

Communicative Competence of Secondary School Students of Bhutan

Choeda¹, Tashi Gyeltshen², Sonam Daker³, Sonam Gyeltshen⁴, Wangmo⁵, Dorji Letho⁶

Department of Language Education, Samtse College of Education, Bhutan

Email ¹choeda.sce@rub.edu.bt, ² tgyeltshen.sce@rub.edu.bt, ³ saker.sce@rub.edu.bt, ⁴ sgyeltshen.sce@rub.edu.bt, ⁵wangmo.sce@rub.edu.bt, ⁶dlethro.sce@rub.edu.bt

Abstract— This study on communicative competence of secondary school students of Bhutan was conducted with the lower, middle and higher secondary school students under four districts Chukha, Samtse, Paro and Thimphu. The study aimed to explore why communicative proficiency was generally perceived low as reported by LaPrarie (2014). Random sampling survey questionnaire was administered to 864 students and purposive sampling interviews conducted with 24 teacher and 2 curriculum developers from Royal Education Council. Other data collection methods included classroom lesson observation and documentary analysis. Simple descriptive analysis for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data analysis were employed. The study found that majority of the students had low proficiency level in both English and Dzongkha with a few who had higher level. The low communicative competence in both English and Dzongkha has been attributed to the negative influence of social media in which students showed more interested than engaging in academic reading and writing activities. However, the study found the schools organised relevant activities such as literary fest, debates, and speeches, speaking and writing activities to enhance the communication skills. The research recommends activities such as reviewing the curriculum standards, enhancing teachers' skills to focus on the communicative skills to improve students' proficiency in communication.

Keywords— Barriers to communication, communicative competencies, curriculum standards, grammatical competencies, linguistic competencies, reading and writing competencies.

I. BACKGROUND

Since the issue of decline in the proficiency of English and *Dzongkha* has been reported, it was necessary to investigate in order to gain deeper understanding of the status of communicative competence of secondary school. According to Hartshorne (2011), "Certain aspects of language develop during secondary school years [such as] complex verbal reasoning, understanding and using figurative language, telling more involved stories and using increasingly sophisticated social communication skills" (p.4). Hartshorne further mentioned that language is the most important skill to enable students to participate in secondary classrooms besides being the main access to the curriculum they study. Therefore, it was appropriate that the proficiency of *Dzongkha* and English be studied to understand and present the status to the stakeholders for improvement.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite English being used as the medium of instruction in the schools for decades, Bhutanese society expressed concerns on the quality of education in particular reference to English language skills of students starting late 1990s. Comments were made in the media stating that Bhutanese students have poor communication skills. The news report titled, 'Crumbling system' reported that high school students, as well as college graduates, lack communication skill (Deki, 2012, para, 36). It has been observed that Bhutanese students have no control over English, implying that they face problems in using the language. The problem of communication skill was also expressed when a Kolkata-based Call Centre conducted interview to recruit Bhutanese class twelve graduates to work with them. Despite the large number of applicants, very few were found to have the communication competence required to work at the Call Centres. LaPrairie (2014) also commented that Bhutanese students have lower ability to speak English.

In 2017, Ministry of Education provided weeklong nationwide training in effective communication in English and *Dzongkha*. These situations indicate that students face challenges on effective communication. It has been noted that majority of the students were not able to speak *Dzongkha* “in its purest form” (Pem, 2017). It has also been observed that Bhutanese secondary school students faced difficulties reading and writing in *Dzongkha*. Further, during a youth camp in Thimphu, students said that *Dzongkha* was one of the most difficult subjects (Zam, 2015).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Bhutan is a multilingual country. The two most important languages used are *Dzongkha* (national language) and English besides 19 local dialects as identified by Tourism Council of Bhutan. All level of schools, institutes and colleges have English as medium of instruction. Even the traditional monastic schools and colleges such as *lopdras* and *sheydras* have some English language classes though *Dzongkha* medium instruction is dominantly used. English has gained importance and momentum since the start of English medium of instruction in the schools in 1960s. In 1964, the Royal Government of Bhutan framed a policy on English education (LaPrairie, 2014). Since then the policy has not only been in effect but has gained momentum with globalisation. The popularity of English has leveled *Dzongkha*, the national language. Thinley and Maxwell (2013) pointed out that English at secondary level education has the potential of playing the role of preserving culture. Similarly, Robinson (2012, p.1) said, “English can also be used as a tool or medium with which to preserve culture”.

In 2006, a new curriculum in English was introduced. Department of Curriculum Research and Development [DCRD] spearheaded the framing and implementation of the new curriculum with professional support from Canadian Professors. It was introduced based on the experts’ premise that the English language education had limited language skills and lacked child-centred teaching-learning processes at that time (Kirkpatrick & Gyer, 2012). Thus, using English in all the four strands of reading, writing, listening and speaking, has been the focus of the new curriculum. Moreover, English is one of the tools for all Bhutanese citizens to get connected with the world. Robinson (2012) holds the view that Bhutanese can use English to get access to international opportunities.

The Ministry of Education [MoE] has laid down the standards of the communicative skills in the schools in the policy

document ‘*The Silken Knot*’. Further, the expectations of the Bhutanese graduates’ communication skill at primary education level (pre-primary – six) and three secondary education levels namely, Lower Secondary School, Bhutan Certificate in Secondary Education, and Bhutan Higher Secondary Education Certificate are described in the Bhutan Qualification Framework [BQF] (2012) document published by Bhutan Accreditation Council.

3.1 What is communicative competence?

Different linguists and experts have defined ‘communicative competence’ in various ways. The two words ‘communicative’ and ‘competence’ means “competence to communicate” (Tuan, 2017, p.106). However, its proper meaning can be derived by examining the different definitions stated in the literature. Communicative competency is also referred to as language proficiency. Savignon (1972, as cited in Savignon, 2018) Taylor (1988) and Bachman (1990) equated communicative competency with language proficiency. According to Ugwuanyi (2012, p. 27), “Communicative competence involves the general linguistic behaviour and ability which enables one to be a good user of a language in terms of productivity (speaking and writing) and receptibility (listening and reading)”. Savignon (1972, as cited in Savignon, 2018) and Bachman and Palmer (1996, as cited in Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007) said that communicative competence is dynamic in nature with the linguistic competence adapting to the context with paralinguistic aspects while in communicating act. They also said that it is relative and not absolute since competence is the sum total of other competences as proposed by Canal and Swain (1980, 1981, cited in Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007) that includes ‘grammatical’, ‘sociolinguistic’ and ‘strategic competence’. Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell’s (1995), (as cited in Juhász, 2015) have propounded five models which constitute communicative competence. They included linguistic, strategic, discourse, socio-cultural and actional which are inter-related. Thus, considering the perspective of different authors or linguists, communicative competence or language proficiency is a broad term which includes the competencies in grammar, discourse and strategic.

3.2 Grammatical competence

Yano (as cited in Ugwuanyi, 2012, p. 31) defines ‘grammatical competence as the “acquisition of phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and lexical rules in a language”. It is also called a linguistic competence and is

considered the core competence. Faerch, Haastrup and Phillipson (1984, as cited in Hedge, 2000, p. 47) said, “It is impossible to conceive of a person being communicatively competent without being linguistically competent”. Thus, when a person has good “knowledge of the spelling, pronunciation, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure,” he or she would have achieved linguistic competence (Hedge, 2000, p. 47).

3.3 Discourse competence

Celce-Murcia (as cited in Ugwuanyi, 2012, p.33) defines ‘discourse competence’ as “the selection, sequencing and arrangement of words, structures, and utterances to achieve a unified spoken message”. A speaker has the ability to be cohesive and coherent while engaged in a discourse. Therefore, a person with discourse competence would know when to ‘initiate’, ‘enter’, ‘interrupt’, ‘participate in’ and ‘maintain’ conversations.

3.4 Sociolinguistic competence

According to Canal and Swain (as cited in Ugwuanyi, 2012, p. 33), sociolinguistic competence is “the basis for judgments as to the appropriateness of a given utterance in a particular social context”. A speaker has the ability to make proper judgment of how and what type of language should be used in the social and cultural context. Sociolinguistic competence also includes ‘pragmatic or actional competence’. It refers to the ability to use linguistic forms and communicative actions or paralinguistic features as suitable in a context. A person would understand the meaning of the utterances in the context while in conversation.

3.5 Strategic competence

According to Canal and Swain (1980) in Hedge (2000), strategic competence is defined as ability to “cope in an authentic communication situation and how to keep the communication channel open” (p. 52). A person’s skill of paraphrasing, gesturing, and switching to a mode of language form one feels confident and is able to keep the channel of communication going shows he or she is strategically competent. The deficiency of other competency in the communication process is taken care with the use of strategic competence.

Since all the four competencies are required to achieve language competency, they are inter-related. If one possesses linguistic competence but has no knowledge of social rules of language, one would not be able to exhibit appropriate

nonverbal behaviours. Similarly, if one lacks linguistic competence one would not be able to have conversational fluency for he or she would be fumbling for words for expression. The term ‘communicative competence’ is at the centre. Therefore, communicative competence “is used to refer to the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form correct utterances, but also to know when to use these utterances appropriately” (Taha & Reishaan, n. d., p. 39).

IV. STANDARD OF COMMUNICATIVE ABILITY OF BHUTANESE STUDENTS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL

According to BQF (2012), the students at Lower Secondary School level (grade 7 to 8) should be able to “communicate reasonably effectively in the academic context” and there “is evidence of progress towards reporting practical procedures in a clear concise manner” (p.19). The quality of communication is indicated in the words ‘reasonably’, ‘effectively’ and ‘clear concise manner’ which would demand the students to be competent in grammatical knowledge. At BCSE level, the standard of communication skills is “the ability to communicate effectively in a format appropriate to the discipline/s.” Also “there is evidence of progress towards reporting practical procedures in a clear and concise manner”. Students are also expected to be able to “present familiar information to an audience” (p. 21). At BHSEC level, students are expected to “communicate effectively and convey information, ideas, problems and resolutions to others they work with” (p. 22). Reflecting on the expectations of the communicative ability as defined by the BQF (2012), the different competencies as described by authors such as Canal and Swain (1980, 1981), Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995) need to be promoted and enhanced in students at secondary level education.

Linguistic	Strategic
Understanding and using: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vocabulary • language conventions (grammar, punctuation and spelling) • syntax (e.g., sentence structure) 	Using techniques to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • overcome language gaps • plan and assess the effectiveness of communication • achieve conversational fluency

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> modify text for audience and purpose
<p>Communicative Competence The ability to understand and use language effectively to communicate in authentic social and school environments</p>	
<p>Having awareness of,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> social rules of language (e. g., formality, politeness ,directness) nonverbal behaviours cultural references (e.g., idioms, expressions, background knowledge) <p>Socio-linguistic</p>	<p>Understanding how ideas are connected through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> patterns of organization cohesive and transitional devices <p>Discourse</p>

Fig.1 Source: Supporting English language Learners

The National Education Framework by The School Education and Research Unit [SERU] of the Royal Education Council [REC](2012) points out that the purpose of learning English is to “develop essential communication skills, a deeper understanding of how language is constructed and interpreted” (SERU, 2012, p.106). The school is considered a rich social environment in which natural and meaningful communication is encouraged. Use of English is also considered a tool for thinking and processing information. With the study of English, students are expected to develop skills to interact, make sense of the world around and even “progress to higher grades to engage in different types of texts” (SERU, 2012, p.106). Students are also expected to be able to communicate well both in English and *Dzongkha* and connect with other cultures. Ultimately, Bhutanese students graduating secondary and tertiary education are envisioned to become “mindful, reflective, creative, skillful, successful, confident, active and informed, capable of contributing effectively to the realisation of GNH and the values therein” (SERU, 2012, p.11). However, students are not able to communicate effectively while speaking either in English or in *Dzongkha*. It is stated that the sentence in *Dzongkha* is not complete without using some English words (The Dzongkha dilemma, 2015). The use of English words while speaking *Dzongkha* is an indication that students are comparatively better in English than in

Dzongkha. In a study by Thongdrel (2016) it was found that “students prefer English than *Dzongkha* in academic setting...[even preferring to use English] in the formal gathering such as meeting, talks, seminars and conferences as means of communication” (p.1). Further, in a study commissioned by the BCSEA in 2015 on grade 10 students’ performance in *Dzongkha*, it was found that “students lack interest in *Dzongkha* because of the subject difficulty and limited scope for employment”. The findings of Thongdrel (2016) and BCSEA imply that students are not motivated to learn and speak *Dzongkha*. One of the REC curriculum specialist said, “It is very rare to see people speaking *Dzongkha* in its purest form and even graduates can hardly read and write *Dzongkha* without abundant mistakes” (cited in Pem, 2017, para, 21).

V. METHODOLOGY

This study is underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm that focuses on the individuals’ understanding and interpretation. Interpretivism holds that there is no single view of the world; rather, people interpret the world in widely different fashions (Sheppard, 2006). They produce and reproduce the meaning of the world as a part of their everyday activities (Blaikie, 2004). To understand this subjective meaning, the interpretivist researcher considers participants’ perspectives and co-creates subjective knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This study considered the perspectives of English and *Dzongkha* teachers, students of secondary school, and curriculum developers at the Ministry of Education.

5.1 Data collection

Data for the study was collected from the selected secondary schools under Samtse, Chhukha, Paro and Thimphu districts. In the process of selection of the research participants, criteria such as level of schools, gender representation and rural-urban locations were considered. Data were collected from the students and teachers (English and *Dzongkha*) of one lower, one middle and one higher secondary under each of the four Districts.

The data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, class observation and documents analysis. Views of the teachers were collected through semi-structured interviews. One English and one *Dzongkha* teacher each from all the three levels of secondary school under the four districts were interviewed. In addition, a few officials from Royal Education Council [REC] were also interviewed. Twenty-four teachers and two officials from REC were interviewed.

The study administered questionnaire to obtain the views of the students from secondary schools. The study administered 864 questionnaires from students. The study also carried out observations of language classes in the class and a few literary competitions. Further, some documentary data, such as students' test papers, essays, home works, project works and textbooks were collected.

5.2 Data analysis procedure

The study used thematic analysis to analyse interview and observation as seen appropriate to the Interpretivist epistemological paradigm. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using descriptive and In Vivo coding. The codes were collapsed to develop theme or categories that became the units of discussion. The data from other sources, such as questionnaire and documents were analysed using statistics, content and discourse analysis as deemed relevant. The findings from these four data sources were triangulated to gain a holistic understanding of the issue under study.

5.3 Ethical considerations

The study sought ethical clearance from Department of School Education, MoE, four District Education Officers and Principals of the participating schools. The researchers obtained the signed consent from the interview participants and sought permission from the teachers to observe their classes and to access relevant documents. Further, the researchers adhered to the ethics of research throughout the whole process of data collection, data preparation and data analysis and reporting. Anonymity of the participants, identity of the schools, and the security of the data were maintained throughout the study.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS

6.1 Low proficiency in English and *Dzongkha* communication skills

According to the objectives of speaking of secondary school students (class 7 to 12) in the English Curriculum Framework (2005), students should be able to communicate effectively with clear pronunciation and enjoy listening and speaking English. Further, the eight levels of achievements as enshrined in the Silken Knot (2002) had specified the speaking standards at each level. Level 5 to level 8 is applicable to secondary students. According to the achievement level, students at secondary level should be able to talk confidently over extended lengths of time, use variety of sentence structure, communicate effectively in social situations and use vocabulary precisely. However, the interviews with English teachers reveal that the standard of communication is below

the expected level. Most of the English teacher-interviewees expressed their opinion that majority of the secondary school students have low proficiency in English communication. An English teacher (T7) teaching class nine and 10 said that some of the students in class nine cannot communicate in English. He also said, "Their level of proficiency and communicative competence is very low". Another teacher teaching English in class seven and eight grade expressed similar opinion. She remarked, "In general, the communication skill of children at classes 7 and 8 level is quite low" (T8). Similarly T9 who taught class seven pointed out low proficiency in English communication, particularly in speaking. He expressed that class seven students in his school lacked adequate vocabulary and hence were less expressive in their communication in the class. An English teacher (T10) of a higher secondary school also mentioned of low proficiency. She said that students refuse to speak in English no matter how much she tried to impose the rule to speak English in the class. Students preferred to speak in other languages. Some English teachers compared the communication skills of Bhutanese students with international standards. For example, T1 said, "students' communication in English is not very good, not up to the mark of international standards.... So, in general, I would say that communication skill that of our students at secondary level is average, not very good but also not very bad".

T6 pointed out that students lack ability to express. The teacher remarked, "When they expressed their feeling or emotions, they exhibit enough competence to express it but sometime when they wanted to express complex feeling, they get stuck". T8 expressed similar opinion stressing the students' limited vocabulary in their speech. She said, "They do not have sufficient vocabulary, they don't know what words to use, and the other reason could be because they get ridiculed because they are generally not used to speaking in English". An English teacher (T11) said that her class XI and XII students in her school were able to communicate in English quite well. However, she said that students have problems with manner of speaking such as varying of tone.

As in English, the communicative proficiency of *Dzongkha* is also observed to be poor. A *Dzongkha* teacher (T13) said, "When the students could not communicate well in *Dzongkha* they could not write properly. I feel our national language *Dzongkha* quality has deteriorated". Another teacher (T18) observed that students face major problem in their writing for they commit errors in punctuation, use of metaphors, grammatical cases, perpendicular strokes, tenses and word application or spelling mistakes.

6.2 Deterioration of communication skills

The interviewees expressed that the standard of students' communication skills is deteriorating. Teachers expressed that the standard of the communications skills is deteriorating due to social media in which the students do not use full sentences while chatting on Facebook. T4 (who has taught English for more than 20 years) pointed out that social media have negatively affected the general English standard. The teacher remarked that the standard of the students' English is low, and it is going down.... Social media is to be blamed. T5 also expressed a similar view on the effect of social media on learning English communication. The teacher said the standard of English of students is getting further deteriorated with students using social media language which does not follow proper grammatical structures while communicating. For example, the use of short forms, which is informal, is assumed to be acceptable English. According to T2, "students are not good in both speaking and writing. I expect more than that but they cannot write well. There are lots of mistakes in writing.... They are not that good and standard is quite low". Making a similar point, T7 said that the students' written English is dominated with grammatical errors and the message they wanted to convey are not expressed in the required manner. She also said that their writings are incoherent and hence not able to communicate effectively. T10 said that students have problem with writing long answers. She said, "When they write, they write very less. Suppose, if I set a question which is for five marks, they would write not more than two to three lines".

However, T8 said that students were better in writing than speaking. She reasoned that students do more writing activities than speaking, thus getting more practice in the former. She also added that students are not given guidance on speaking and hence poor at speaking.

While a few teachers observed that the standard of the communication skill is average, majority of them expressed that the standard of the communication competence of the students is quite poor and is deteriorating.

6.3 Speaking competence

According to the objectives set in the English Curriculum Framework (2005), secondary school students are expected to be fluent in speaking English. They should be able to speak using rhetorical devices, idiomatic expressions, participate in classroom discussions in their classroom and in daily interactions in the school and beyond. However, majority of the teachers hold the opinion that students are far more fluent

speaking in *Dzongkha* than in English. According to T1, "Students could communicate well in *Dzongkha* rather than in English". T2 and T3 also shared a similar opinion stating that students generally speak *Dzongkha* better.

T7 observed students are more comfortable speaking in *Dzongkha*. T12 also observed that students find it much easier to communicate in *Dzongkha*. T8 pointed out that students are better in *Dzongkha* since it is the most commonly spoken language in the locality. T9 said, "When it comes to spoken *Dzongkha*, students perform better than English". T10 expressed that students are more fluent in *Dzongkha* and therefore prefer to speak in it. She said, "If I speak in English to them they would not hesitate to respond in *Dzongkha*". Figure 2 shows that students speak better in *Dzongkha*.

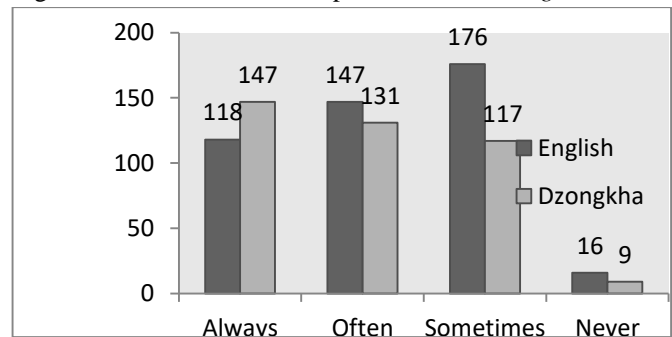


Fig.2: I am clear when I speak and I can participate in all speaking activities

On the two items in student survey "I am clear when I speak" and "I can participate I all the speaking activities organized in the class", the students' responses exhibited some variation for English and *Dzongkha*. While response is not very positive for English, it is positive for *Dzongkha*. For English, the average for two items are, 118 always, 147 often, 176 sometimes and 16 never, whereas average for *Dzongkha* are 147 always, 131 often, 117 sometimes and 9 never. Students felt that they were good at speaking in English 'sometimes' and not always. It could be due to certain situations that they found themselves doing well (for instance, when they were familiar with what they were speaking about)

On the other hand, teachers reported that students hesitate and are reluctant when asked to communicate in English in the class. T3 pointed that students do not take interest to speaking in English. The reason could be also due to lack of confidence. The teacher also said that very few students take interest to communicate in English. T4 expressed that students follow what their teacher does. T4 said, "Sometimes even teachers explain in *Dzongkha* during English class. Similarly, students

tend to speak in *Dzongkha* when answering question in the class. I repeatedly tell them not to speak in *Dzongkha* during the English class". T5 pointed out that students converse or discuss in *Dzongkha* in English class group work. T6 also expressed that students are good at speaking in *Dzongkha* since they mostly use the language while in the school campus or outside.

Comparing the *Dzongkha* and English speaking competency of the students, they are generally less fluent in English. In the extracts (given below) from an interview with the secondary students, the students most provided short responses that are vague with long pauses and fillers indicating their low speaking competency.

Extract 1: focus group interview (class 7 students)

Interviewer: What is one common activity that your people in the village engage in this season?

Std 1 boy: No

Interviewer: Are they not doing work in paddy field?

Std 1 boy: Yes

Interviewer: That's what I was asking about? What work they must be doing.

Std 2 girl: Yes sir, they are in the field.

Interviewer: OK, are you a day-scholar or a boarder?

Std2 girl: Day-scholar

Interviewer- OK. How do you spend your Sundays at home?

Std girl 2: Watching TV, doing homework.

Interviewer: Any TV programme you like?

Std boy 1: Cartoon

Interviewer: Cartoon? Which one?

Std boy 1: Sheldon

Interviewer: What do you like about it?

Std boy - ... (No response)

Extract 2: Focus group interview (class 11 science)

Interviewer: I would just like to ask you whether you do readings? Do you do reading of library books?

Std 1 boy: To be honest sometimes yes sir. Sometimes I don't la. Sometimes some of the books are interesting so I read that book. But sometimes the vocabulary is so difficult.

Interviewer: Which is one book that you remember the most, I mean very interesting.

Std1 boy: There is two books sir. 'Straight right into my hand' and other is 'please take my help'.

They are interesting.

Interviewer: In what ways were they interesting?

Std boy 1: Because in that particular novel it is about both of them it's a love story about youths

6.4 Class observation

The speaking competency is observed to be low as observed in a class observation in which there was question-answer session on the short story 'Hector's great escape'. The session focused on the elements of short story. Students could point out correct answers but their answers were short and the sentences were incomplete. Most of the students gave answers in phrases or in one or two words. The responses were not expressive. They quite often relied on their written notes and provided answers in reading tone rather than speaking tone. Following were some of the responses given by students when teacher asked question:

Extract 3 (Class observation)

Teacher: Can you tell me the setting of the story?

Std 1: Countryside –

Teacher: What is the time?

Std 2: Summer to autumn –

Teacher: What is the point of view?

Std 3: The story is first person point of view?

Teacher: Is it correct?

Std 4: No

Teacher: Then what is it?

Std 4: Third person

Teacher: How do you know it is third person?

Std 4 – Pronoun he is there.

Observation in a middle secondary school also showed poor communicative competence. Class nine students did a presentation on a chapter from the novel *Dawa*. When students asked questions to the presenters, the questions were long and complex. Questions could not be understood and class became noisy and chaotic. Teacher had to intervene and rephrase the questions. Though it was English class students conversed in local dialect during the class discussion.

In a higher secondary school, teacher asked series of questions on *English Zindabad versus Angrezi Hatao* by Khushwant Singh. The teacher was interactive and gave opportunities for the students to respond. However, the students were hesitant and reluctant to respond to the questions. Moreover, the responses the students gave were inaudible and lacked clarity. The students mumbled in low voice.

Figure 3 given below indicate that teachers provided adequate opportunities to speak in the class.

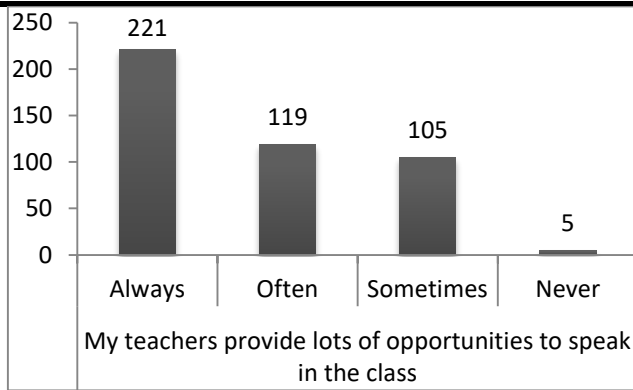


Fig.3: My teachers provide lots of opportunities in the class

Teachers were observed to be making efforts towards creating situation in the class where students are required to converse in English and let them interact with each other. However, students did not exhibit expected level of interest and interaction. Unless the teacher pointed out the students, there were very few who volunteered to respond to the questions. While majority of the teachers expressed that students' communication skill in English is low, their opinions on spoken English and written communicative competency varied. Some teachers pointed out that students are better at speaking while some said they are rather better at writing. According to T5, "students are better at speaking. When it comes to writing, maybe because they lack reading habit, they are unable to express well". T4 had similar opinion. He said, "While the students are good at speaking, their writing is not really good. For example if they are asked to write an essay, they won't be able to write like in the way they speak. Their writing skill is not as good as their speaking skill. In speaking, they are quite OK, maybe because they are in the urban areas". T1 also made same observation that students do better in speaking than writing. The following interview extract reveals that some students are good speakers:

Extract 3: Interview (class 9 student)

Interviewer: Right now you are doing the novel *Dawa*, right? Can you say something about it? I mean if you have found interesting so far from the start till now.

Std 2 girl - The most interesting thing I found is that when *Dawa* goes to Bumthang to cure his disease called *Mange* and when he comes back to *Paro*. It is his birth place and then it comes to *Paro* he finds that *Paro* have changed with development activities to place and he goes to a blue pool which was pristine, pure water but he finds out that it was not the pure and pristine one that it used to be. It indicates that

due to the development activities taken place the blue pool is, sorry, due to the development activities taking place the air, water and land is being polluted by humans and the humans are not taking initiative of caring like land and the land water. It also, the problem of waste in our country is major and we people are responsible of it portrays message to all of us that we should take care of waste and one thing I like most is when he comes back, *Dawa*, other dogs have forgotten him that once he led the howl back in *Paro* and it indicates that nothing is impermanent, nothing is permanent in our life. The name, fame, glory will not remain with us forever. And just now the thing matters is what we are today and we have now ...and I have learned that nothing is permanent. Everything is impermanent.

Majority of the teachers expressed that very few students are good at speaking. For instance, the girl in the interview (Extract 3). The spontaneous, logical and expressive answer, correct grammatical structure (subject-verb agreement in sentence utterance) and the use of words such as 'pristine', 'fame' and 'glory' show that she is a fluent speaker. In the class observation in some schools, particularly in urban schools, most of the students who volunteered to speak in the class were fluent. They spoke with correct pronunciation and structure.

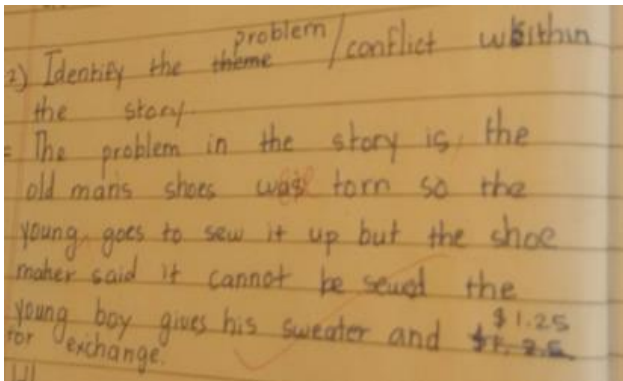
Regarding communicating in *Dzongkha*, T20 observed that students face challenges with pronunciation and clarity in their speech. She added that students have difficulty in understanding some of the *Dzongkha* words which she would have to explain in English. T17 expressed that students are habituated in using their own dialects especially in southern and eastern regions for conversations and they hardly communicate in *Dzongkha*. Hence the students find difficulties to speak *Dzongkha* correctly and clearly. T13 who shared similar opinion said that students find it difficult when they have to deliver speeches and to talk in *Dzongkha*.

However, some *Dzongkha* teachers observed students to be good at speaking. According to T19, "Students, who are in the capital have no problem in speaking *Dzongkha*. However, as most of the subjects are taught in English, students are better in English than in *Dzongkha*".

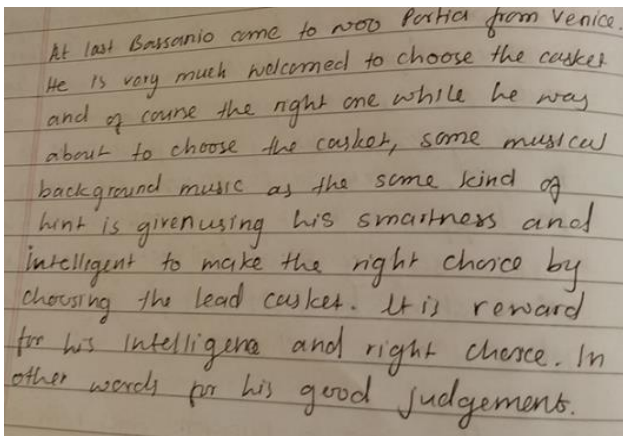
6.5 Writing competence

According to the writing objectives as outlined in the English Curriculum Framework, secondary school students are expected to spell correctly, write coherent paragraphs, use appropriate diction and demonstrate fine distinction in grammar and diction. Similarly, The Silken Knot standards of

writing spell out that student at level five to eight should be able to use wide range of punctuations accurately, write simple and complex sentences and use of sophisticated vocabulary in their writings. However, majority of the teachers expressed that students are poor at writing and are below the expected standard. According to T7, students’ written English is dominated with grammatical errors and the message they wanted to convey are not expressed in the manner it should be expressed. She also said that the writings are incoherent, hence they are not able to communicate effectively as evident in the following samples:



Sample 1: From lower secondary school



Sample 2: From higher secondary school

Teachers were found to be taking initiatives to help students improve their writing. For example, T7 lets students do their homework in the school during the free time to avoid students copying from friends at home. She said, “I make sure they do it in the class whether they are right or wrong. If I get a feeling that it is not their own writing then I make them rewrite. Another thing is from teaching how to get cohesion and coherence, students write better”. Figure 4 shows that teachers provide support in students’ writing.

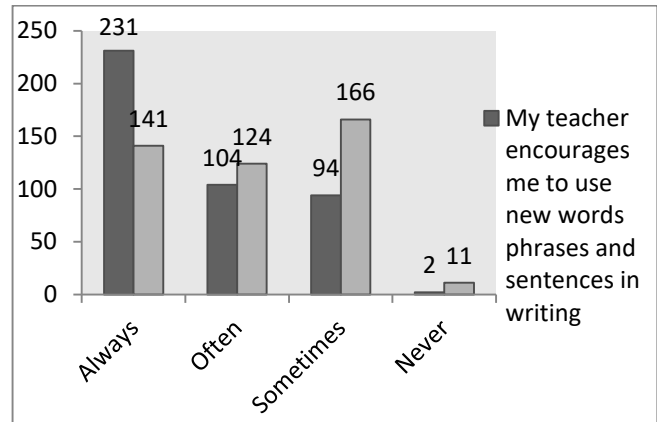


Fig.4: Teacher encouragement and individual engagement in writing

While the responses are positive for “My teacher encourages me to use new words, phrases and sentences to improve my writing” with 231 always, 104 often, 94 sometimes and 2 never, it is not very positive for “I get to engage in varieties of writing activities in the class” with 141 always, 124 often, 166 sometimes and 11 never. It is likely that students are uninterested to engage in writing due to low competence in writing which is shown by the following figure.

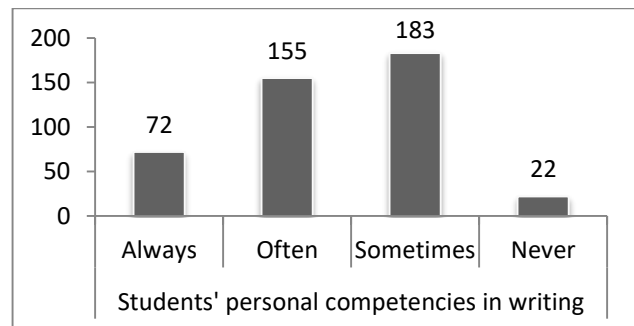


Fig.5: Students’ personal competencies in writing

However, T8 and T9 believe that the students are comparatively better at writing than speaking. T8 said that students do more writing activities than speaking, thereby getting more practice in the former. T10 said that students have problem with writing long answers. She said, “When they write they write very less. Suppose, if I set a question which is for five marks, they would write not more than two to three lines”.

Some teachers pointed out that students have problems with language such as the use of tenses and punctuations. Regarding the use of tenses, T1 said, “Especially in writing,

most of them fail to cope with even the sentence structure like tenses are not up to the mark". As observed by T1, the analysis of the students' work also indicates students' inability to use tenses correctly.

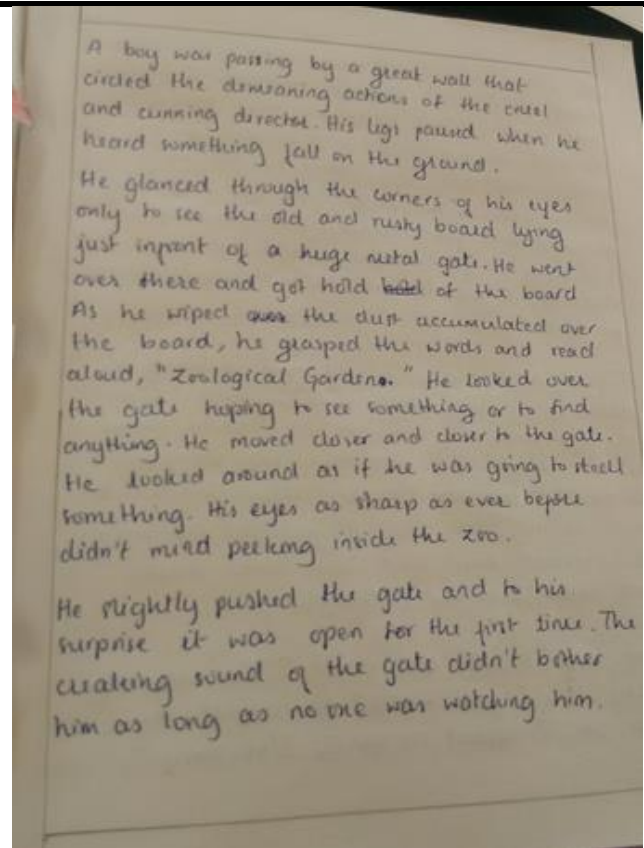
The use of punctuation marks seems to be one of the problems faced by students while writing as expressed by the following teachers:

They are very bad communicator in the context of grammar. As I told you because of social media they lack communication skill and when we tell them to read they do not read, so cannot write well... and their main problem is grammatical error and even punctuation (T3)

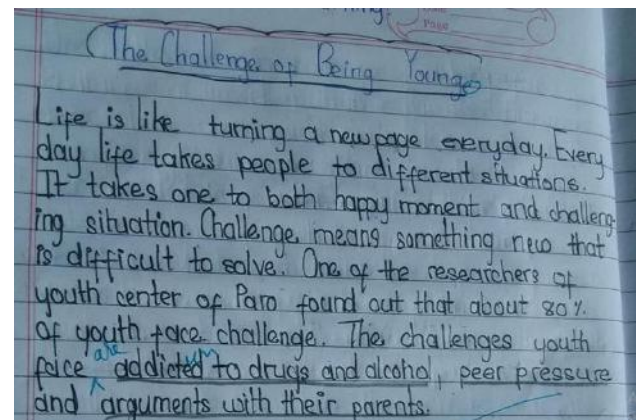
Another teacher is also of the view that one problem students face when communication through writing is the punctuation.

When it comes to writing, maybe because they lack reading habit, they are unable to express well in the writing and sometime very little thing like punctuation. They will write a whole paragraph without any punctuation mark. Of course, we stress them, without punctuation marks, the sentence won't be clear and writing won't make sense but sometime they get carried away and whole paragraph will be without punctuation (T5)

Analysis of the students' written work also confirmed that punctuation is a problem. According to T10, students lack grammatical knowledge to the extent that some class nine students do not even know when to use capital letters. According to T4, "In class, students do speak English but then the structure go missing but in writing they get help from books and their brothers and sisters so with the help they do better in writing". T2 agrees, however, he feels that students look as if they are performing well in writing, because in writing, they copy from friends or they get help from their educated family members. He said, "If you look at the end result, writing is little better and that is usually because they tend to be copying and we exactly don't know whether they are really writing or copying". T3 also agreed that some students are good at writing as seen in the samples of students' writing given below. However, T8 said that teachers must put in extra effort towards providing feedback and guidance in writing.



Sample 3 from higher secondary school



Sample 4 from middle secondary school

Generally, majority of Bhutanese students find difficulties in reading and writing in *Dzongkha* though they have been more confident in speaking. The difficulties are likely due to minimal instructional hours given to *Dzongkha* since they have only one *Dzongkha* subject. According to T18, most of the students can read better compared to their writing skill since they do need not take care of grammatical errors while

reading. But when they have to write, major errors are in the punctuation, spelling and grammar. T19 explained that the difficulty of writing in *Dzongkha* was due to many superscribed letters, consonants, prefix, suffix and secondary suffix and subjoined letters.

6.6 Reading competence

Some teachers pointed out that communicative competence depends on the readings that students do. T7 said that unless students are given adequate exposure to books, develop good reading habit and increase the frequencies of writing practice, it is difficult for them to improve their reading and writing. T8 also pointed out that the students who were fluent in speaking are the ones who do lot of reading at home. T9 mentioned of the reading hour observed every two weeks in his school to help students inculcate the habit of reading. Figure 6 shows that teachers make concerted efforts towards reading activities to enhance students' communication skills.

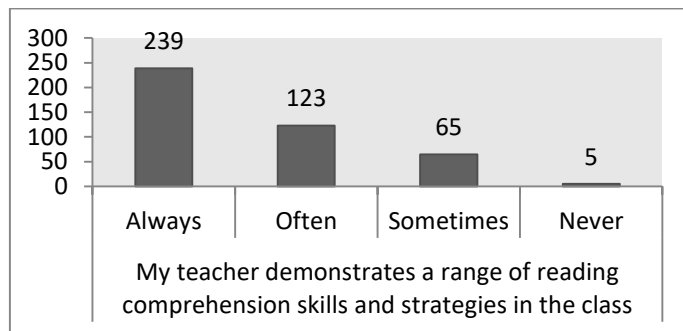


Fig.6: Teacher demonstration

The finding for the item “My teacher demonstrates a range of reading comprehension skills and strategies in the class” is encouraging with 239 students responding to always in the two subjects. Responses to other frequencies are 123 often, 65 sometimes and 5 never. The findings suggested that teachers very often perform reading demonstration to their students in the class.

6.7 Barriers of poor communication in English

On asking what could be the causes or barriers to poor communication skills of the students, the teacher interviewees iterated the following barriers:

6.7.1 Conversing in local dialect

The teacher interviewees feel that one barrier to poor communication skills of students in English was the students'

preference to converse in their local dialect. Verbatim from the interview given below confirms the above mention claim.

Communication barrier, when it comes to students' themselves, what I find is whenever they get to converse with each other, they do in their dialect. In this school, with students from diverse background, they converse in all the languages or dialects (T1).

T10 expressed the same view that students in the school conversed more in local dialect. She said, “Students don't speak in English no matter how much we tried to impose. They will prefer to speak or communicate in other language besides English and *Dzongkha*. If I speak in English to them they would not hesitate to respond in *Dzongkha*”.

The researchers' observations of the lessons also confirmed the above claim. When the students were assigned group discussion, the researchers observed most of the group's members discussed in *Lhotshampa* or *Tsanglakha*. When presentation and discussion were organised in a middle secondary school English class, students were observed discussing in local dialect. Teacher had to tell them to speak in English.

6.7.2 Lack of reading habit

Lack of reading habit is one barrier the teachers feel that leads to students' poor communication skills. T2 states:

The main reason is they don't read. Our children do not have the habit of reading. So they lack reading and reading habit and they are not able to speak and writing as desired.

It is in contrast to the objectives of reading as stated in the English Curriculum Framework. The objective states that students should ‘enjoy reading as a learning activity’.

6.7.3 Shyness

Shyness is one barrier for communication that some teachers expressed. According to T12, students are quite shy and timid to volunteer to speak in the class. She said students “need to come out of the cocoon of shyness and timidity”. Students remained shy since they get ridiculed by their friends as mentioned by T8. It has been observed that students in the class mock and make fun of their friends who attempt to speak

English. Further, the teacher also felt that students are scared of making mistakes and hence choose to remain silent.

6.7.4 Inadequate role modeling by teachers

Some teachers feel that teachers are also responsible for creating barrier in students' communication skill. T10 said that teachers have freedom to speak any language in the school. She said that once teachers start using local dialect to talk with colleagues in the school, to communicate in English proper becomes very difficult. They openly speak either in *Tsanglakha* or *Lhotsamkha* even if students watch them which is not a good model to promote communication in English. T8 mentioned that the responsibility of helping children improve English language is left mainly on English teachers. She said that all teachers are teachers of English. She said, "If all other teachers teaching science Maths, Geography also take some responsibility towards, giving some attention towards English perhaps, I feel that is one of the greatest way in making children communicate in English."

6.7.5 Measures taken to help the students develop communication skills.

When asked on the measures taken to promote students' communication skills, the teachers reported some of the opportunities that they provide so that students improve their communication skills. The opportunities include literature festival, news sharing, extempore speeches, debate, book review and compulsory speaking in English. Besides, there were also other activities organised by school to help students improve their communicative competences. T11 mentioned activities such as mock interview, poetry dramatisation, seminar and literary week that focus on improving students' confidence in speaking. T8 also said that she organised short paragraph presentation to enhance students writing and speaking skills while teaching novel. Spelling contest was another regular school activity mentioned by T10 in her school. T12 said 2-3 minutes talk in her English class has helped students develop some speaking skills.

The Teacher guide has been found useful in organising some of the speaking activities. T2 said, "We usually go along with the Teacher Guide only and sometimes when we find interesting activity we include that with it but mostly we carry out the activity that is included in it". T3 also mentioned the use of the Teacher Guide while doing listening or speaking activities. Since the activities are already planned in the guide it was found easier to use them in the class.

VII. DISCUSSION

Majority of the teacher-interviewees expressed that communicative competence of secondary students in general is below the standard set in Silken Knot and English Curriculum Framework documents. Majority of the students have poor vocabulary, lack ability to express and are weak at grammar both in spoken and written communication. This is in contrast to what literature says. Literature states that students need to possess five competencies which are "knowledge as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, what, where and in what manner... and the ability to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others" (cited in Juhász, 2015, p.3). Communicative competency is being competent in grammar, discourse and strategic aspect while communicating orally or through writing. However, teacher-interviewees, writing samples of students, and observation of students' speaking in the class, revealed that students have low communicative competency. Interview with the students also revealed that they faced difficulty in expressing their feelings as they often got stuck in the middle, felt short of words and responded in short phrases even when questions demanded longer answers revealing low discourse competency.

With regard to written communication, teachers pointed out that students have problems with sentence structure, spelling, tenses and punctuation. Writing competence is associated with grammatical competence. According to Hedge (2000), a student would have grammatical or linguistic competence if he or she has good "knowledge of the spelling, pronunciation, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure". He or she would have achieved linguistic competence" (p. 47). However, students' writings dominated by errors.

When students were interviewed or observed in classroom discourses, they were seen incompetent in making engaging and meaningful conversations. Long pauses in the interviews, hesitations to initiate discussions or talk, habitual use of fillers such as *umm* in their conversations indicated that students were not fluent with their discourse ability.

Celce-Murcia (as cited in Ugwuanyi, 2012, p.33), defines discourse competence as "the selection, sequencing and arrangement of words, structures, and utterances to achieve a unified spoken message". Students faced challenges in achieving a 'unified spoken message' as their expressions were not logically connected. However, there were a few students who were able to maintain longer conversations. A student was able to describe her feelings on a chapter from

novel *Dawa* with spontaneity and in an engaging manner. She used appropriate expression of starting and ending her response.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since most of the standards are not met as per the Silken Knot and learning objectives set in English Curriculum Framework, it is required to review the standards and objectives. It appears that the standards set are higher to achieve. Alternatively, measures should be put in place to boost the communication competency of the students through the study of the current curriculum.

As the findings of the research show low speaking and writing competence, it is necessary to revisit the curriculum content to find out if the syllabus so designed in the text is authentic to Bhutanese or to English as Second Language context. Students were also found to be poor at grammar usage both in speaking and writing. Therefore, it is also appropriate to evaluate the curriculum and find out if grammar points are adequately addressed.

Since students exhibited poor competences in their speaking during the interviews, teachers need to focus on real-life skills. Students need to be given ways and skills such as responding to questions using logic, using formal language, implementing technical aspect of writing (organization and presentation). A curriculum developer from Royal Education Council pointed out that teachers in the school should stress on building competency in speaking, listening, reading and writing and not on the content.

Students need to be given adequate guidance in their reading and writing activities. Since social media has been affecting students negatively, teachers need to guide student to make proper use of social media so that they derive positive benefits. Teachers can model clear articulation of words to promote clarity in speech. Teaching correct pronunciation and manner of speaking will help students improve their competence. Feedback on students' speech and written work also need to be dealt carefully by teachers.

Since students are influenced more by multimedia and videos, students need to be motivated to develop good reading habits. Students need to be encouraged to read library books in both English and *Dzongkha*.

The grammar points need to be clearly stated in the syllabus. Teachers need to teach grammar not as a rule but in context. In *Dzongkha* more emphasis needs to be given for grammar lessons.

Apart from organising literary activities to help enhance students' communicative competence, it is important to provide sustained support in terms of identifying student's shortfalls and provide appropriate and effective feedback through interactions.

IX. LIMITATION

Since the sample of the research participants have been from a few selected schools from the four regions, the findings or generalization that had been done may not be applied to a case of the whole nation. Since the data with regard to *Dzongkha* had been inadequate compared to English in the present study, further in-depth study for *Dzongkha* communication skills need to be done separately.

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