the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of children in everyday activities support them in the learning process. Modeling is one of the best tools to learn (Bandura, 1977; Montessori, 1967).

Learners and teachers embark on the journey of knowledge development together. The process takes place more easily when opportunities are created for teachers to fully comprehend their students' learning styles, temperaments, and their strength and weaknesses, which then allows the teacher to be better able to follow and support their students' progress and modify the instruction accordingly, creating a better 'goodness of fit' (Thomas & Chess, 1977). Temperaments are in born characteristics. Knowledge and understanding about the influence of temperaments on the development of children is important in relationship to the values, demands, and expectations from the culture in which the child grows. Rubina's mother supports her shy characteristics by gently talking with her and inviting her to interact. At times mom reports when she is frustrated and speaks loudly with Rubina, she cries and shuts down. (Observation and interview, August, 2014)

Salim, is a loud and active child. The teacher refers to him as a monkey as he is constantly curious about the materials. The teacher reports that she shouts a lot at Salim. Salim stops temporarily when the teacher shouts and then again starts to become interactive with others and the classroom. When the teacher asks Salim to sit and write, he begins to write but then is easily distracted, and begins to interact with

other people and materials in the classroom. (Observation and interview, August, 2014)

It is important for primary caregivers to be nurturing in their interactions with young children to support secure attachment relationships. The understanding of how temperament and inborn characteristics influence young children's reactions and behaviors is central to providing an appropriate response to the child (Kochanska, 2001; Young, 2009). It is valuable for caregivers to understand the role experience has in determining what sorts of support they can offer. Young children acquire a range of emotion and expressions while interacting with their primary caregiver and other family members. These interactions assist the young child in their emotional development (Belsky, Friedman, & Hsieh, 2001; Young, 2009) which in turn impacts language and literacy learning. Responsiveness and warm physical contact increase the chances of forming secure attachment bonds (Posada et al., 1999). Parent behaviors and attitudes influence attachment formation.

### **Parental Attitude and Aspiration, Secure Attachment and Positive Parenting Practices**

Family stress and poverty are two environmental conditions that negatively impact healthy emotional development. The impact of poverty has been found to cause illness and fatigue in parents and young children (Vondra & Barnett, 1999). Poverty conditions can result in families having to move more frequently, increase in parental stress, and an overall lack of sensitivity to young children's needs (Young, 2009).

One parent from Banke stated "Yes, I hit my child as they need it. We have our own work to do and we are tired. The children start nagging and so they get a stick from us." She continues to report that "when my husband drinks outside and

comes home, we quarrel and he hits me when he is drunk,”. (Focus group discussions and interviews)

Another parent from Lalitpur reports “*We move from our place. We have no relatives in this community. Both of us have to go to work. No one stay at home to take care of the children. I have to keep children inside the room to stay safe. When I come back from work, I am so tired. I cannot help them. And when I come home, I see the children making room disorganized. I feel angry and scold and sometimes I have to hit them. I do not know what to do, this is how life is.*” (Observations and interviews)

Interventions can help support parent-child relationships through weekly home visits and parent support groups (Wendland-Carro et al., 1999; Young, 1999; Lieberman, Weston, & Pawl, 1991). Interventions consisting of an educational component advising parents on specific behaviors consistent with the values of their socialization processes and practices can increase secure attachment relationships and healthy emotional development for children and reduce the stress in families. In case of Paraspur, community is there to take care of children. The community people closely watch the children’s everyday activities and support both families and children for learning values. However, in Lalitpur children and families are isolated from the community. There were no community support and linkage in their everyday activities. This isolation was not only disintegrating the values of the society but also leaving them alone as an individual. Looking back to children’s education, families are left alone to worry of their children. Whatever support system they had for children’s learning, were always limited. Naturally, children’s learning remained weak. Consistent home visits from people who are knowledgeable in early childhood has been shown to support families under stress by shifting parent attitudes,

expectations of children, and daily patterns of interaction and behavior of the parent (Young, 2009). Counseling and coaching can aid teachers and parents in the identification of their own and the children's temperament to help channel their interactions to achieve more effective interactions with the children, supporting oral language and literacy development.

### **Home Preschool Relations**

Activities in the home during the preschool year scaffold children's early learning skills and develop their oral language. These early activities support children for developing the foundation of the literacy skills and reading comprehension. This natural nurturing process develops their conceptual understanding towards learning and helps motivates children to their reading in the later years (Leseman & Jong, 1998).

A child's language is the reflection of their home cultures. Children who speak different mother language at home lag behind in oral communications in the second language. However, it is believed that fluency and literacy in the mother tongue lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning additional languages (Pandey, 2012). I observed that children who can express and participate in their mother language in schools have confidence in their learning. These children have different capacity to express themselves and communicate with others. Saroj do not speak clearly. He lisps. Sangam speaks very slowly and Rubina does not speak at all. These children gradually learn second language and prepare for transition to formal academic learning in the primary schools. Their oral language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and knowledge of the words are the basic skills that children bring from home to preschools. The pre-school experiences with words and pictures support children to construct their own understanding in the language.

The extensive use of oral language both at home and preschools enables children to develop literacy along with many other areas (Munro, 2009). For example, Pratigya did not have literacy-rich environment at home but she was confident in use of language, and expressed herself. If children have a strong grasp of language skills, they are able to question, converse, investigate and initiate the meaning making in class and outside.

Teachers can be instrumental in providing language-rich experiences to children as in Gaurishankar and Holiya preschools. These teachers using both home language and interactive classroom activities created positive learning environment for the children. However, the children who come to preschools (ECD centre) with language background other than the language of instruction and communication had difficulties in making effective interactions with teachers and preschool environments.

Ranjan was hesitant to speak and ask the questions to the teacher. The teacher did not understand his dialect and Ranjan did not follow the teacher's instruction. (Observation, 2015)

### **Preschool Context**

Preschool education plays a critical and significant role in promoting literacy, preventing reading difficulties, and preparing young children for further schooling. Teachers' application and approaches to communication, motivation, knowledge in child development, knowledge in teaching, and their competencies in teaching learning processes influence how children learn language and literacy. In Nepali primary schools, children are expected to demonstrate their oral language skills with fluency in communication, come with motivation to learn, show ability to demonstrate their background knowledge, and ability to express their ideas (USAID & Equip, 2010). Through my findings, it has been shown that teachers and parents

are not able to prepare young children to enter primary school with these abilities and competencies. In addition, in my study I have found that no attention is given to the transition between home and preschool and preschool and primary school.

### **Teachers Competencies and Motivation**

Those teachers who have given priority to and are convinced to continue teaching in the children's home language were creating a better learning environment. As in Holiya ECD center, teacher used home language and created child friendly activities-based teaching learning. Children from these homes who had more interactions had more confidence in their language and communication, as Pratigya, Salim can tell/retell stories and take parts in the activities. (Observation, 2015)

Typically, children can develop a strong foundation for literacy and reading skills when they are given opportunities to engage in purposeful and meaningful language, and early print activities and interactions (Brown, 2014). Reading is a process that builds upon a wide range of developing skills and is an ongoing process. Print-rich environment and everyday engagement on reading activities supports children to move through reading development. However, in my study preschools, only few activities were undertaken for supporting children to develop concepts of print for their language and literacy skills. The activities and materials included storytelling, a few matching games with pictures and words, charts on the walls and other visuals. It was found that two teachers did use the materials however these two teachers repeated the same activities and used the materials in the same way over and over again (Observation). Four teachers did not use any variety of print materials, and therefore, there was no opportunity for children to understand how print functioned for the purposes of reading, particularly with regard to books. Concepts about print include- knowing where the front and the back of the book are located; knowing right

side up from upside down; knowing that the print, not the picture, is what we read; knowing which direction we read in; and knowing the meaning of punctuation marks (Brown, 2014). My study revealed that the teachers received government training (Interview with teachers). This training was provided at the initial onset of the teacher's work. However, it is not supervised and monitored. As mentioned before, two teachers had access from outside visitors who provided access to follow up and variety of teaching learning ideas. The teacher's understanding and creativity in teaching learning process are very limited.

While the teachers were teaching Nepali alphabet and words, children were reciting the *ka for Kalam*, and *Kha for kharayo*, for the last few days. When I asked what else could be from Kha, thinking that one of the child's name comes from Kha, Khagendra, no one could reply, and even teachers didn't give any hint on it. I told them kha for Khagendra and asked them to find more words from the same initials. I haven't found similar activities in English as well. They just follow one word for one alphabet 'a for apple.' (Observation, 2014, 2015)

What I discovered in one case in Banke is that the teacher's confidence influenced their ability to be an interactive teacher.

In Holiya ECD center, teacher was partially following the activity-based teaching learning during my initial visits. When I regularly visited the ECD center for the class observations, teachers started story telling using different methods, picture book, puppets etc. She also used small group and big group activities providing varieties of materials in the center. (Observations, 2015)

This deviance from my other observations led me to further investigate the connection between teacher competencies and teacher confidence in terms of teacher efficacy.



Teachers can support children in practicing word learning skills. Teachers in the two preschools applied various methods and materials to support children for independent word learning with different instructional activities. Teachers demonstrated word pronunciation and accent to the children/student in the classroom. While reciting alphabets or the picture names (words) the teacher has to be very careful on phonemic awareness of the children. However, I found that the teachers were not aware of the letter/sound pronunciations of the children in my study preschools.

The teacher was pronouncing '*Putali*' and children were pronouncing '*Tutali*'. Similarly, the teacher was pronouncing '*Knees and Toes*' and children were pronouncing '*Nish and Poes*'.

The phonemic awareness and the basic language skills develop simultaneously and it starts in the early literacy stage (often in the preschool years). When children start learning/ reciting rhyme and recognizing rhyming texts and repeating these rhymes themselves and when they engage in word play or any other play time. But in my study area, teachers did not notice the differences in the pronunciations.

### **School Community Influence**

Community involvement in the school activities has positive effects on academic improvement and increased achievement of the student (Edwards, 2004). In my study area, the community context influenced the child's learning.

The case of Ramesh, he left his community (in India) and now is in a new place (in Nepal). He studied in India and when he came back to Nepal, he forgot his earlier learning. Because of this he was quite sad and depressed. He was missing his friends, missing his teachers, and his animals and house. As he was born in India, he did not have any attachment to Nepal. He described his previous school with a smile

on his face and his eye brows heightened- it had a big compound with a big playground and there were gardens and many children playing together. The teachers talked softly and kindly. They would not shout. It was located in the northern part of India.

Furthermore, Ramesh is a Hindu and all of his friends are Muslim. So, when the children talked about going to Madarasa School inside the mosque on Fridays, Ramesh was not allowed to go, which reinforced his isolation.

Parents have strong influence on schools. Sometimes it is difficult for teachers to remain more objective and secular to meet all students' needs. For example, one Muslim man said- why do not teach children A for Allah and connect learning the alphabet with the religion? Doing this would again reinforce isolation of Ramesh.

The community culture and school culture can align as in the case with Banke since the teacher comes from the community. In Lalitpur, this is not the case. Teachers come from all around Kathmandu and are not necessarily from the community where the children who attend are from. Teachers are less familiar with the family contexts in Lalitpur, and therefore, are more judgmental.

Shaming is something I frequently observed teachers using in Lalitpur. Teachers in Banke did not use this method. I deduced that Banke teachers did not use shaming because the teachers were from the same community, shared similar values and patterns of behavior, and had a deeper understanding of the family's life journey.

### **Teacher's Culture and Language Background**

Teachers' role is important to support children by demonstrating or modeling from books, stories and from socio-cultural contexts (Smith & Berge, 2009). The

choices teachers make in the stories they use are influenced by their own cultural and language background.

The teacher, as an agency, has power and influence on the children and on their classroom. When teachers do not have a self-awareness of how their own culture influences them they can project their own values and beliefs onto the children. In my study, I observed in Lalitpur how this lack of awareness controlled and suppressed the children.

In Lalitpur, I was waiting in a class to observe a teacher yelling at a young girl because the girl's parents were not literate. The little girl was crying and then she went to sit by herself, crying and being quiet. The other children were also scared. Their heads went down to the desks, sitting without movement or sound. They did not look up to see the teacher. The teacher left the room. I started to sing a song and the children started to sing with me and the little girl stopped crying and joined in. (Field Note, 2015)

My observations raised the questions on the socio-cultural background of the teachers who supported the reproduction of more colonial rote ways of teaching-learning approach. I found during my observation in the classroom activities that teachers were trying to influence learning patterns through their pre-understanding and not providing space for the children to bring their ideas.

The teachers used call and response as the predominant method of teaching. This influence came from their own learning experiences as children. The teachers were not able to critically reflect on why they used this method. In addition, teachers believe that hitting and punishing children is necessary for children to learn good behavior and to be good students. (Observation and interviews, 2014, 2015)

This way of teaching was typical for the teachers when they were small. This way of teaching has its roots in coloristic oppressive forms of teaching, as it kept the colonizers in control and those who were colonized remained fragmented and scared.

The symbolic action of any pedagogic agency - its capacity to inculcate meaning- is a function of its 'weight' in the structure of power relations. Pedagogic action, in reproducing culture in all arbitrariness, also reproduces the peer relation, under which, it writes its own operation, (Jenkins, 2002, p. 105).

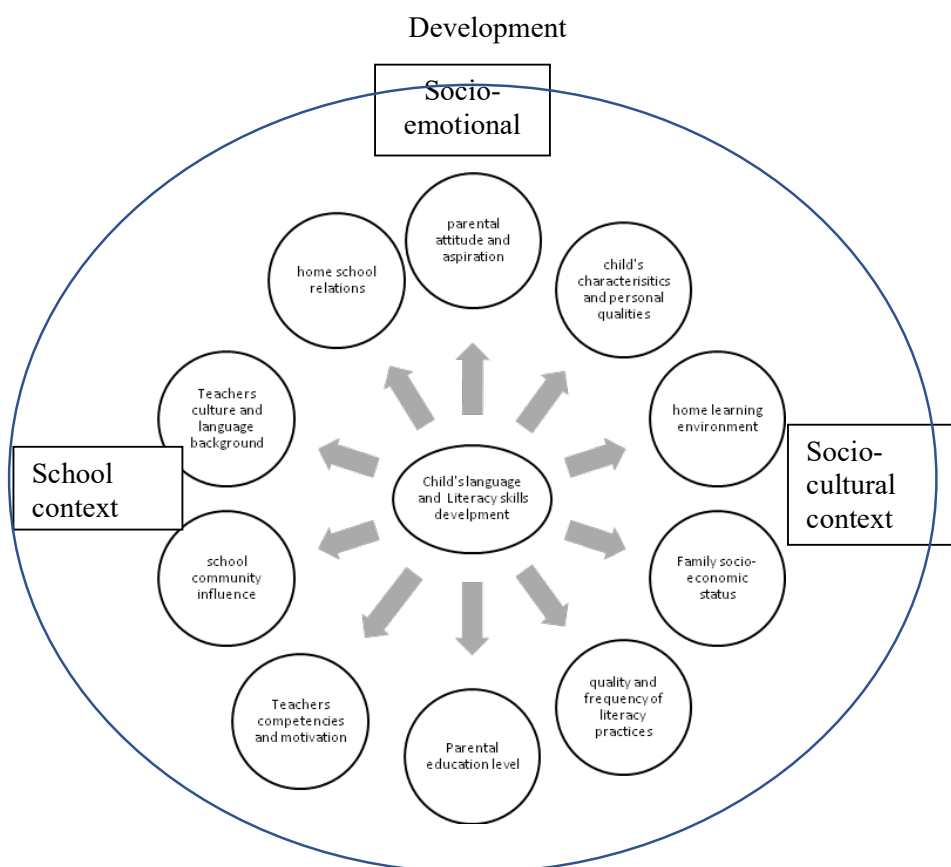
It is important for teachers to get to know and to interact with their families and community. Understanding the child's family and community as well as the children's connection with the dominant language use in the school provide teachers with a basic foundation to better support the learning of language and literacy in their classroom. However, there is need of critical self-reflection. During my interviews, the teachers had difficulty in reflecting upon their own abilities in terms of their own biases and limitations. Therefore, I find that not only training in teaching and learning methodologies and materials is needed to increase the healthy development of language and literacy for young children in Nepal, but also training that inculcates practical applications of self-reflection, mindfulness, cultural responsiveness, critical thinking, and application strategies. In addition, trainings in bilingual or dual language programming are necessary since so many young children in Nepal do not speak Nepali or English as their mother tongue. Research strongly shows that the use of their first language during class instruction and communication facilitate children to adapt and prepare them to learn (Ball, 2010). As Vygotsky suggested, the teacher needs to understand how to use and apply the knowledge of the zone of proximal development of an individual child: what child can do on her/ his own and what the child can do with help of the teachers or the adults (Vygotsky, 1978; John-Seiner &

Mahn, 1996; Schunk, 2012). The ability of the child cannot be separated from the cultural context of home; therefore, teachers should be aware of how their own cultural context and background may prejudice the ability to support the child from different background and culture.

### **Model of Contributing Factors in Oral Language and Literacy of Young Children in Nepal**

Summarizing my understanding from this study, the chart (figure 5) below shows the influencing factors of a child's oral language and literacy skills development.

Figure 5. Influencing Factors of a Child's Oral Language and Literacy Skills



### **Synthesizing the Findings**

Oral language and literacy in young children is complex, multifaceted and is influenced by many factors. I have developed a model to capture the influences that I have found in my study. This model describes the influences, where they were found, how they contribute, and why they are important to understand the complexities of oral language and literacy learning for young children.

The interrelatedness of the contributing aspects sheds light on how to develop interventions to enhance children's language and literacy learning. In addition, because the factors are interconnected by attending to one of the factors, there will be impact, even if small, on the other factors. For example, when I was a participant observer, the strict teacher who used rote learning as her dominant method of teaching, left the room. I interacted with the children in a gentle and kind manner. The children became more responsive, participatory, and shared their language and literacy skills in a wider depth and breath. Teachers were not using child friendly methodologies and pedagogies (we can define these at some point earlier on or here can work too). Though these teachers were trained at some level, they were not practicing the approach, not being confident towards the children's ability to understand. Rote learning is easier for teachers as they do not have to prepare lesson plans and materials for the activities. It was also because of the teachers' capabilities to prepare the lessons. These teachers were not confident on the activities-based learning approach as they were habituated with rote methods of teaching and learning.

Another example is print materials. Print awareness supports children's ability to recognize words as components of both oral and written communication. Print awareness is predictive of early grade reading of the children (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015). If children develop good understanding on the concept of prints

(print awareness), they will have a greater ability to match spoken words to written words while reading. However, the teachers were repeating alphabet learning (applying the part to whole teaching approach), underestimating the child's capacity to learn words before the alphabet. Print awareness enhances children's understanding that each word is separate, and that words are separated by a space within each sentence. In this regard, I found that the teachers and the parents' collaboration is important to provide plenty of opportunities to the children for developing their concepts of print awareness. There are print materials available at the home and the community, such as hoarding boards (billboard), sign boards, labels in the household materials, newspapers, books and booklets etc. However, parents and teachers have not used it as resource materials for reading skills development. This is an area that can be increased with teacher parent training. It is also inter-related with the children's characteristics and personal qualities, home learning environment and quality and frequency of literacy practices within existing socio-cultural contexts.

Knowledge of alphabet and awareness of phonology are both strong predictors of literacy skills (reading and writing). There are systematic relationships between letters and sounds. Written words are composed of letter patterns representing the sounds of spoken words, which helps in recognizing words quickly and accurately (Pandey, 2012). Teachers were helping children to recite letter and word, ignoring the letter word relationships. However, I found that it was helping children to familiarize with words automatically, and decode or sound out new words (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015). I found that children can read fluently the words they have recited with letters (for example, a for apple, b for ball) both in English and Nepali. Reading fluency leads children to oral language proficiency.

Nepali school system still follows some of the colonial teaching-learning practices. Such as, reciting the words and letters, copying the texts from books, following teacher's instruction for drawing and coloring etc. Teacher centered teaching learning approach reinforces power dynamics and hierarchies, which impacts the social emotional wellbeing and learning of children. Therefore, colonial education practices are prevalent in teacher and parent attitude.

They mostly focus on the recitations of the words. It is believed that, learning can only be done by recitation and repetition. Learning is done by rote/memorization while farming is done by everyday visit. Therefore, teachers in my study preschools emphasized on recitation of letters and words. In eastern practices '*shravana*' is actively listening to the text through a teacher. Therefore, teachers would take the lead in class and children would listen to them mostly instead of creating activity-based teaching-learning approaches. Also, sometimes one of the children would stand in front and would shout the alphabet-words (a for apple, b for ball....) or the picture-words and other children would follow him/her. It is also the process of "cognitive modeling," in which the teacher instructs the children for the activities. Instead of letting them experiment, teachers herself or himself performs the task (Schunk, 2012). However, in ancient times it was only through story and listening or modeling in the fields or as an apprentice, children learned. There were not so many options as there is today and children would not come together in classrooms as they do today. Children learn in more natural settings such as alongside their parents at work in the fields or in their business, or in religious contexts.

As discussed in chapter V, the activities followed by the teachers were interdependent on the teacher's socio-cultural background. For example, teacher in Langtang preschool was shouting as children making classroom stressful



(observation). Similarly, in Soniya and other preschools in Banke, the language of instruction was dominated by their mother language. According to Vygotsky (1978), “culture teaches children both what to think and how to think.” Teachers’ cultural background influences the teaching-learning approaches. Teachers were transferring knowledge through the use of language as a primary form of interaction. Language represented the culture of both the teachers and the children. From Bourdieu’s standpoint, each agent is equipped with a habitus (shaped in formative years of home culture) that bears affinity to a larger referential group/class habitus (Lizardo, 2009). The teaching-learning approaches were dominated with the teachers’ social construction rather than children’s basic need to develop oral language skills, mostly in Lalitpur. However, the oral language development of the children is not carried out in a vacuum; the activities carried out by the teachers are the results of the social construct. They have their own social origins and habitus. Teachers were supporting to develop some of the basic oral language skills, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension without any prior preparation. Teacher’s limited awareness on how to develop these abilities in children makes them slow in learning oral language skills.

During the early years, oral language development occurs through meaningful interactions with others, such as instructional conversations and collaboration with peers. To meet the challenge of teaching in both languages, teachers in my study area were recruited from the local community. It is the teacher’s role to bridge the home language and the second language used in the preschools. Though the teachers were not properly trained (prepared) to develop children’s oral language, vocabulary and literacy skills, they were providing opportunities to listen to and also share the new words that children learnt every day.

It is important to make learning applicable in every aspect of home as well as community. For this, teachers can provide some tasks to children to remember and associate the learning of new words through their daily usage. But I did not find such exercise in the preschools. Teachers simply followed the alphabet pattern and provided this to children to memorize or told children to memorize the picture word chart without any creative activities. The project work to the children to share the words they use at home specifically at the particular situation is effective in learning vocabulary. Such activities support children to bring new words from home to school and also to take new words to home from school. However, the teachers' capabilities to bridge home language to preschools and linking it in oral language and literacy skills were found limited in my study area. The learning is different with the difference of their mental age and the age of the children. This is called 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) (Smagorinsky, Hansen, & Fink, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers are the key to support children for this.

It is found that parents' involvement in children's learning is varied. It is noted that children from lower socio-economic background have poor learning achievements (Van Steensel, 2006; Hamilton, 1990). In my study area, some families living in especially harsh circumstances had fewer resources such as access to books and opportunities for involvement. Other parents, though they were economically poor, they involved and participated in the programs, and supported children in language and literacy skills. Sometimes these parents helped the child regularly, visited the preschools, assisted teachers, and shared stories with children. In many cases, older siblings were the "designated" reader for the smaller (child) and helped for learning (shared reading) as he or she was trying to read alone. No parents were involved in supporting reading to the children at my study area. This was mostly due

to their limited time to stay at home with children, limited access to materials as well as the cultural practice of not to use household materials to use it and the lower confidence towards the literacy activities.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter is based on the overall reflection of my study. I have also shared my own childhood memories and connected them with my field experiences. Children come from different socio-cultural backgrounds, with a wide range of language experiences. Sometime these various backgrounds make difficulties for teachers to smoothly operate the teaching-learning activities due to the teacher's limited training and understanding of development and the teaching learning processes. Teachers' role is important to facilitate these children to develop their oral language, vocabulary, and literacy skills. Children learn by listening, speaking, reading and writing in the (pre) schools with the support from home and the preschool environments. These are the influencing factors for child's language and literacy skills development. The major components are socio-cultural contexts, socio-emotional well-being of the children, families, teachers, and school contexts.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I present the conclusions of my study. I discuss and provide conclusions and reflections based on the findings of the research. I delineate implications and provide recommendations and considerations for further research practitioners, policy makers, and academicians.

#### **Recapitulations of the Study**

I started my research with an interest in the area of children's learning and literacy skills development at the preschools. Through my interest and my work in early childhood of seventeen years, I was drawn to study oral language and literacy skills of young children. I reviewed the literature related to children's language and literacy skills. I applied Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory in the learning and development of the children. I also used Bandura's socio learning theories in relation to my study. My study focused on investigating the environment provided at home and preschools in two locations in Nepal. Over the course of time, I focused on the influences on children's oral language and literacy competencies and the support provided by parents and teachers to enhance their oral language and literacy skills.

Research has proven the importance of home environment to promote young children's oral language and literacy development through the interaction between parents, family members, community's, and the children (Sim, 2012; Snow, 2013; Siegel & Harzell, 2013). Home environments offer opportunities foundational to the development of oral language and literacy (Chu & Wu, 2010). Children observe and imitate the language and literacy activities of the family members. Through my literature review, I discovered that there are limited evidences about the home and

preschool environments that support language and literacy developmental, especially those children with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds different from the dominant languages of Nepal.

Considering the oral language and literacy skills of the children, I started to study why so many children in Nepal were weak in language and literacy skills in primary grades? Why were children from multilingual backgrounds facing more challenges in learning than children from the dominant or monolingual language contexts? These foundational questions provided a base for further guiding questions for the research three research questions: (a) how do children demonstrate their oral language and vocabulary at home and preschool (ECD center)? (b) What language and literacy skills do children use or demonstrate at home and preschool? (c) What strategy is being used to enhance language and literacy skills at home and at the preschool? To investigate these questions, I used qualitative methods including key note interviews, focus group discussions, and observations to learn about the everyday activities of the children at home and at the preschools simultaneously.

This research followed a qualitative design to explore children's oral language competency, and their home environment and parental support for enhancing children's literacy skills (reading and writing) and the influence of teachers and the school environment. The study was undertaken in six preschools (ECD centers) in two semi urban communities in the Midwestern and Central regions of Nepal. I used a Qualitative approach for the study as it brings the meaning of people's lives, their views, and perspectives under real-world conditions (Yin, 2011) as a foundation for understanding the contributing factors that influence the development of oral language and literacy in young children. The study was designed with subjective perception and knowledge which was generated through the interactions with research

participants and their multiple socio-cultural contexts. This study is based on the interpretive paradigm using an ethnographic approach.

Over the course of my study, I found variations in the situation and the available environment to the children in study communities in Banke and Lalitpur. The data showed that the literacy activities that supported children from home were not adequate in all the study areas. Similarly, the literacy activities in preschools were found equally inadequate because of the teachers' understanding regarding the literacy skills. In all the study areas, where children have mother tongue, the dominance of the Nepali language impacted the children in learning their language. The teachers had difficulties in addressing the needs of children whose home language was other than Nepali.

All the children were learning Nepali and in Nepali language though they had their own mother language. Moreover, all the parents emphasized the need to learn Nepali and English as it was understood that these subjects were important for further school education. This made learning more complicated for the bilingual children in terms of social emotional well-being, confidence, reading and writing and comprehension. Because of the domination of the Nepali language and aspiration for the English language, the use of children's home language was in decline.

Literacy skills are interdependent with oral language skills. There is a strong link between oral language, word knowledge, and reading skills (Silverman & hartranft, 2015; Snow, 2013; Pandey, 2012; Dahlgren, 2008). Home and school activities help children to develop their oral language. However, children whose first language is not Nepali have different 'home talk' and 'school talk' and sometimes they face difficulties in understanding and using it.

## **Conclusions**

Children develop their oral language and the literacy skills within their environment (both indoor and outdoor), interacting with their parents and the teachers. Their literacy in mother tongues is developed before they enter the preschool. Parents and siblings play important roles to support children's oral language and literacy skills development as they are involved in everyday interactions/ communication activities at home.

The relation between home and preschool help children boost their confidence, educational achievement, and ability to learn. Parents and teachers bridge the gap between the home language and language of instruction at the preschool. However, the transitions between home and school for young children are not getting attention. The teachers and parents have limited communication regarding children's everyday activities. It is about just for the purpose.

There are differences in language learning (phonology) between the preschool and the home environment. The socio-emotional well-being and the socio-cultural contexts are not considered as the part of the regular study area in the school contexts.

Children follow systematic and clear instructions. While the children follow the teacher's instructions even in a different language, they do not necessarily relate the meaning to their own home language. Many times, the children simply imitate the teacher and other students. At time, this creates confusion in part of the children, and in some extreme cases, the children start to believe that one language is correct and the other is wrong.

The differences in instructional methods highly influence language and vocabulary competencies of the children. Children's level of confidence on

expression, interaction and other activities is directly related with the teachers' level of competencies.

The study reveals that parents were unaware of available opportunities, thus, unable to create conducive learning environment for language and literacy practices at home. In the home environment of low socio- economic background, parents had limited time and resources to create children's foundation of the literacy skills. However, they were not using the opportunities available to them.

The preschool environment supports the culturally privileged children; those whose mother tongue is the same as the instructional language in the learning process. The curriculum and curricular materials are in Nepali. When the child's mother tongue is different than Nepali, the Nepali language of instruction is not ideal for those children. Thus, preschools have been contributing to the reproduction of social differentiation. Those who speak different languages and belong to different cultural backgrounds fall behind because of ineffective teaching-learning processes adopted by the teachers, unaware of child's temperament, limited interactions at home, limited communications between families/parents and teachers etc.

The teaching learning approach is also the contributors for the learning of the children. Activity based teaching supports children to be confident in oral language.

Children's language and literacy skills were also found affected according to their home environment. There were limited opportunities to the teachers for pre- and in-service trainings in linguistic and cultural diversity, and in principles of first and second language acquisition. All the teachers in the study area require training in language and literacy skills.

Preschool teachers use both active teaching learning and conventional teaching in the preschools. Those teachers who follow conventional teaching



methods instead of active teaching and learning emphasize reading and writing using recitation and dictation of alphabets as the core elements of literacy skills. *Au contraire*, teachers who interact with children in their own language, and teaching using the mother tongue, encourage children to speak and process in their mother tongue have better result than others.

Literacy skills are not necessarily developed inside a classroom with a set curriculum. Children develop their skills from the point when they start listening to the adults (parents and teachers). They catch the words in every conversation/ instruction, and start imitating them and building on their vocabulary. For children whose home language and language of instruction at the preschool is the same, they have a single base and they build on it linearly. Bilingual children, on the other hand, have separate home language base and school language base, and that creates confusion to the children. The preschool plays a vital role to bridge this gap. Activity-based learning over curriculum-based learning helps children develop their oral language and literacy skills in context. As such, everything can be used as learning materials. For example, food packages, hording boards, signs and symbols can also teach new words the same way storybooks (textbooks) can. Children learn effectively when classroom environment is interactive and child-friendly, which further boosts their confidence in speaking/sharing.

Oral language and literacy skills developed in preschool (early age) support them to develop their reading and writing skills in primary grades and beyond. And thus, teachers and parents play a key role in creating the environment conducive for developing oral language and literacy skills.

### **Implications**

The implication of the study is broadly divided into four distinct categories,

#### **Practice**

Preschool teachers are responsible for creating enabling environment for children's learning and development by addressing the issues related to language and culture. Teachers role is important to the use of multilingual materials, storytelling and retelling in children's language, and create shared learning environments at the classroom. Support with reading materials and positive interactions at home and preschools creates enabling environment for the children for developing oral language, vocabulary and literacy skills, and also the skills to bridge the gaps between home and preschool.

#### **Policy**

Children's learning is directly related to their home literacy environment, socio-economic conditions of the parents, home language of the children and the preschool's teaching learning approaches and its quality. The policy needs to address these issues including child-friendly learning approaches with inclusion of culturally diverse children in the mainstream of formal education. It is necessary to amend the current policy of education in Nepal, especially in the early childhood and (pre) primary level of education. The focus for the government is to address the language and literacy skills with vocabulary development for early childhood/preschool children.

### **Future Research**

This study opens the learning space for the researchers interested in the oral language, vocabulary and literacy skills of the children in rural and urban regions. There is need of further research in foundation of language, early experience, home

environment and attitude of families since they all contribute to language and literacy growth of young children. The study contributes for revising the current policy of education in Nepal, especially in the early childhood education and preschools. This study opens the avenues to explore the reasons behind poor literacy skills, poor reading comprehension of the children in grade one, grade two, grade three and above.

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