

Simplifying the Study of History: An Action Research

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Abstract:

This is an action based research paper carried out at Tsirangtoe Central School under Tsirang district. It involved 40 participants from the 4 sections of class VIII comprising 5 males and 5 females from each of the sections aged between 13-18 years old. It is an alloy of qualitative and quantitative design. It also involves a focus group discussions (FDG) attended by 10 additional students from the same grade. In total, 50 students were taken as the sample for the study. It aims to explore and identify the complexities in learning history, analyze it and then find innovative means to simplify the study of history so as to enhance the performance of the students. It also studied the common perceptions about history subject among the students so as to generate their interest in learning it thereby elevating the status of history as one of the most important discipline in the school.

Keywords: *History, challenges, findings, complexities, teaching, and learning.*

Introduction

History is one of the social science subjects taught across the world. It is also taught in schools in Bhutan from class VII and above under the broad umbrella of 'Arts and Humanities'. As cited in Paul (2014), Edward Hallett Carr defined history as "a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts" and as "an unending dialogue between the present and the past," It is one of the most important subjects as it triangulates the past, present and the future. It also imparts socio-economic, cultural, political, and ethical values to the readers. It aids to a great deal to the proper development of an individual as it shapes the character of an individual by reflecting their genesis.

However, in the course of time, redundancy can be witnessed in learning history and has turned out to be a subordinate discipline. In terms of the

pedagogical aspect, teaching and learning of history is a cumbersome process as it is encapsulated with numerous dates, similar events, and unique names of the individuals. Embedded with such complexities, history as a subject in the schools in Bhutan is gradually becoming redundant as not many students take keen interest in learning it.

So, this research paper delves into the hurdles that makes the study of history difficult and explore possible strategies and experiment it so as to simplify the study of history so that it becomes easier for the students to learn thereby enhancing their interest and performance. It also attempts evaluate the status of history and its importance so that it becomes at par with other subjects where students would treat history as an indispensable part of their lives.

This research is a mixture of both the qualitative and quantitative design. Participants were selected using the stratified sampling where 10 students each were selected on a random basis from all the 4 sections namely A, B, C and D which amounts to 40 respondents. In addition there was a focus group discussion involving 10 additional students from the same grade. In total 50 students were taken as the research samples across the sections for the valid findings. Thematic analysis has been done for the qualitative data generated from the research and for the quantitative information excel is used for the interpretation and analysis.

The Purpose of the Study

- The modus operandi of this research is to identify complexities and to simplify the study of history in class VIII, so that it becomes easier to learn the historical concepts.
- The other purpose is to generate the interest among the students in learning history so that it enhances the performance of the students.

Reconnaissance

Situational Analysis

Having taught history for five years, the inference drawn is that the majority of the students academically indifferent towards learning history owing to the nature and complexity of the subject where one need to remember the dates, names of the people, events and it's results and significance and of the although it is one of the indispensable disciplines. According to Bain (2012), the popularity of a high school course often masks the challenges students and teachers face in learning its content. Such, I think, is the case with world history, especially with the world history as it contains complex information. So an attempt has been made to remove the complexity in its learning.

Competence

I pursued B. A. in Political Science and History at Sherubtse College from 2010 to 2013 where in Political Science, we have to undertake a conventional research module for a year and I have excelled in it. After that I and my friend, we have just completed a research paper titled, 'Ache Lhamo: A Sacred Mask Dance on the Verge of Extinction' which is on the verge of getting published.

Furthermore, while pursuing Post-graduate Diploma in Education, I presented a research paper during the College Research Convention in 2016. I also played the role of a mentor while two of my colleagues conducted an action research in 2018. The actual motive for going about with this research is to improve my teaching methodology so that history can be taught in a way students can better understand the concept.

Literature Review

History education started in Bhutan since the inception of the modern education in 1960's. From that time, history has undergone different reforms in its syllabus contents and teaching methods. History was taught in English medium, however attempt was made to teach history in Dzongkha for some time but failed as it proved to be ineffective. According to Wangdi (2016), "Education minister Norbu Wangchuk on social media said that history, civics, environmental and social studies, cannot be taught in Dzongkha." After its failure it is taught in English medium of instruction.

History is an indispensable subject of study and that's why it is sometimes called as mother of all subjects. Weiner (1995) states that, "teaching history is imperative to our survival as person with understanding." History is the only discipline that truly attempts to triangulate the past with the present and the future The importance of history can be gets reflected in the words of Alabi (2020) where he opines that, history draws on significant

event of the past to inform the present and to safeguard the future.

However, the importance of history is dwindling over time as students find it dull and boring subject, thereby lacking interest to learn it unlike other subjects. At times history can be seen as a secondary subject in the school. For example, the marks for history and Geography are combined in the academic transcripts. Weiner (1995), too observed that history takes back seat to other social science. Students of secondary schools of Bhutan too feel that history is not the major subject in the school.

Dates, events, names of the places and persons are vital components of historical studies. Historical accounts without names of neither the place nor person and which fails to indicate when events took place are usually weak and boring, asserts Harrison (2002). These components in itself pose major challenges in learning the subject. Students feel that all they need to do in history is to memorize the past events which culminates in history becoming a dull subject. People view history as enumerations of bygone facts and figures which are obsolete oblivious of the fact that it has connections with the present day.

There are numerous other challenges in learning history such as biasness of information, relevancy of the content, teaching, and learning skills and aptitudes. According to Tok (2016), the learning problems of history include syllabus content and vastness, teaching skills and other teacher dimensions. Another major challenge in history according to Harrison (2002) is the "Use of Tenses" while writing and responding to the questions. History is the valid narration of the past events and in doing so, it must be put in past tense. The problem with secondary school students is that they put it in a present tense most of the time.

Any complexities in history can be mitigated with the use of different methods and strategies.

History needs to be taught using different skills and strategies including the pedagogical

means History must be taught to generate values and attitudes from the people who have experienced things in the past. According to Yilmaz (2008), history must have sense of why it is taught. He further exhorts that, history teaching must be aimed at developing student's history thinking and reasoning skills by providing them skills and procedures.

Alabi (2020) asserts that "effective instructions have bearing on the interest of the students and their motivation to learning history and also influence them to make critical judgement on historical issues and understand current issue in historical context." One easy way to make students learn better is to relate the past event with the current situation and compare and contrast them to understand the changes better.

Nichol, (1987) states that using 'Picture Concept' will help them remember the important dates in History. He further iterates that the concept of using picture help students to remember the dates and events in history easily and it is fun to do that as well. The other means to create history as one of the interesting subject would be by taking students for 'Field Trips' besides lecturing in the class. According to Perkin, (1970) one of the important strategies to remember dates and events is by making a 'Timeline' that would provide the list of dates and their corresponding events and reading over them.

Action Research Questions

How to simplify history in class VIII so that it becomes easier and interesting to learn?

Methodology

Data Collection Tools

1. Sampling

The stratified sampling was done where out of 130 students in 4 sections of class VIII, 10 students each were selected with 5 male students and another 5 female students from each of the sections. In total, there were as many as 40 respondents in total for the study. 10 additional students from the same grade were also selected for Focus Group Discussions (FDG).

2. Survey Questionnaires

The survey questionnaires of two pages containing TWO sets of pre-determined and structured questionnaires were used to retrieve the information from the respondents. The first set of question contained 11 Likert Scale Questions followed by another question where students were asked to rate or rank the level of difficulties while the second set contained 5 Short Answer Questions. In total, there were 16 questions.

3. Observation

Classroom observation was done at the regular intervals to record the changes in the mood and behavior in the class before and after the application of interventions or the innovative means to generate their interest in learning in the class.

4. Interviews

Interview to collect the feedbacks from the students with regard to the effectiveness of the innovative interventions applied to find out its effectiveness and accordingly proceeded with the next and the better means.

Data Analysis Procedures

This research is the alloy of both the qualitative and quantitative design, thematic analysis was done for the qualitative aspects of the information and for the little quantitative data,

Microsoft Excel was used to interpret and analyze the data.

Intervention Applied

During the course of the study, the following interventions were applied and tested for its effectiveness to validate the findings of the research.

a. Maintaining Records

The anecdotes were maintained with regard to observations made, application of new technical approaches and its effectiveness, the results and the feedbacks generated there on to add value to the findings.

b. Conduct Quiz

Quiz was conducted for three round to evaluate the both as means of learning as well as one among the intervention methods.

c. Class Test

The class Test was conducted for three times to evaluate the performance of the students before and after the application of the interventions. This was done to test the effectiveness of the erasures applied. .

d. Note Taking Methods

Students were introduced to new methods of note taking as a vital means of learning and understanding the historical concepts and its analysis.

- 1) Cornell Method.
- 2) Mapping Method.
- 3) Sentence Method.
- 4) Outline Method.
- 5) Charting Method.

e. Note Book Checking

This was done at the regular intervals and the students were marked. The notebooks were checked and the feedbacks collected with regard to the comparative effectiveness of the above methods. The objective of notebook checking encompasses the evaluation of the completion of the assigned task, incorrect responses to the questions, and to assess the note taking techniques followed by each individual.

f. Exploring New Teaching Methods and Teaching Materials

New teaching strategies (pedagogies) too were explored and adopted to add to its variety with the purpose of generating the interest of the students towards learning history which also implies to the subsequent enhancement of their performances.

g. Assessment of Class Test and Midterm Result

This was done to find out what types of questions can students tackle easily and which levels of questions are difficult for them. After the assessment, they were taught on the techniques of answering especially the ‘open-ended’ and ‘creating level’ of questions

h. Inspiration and Motivations

Majority of the students felt that history is dull and boring subject and remain academically indifferent. So, as an impetus to the students to learn history and to generate the interest among them to love the subject, the importance of history was told to them as a part of teaching and learning. Most importantly, the pragmatic importance of having to enhance the General Knowledge and the need of historical information to pass the examination of Royal Civil Service Commission to get the government jobs or to become civil servants were also highlighted.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In this research, the qualitative data is analyzed thematically whereby the Microsoft Excel is used to analyze the quantitative Data. In the data presentation, following acronyms are used:

- a. **BLD**- Base Line Data
- b. **PLD**- Post Line Data

1. Students Passion in Learning History

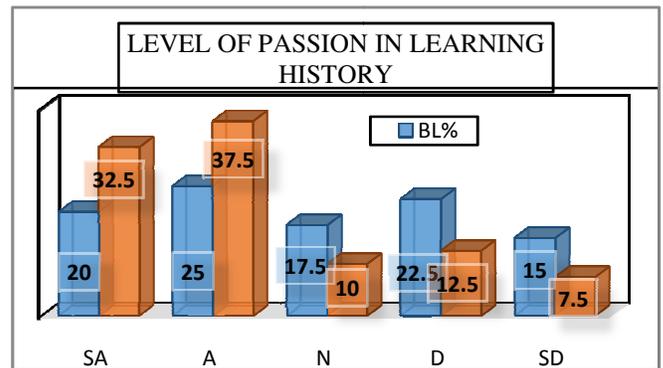


Fig. 01: Passion in Learning History

The survey conducted reveals that much of the students do not seem to have keen interest in the art of learning history. During the baseline survey, only 20% and 32.5% of them were seemingly interested in learning where as the remaining from 40 respondents either remains neutral mentioned their declined interest in the subject. One of the reasons withstands the fact that the students relate the subject with just the story of the past and nothing else. Added to it, many of the respondents felt that history does not fall under the main subject in the school setting.

However the post intervention data revealed a slight increase in positive attitude of the students towards learning history. Data reveals that there was 5 percent increase each in the strongly agree and agree scale amounting to 37.5% and 20%. To generate the interest among the students, teachers

also need to be able to teach in a way where students would enjoy learning the subject as well.

2. Pedagogical Styles in Facilitating History learning and the Enjoyment Level

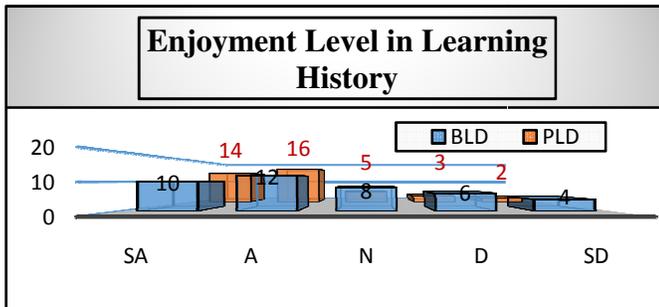


Fig. 02: Pedagogy and Enjoyment Level

One of the tactics to bestow justice in teaching is that we must break complacency and remain updated with the pedagogies of the current time. Teachers at the first place must be well equipped with the different pedagogical aspects of teaching where in the students would enjoy the subject subsequently elevating their interest and performance in both formative and summative assessment. Wangdi, (2016) informed the mass that the teachers of Bhutan are introduced to Transformative Pedagogy. Teacher must also use different teaching strategies especially in history.

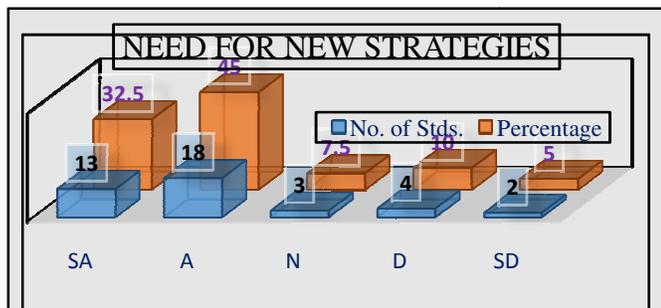


Fig. 03: Innovative Reaching Strategies

While surveying the need for the new Teaching methods to which following were the responses in percentage. 45% strongly agrees and 32.5% agrees

which amounts to 77.5% of the respondents fully support the application of innovative measures of teaching and learning. Thus, the direct inference is that the teaching learning methods ought to be changed adapting to the current need of the students

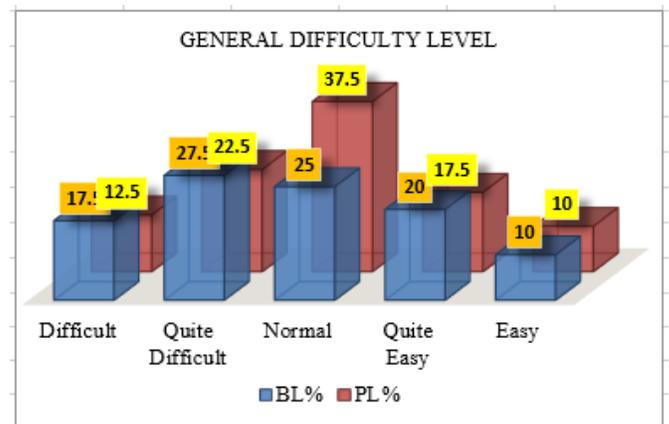
Upon the application of the different innovative measures of teaching history, the findings as represented in the graph has witnessed 10% increase in the level of enjoyment in learning history in the post line compilation compared to the baseline where teaching was done as usual in a normal setting.

3. Complexities in Learning History

3.1 General Difficulties

Fig. 04: General Difficulty Level

As per the data collected, the reason for why students remains academically indifferent towards learning history as even after the application of the interventions, 12.5 %of the 40 respondents still



finds history as a difficult subject, however there was a decline of 5% compared to that of baseline where it was 17.5%. This indicates that students find history as a mediocre subject

3.2 Comparative Difficulty

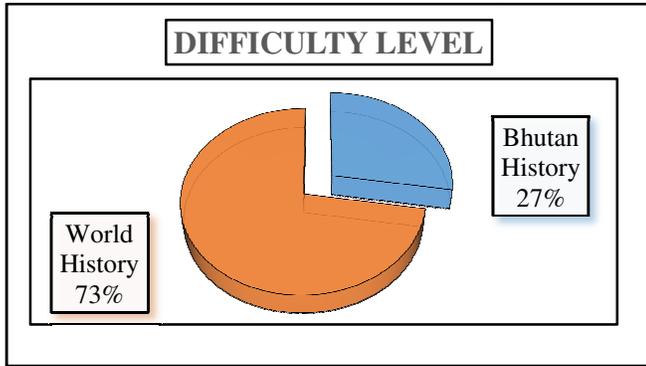


Fig. 05: Comparative Difficulty Level

More than the Bhutan history, the respondents in general including the respondents finds Bhutan History much easier to comprehend than the World History. World History is tough to 73% of the participants where as the toughness of Bhutan History stands at just 23%. This is owing to the fact that we are accustomed to the Bhutanese terms and terminologies where as the world history happens to be of foreign origin.

3.3 Elemental/Componential Difficulties

FIVE componential hurdles of learning history were delved into. They are

1. Dates
2. Events
3. Names of the People
4. Names of the Places.
5. Results/Significance of the Events

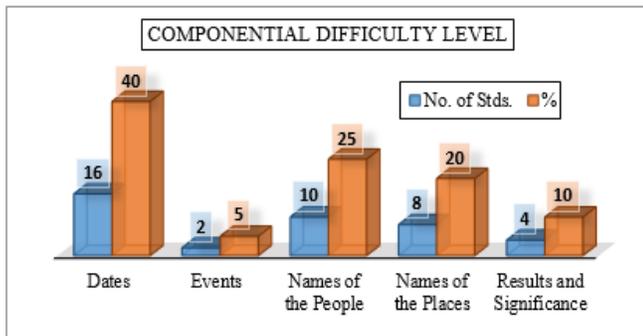


Fig. 06: Componential Difficulty Level

As per the findings, the toughest among the participants happens to be the ability to remember the dates followed by the names of the people and place, know its results/significances and to remember the events. 16 students find difficulty remembering the dates, 10 in remembering the names of the people, 8 in remembering the names of the places, 4 in knowing the results and significances. Students at the most remember the events only.

4. Awareness of the Career Prospects related to History

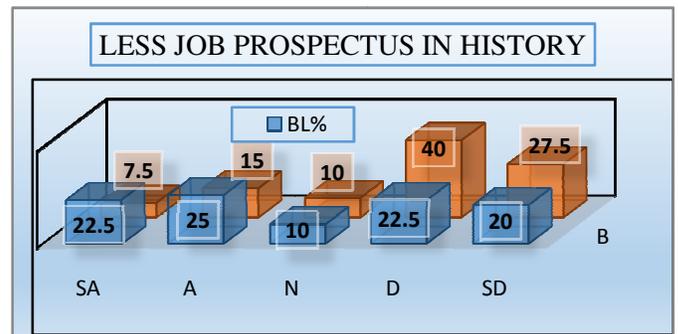


Fig. 07: Awareness Level of Job Prospectus

One of the living myth among the students and the participants is that opting history as the main subject of study and specialization would either mean less jobs or the jobs of the lower status. According to the findings, students listed the jobs related to history as follows; Teacher, Historian, Author/Writer, Researcher, Tour Operators while history provides professional scopes much greater and wider than that those mentioned by the participants. As per the data, 22.5% of the students strongly agree that history do not help them in getting better jobs in future. This indicates that they have career insecurity to some extent.

5. Analysis Post Assessment: Open-ended and Creating Level of Questions

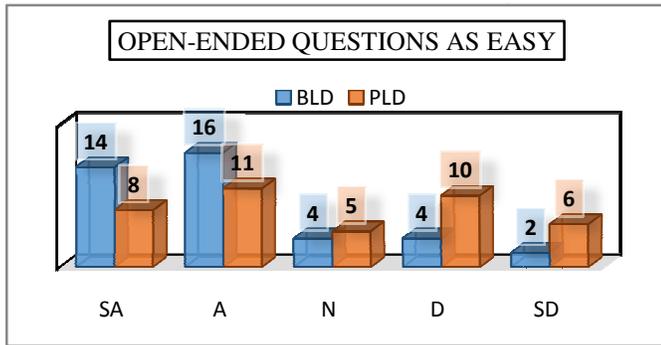


Fig. 08: Solving Open-ended Questions

Another trouble traced after the class text and the exams are with the ‘open-ended’ and ‘creating level of questions’. There is a huge misconceptions among the students that open ended questions are easy and they can fetch good marks. But the fact is that open ended questions demands answers specific to the concept and deviation from the main points would mean null and void. 14/40 students strongly agree and 16/40 agrees that the open ended questions are easy to respond. The immediate intervention was made by giving them an awareness of the truth and nature of the open ended questions including the way they must respond after which the number decreased during the post-line.

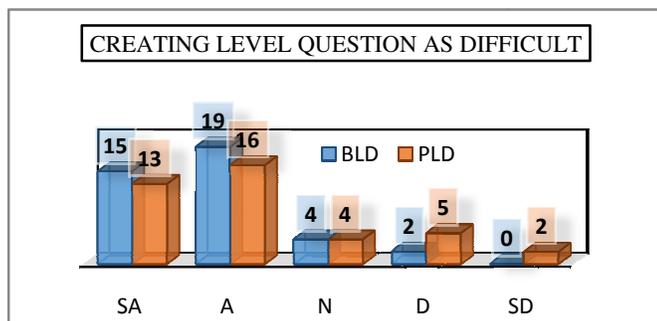
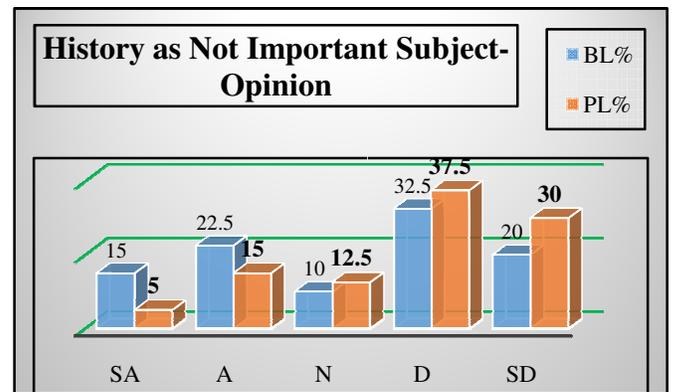


Fig. 09: Answering Creating-type Questions

Majority of the students finds tackling the ‘creating level of questions’ as hard and the intervention made little changes. 15/40 and 19/40 students felt that the creating level of question is too hard and the number slightly decreased during the post-line data to 13/40 and 116/40 respectively. As an intervention, the ways of tackling this type of questions were taught.

6. Need for the Elevated Status of History as a



Distinct and Important Discipline

Fig. 10: Parity of History with Other Subjects

Another reason for students do not take genuine interest in learning history may be because they think that history is not that much an important subject as compared with few others. The survey conducted found out that 20% strongly disagrees and 32.5% disagrees where 15% strongly agreed and 22.5% agreed to the statement that history is not an important subject in school. The direct inference is that 37.5% of the participants don not view history as an important subject.

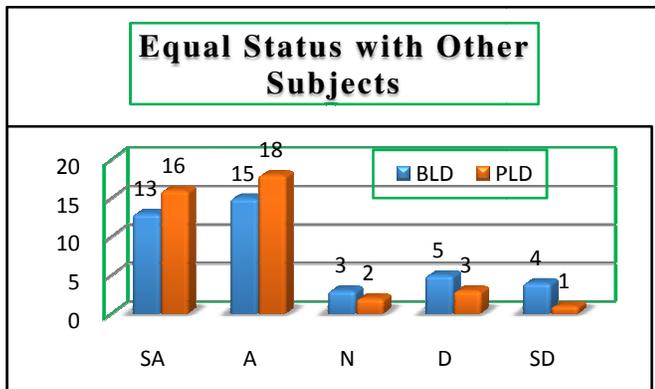


Fig. 11: Need of Elevated Status

Secondary treatment meted out to the history subject may be one of the reasons for the declined interest among the students in learning history among the students. This indicates low priority index among students. However, with the Royal edict issued on 17th December, 2020 and with the new assessment criteria set by the Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA), history would perhaps gain parity with other contemporary subjects taught in schools of Bhutan. “Many teachers are happy with the education ministry’s new assessment criteria that mandate students from class IV to XII to obtain a minimum of 40 percent in both continuous assessment (CA) and written examination to pass the examination. The new assessment structure was effective from this academic session.” (Rinzin, 2021)With new assessment criteria in history curriculum, there is a ray of optimism in intensifying the love for the subject by the students thereby enhancing the performance.

Key Findings

1. History as a Dull and Indifferent Subject.

According to Weiner (1995), students often complains saying that history is boring and irrelevant because we fail to understand and apply it. Students find the historical study as the forceful memorization of the past events. This makes students lose interest in history.

20% and 25% respectively strongly agrees and agrees that history is a dull dull subject and not so important like other subjects. However the figure seen increment upon intervention to 32.5% and 37.5% in strongly agree and agree respectively.

2. Difficulty Remembering the Dates, Names of the People and Places.

40%, 25% and 20% strongly agrees that the dates, names of the people and places dates, names of the people and the places are difficult to be remembered. However, it will be easier to keep the dates remembered if proper chronological order is followed while taking notes. As per the findings, there are not much difficulties in remembering the events and its results unlike the dates, names of the people and places where events took place.

3. World History as Tougher than Bhutan History.

73% of the students find the World History much tougher than the Bhutan History. This is owing to the fact that they are introduced to new names and places. Upon research, it has been found out that they have difficult time remembering the foreign names and places. In the case, Xu et al (2018) researched and stated that, only elaborative rehearsal can improve information retention in long-term memory.

4. Difficulty Tackling the Open-ended Questions.

Another hurdle found out during the summative assessment is that students’ faces challenge in tackling the open ended questions. Open-ended question demands one correct answer and do not accept any types of answer. As cited in Husain et al (2011). “Open-ended questions address key concepts, processes, and skills that go beyond specific instructions that define the critical content. In general, open-ended questions require

complex thinking and produce a variety of solutions (Badger 1992).” Visualizing the condition and making outline before writing the responses would be helpful. According to the observations made, students lack the English language articulation that makes them unable to express and convince their ideas and feelings.

5. Hardships in responding to the Creating Level Questions.

Students face huge difficulty when it comes to synthesizing or creating the historical events. 37% and 47.5% of the respondents strongly agree and agree respectively that the creating levels of question are difficult. Upon the intervention made, there is a slight decrease in the figure indicating that they learnt some techniques to tackle those sorts of questions. Post-line data showed the decrease in percentage by 5% and 7.5 % respectively in the same. One of the ways to solve it is to alter or reverse the results and the significance. Another way is to brainstorm the points and use the mapping methods to outline the points before responding to the questions.

6. Challenges posed by the New-Normal curriculum.

The grand idea of the Ministry of Education of implementing the New-Normal Curriculum starting academic year, 2021 is a great leap forward towards free and depth learning which would generate better human resources in the future. However, since it is in its beginning phase, it has posed challenges both to the teachers and as well as they are facing the new curriculum for the first time. 29/40 students which amounts to 72% mentioned in the survey questionnaires which was the highest figure in the list of challenges they face in learning history subject in the school. The challenge is to do with the availability of texts and inaccessibility to online sources as majority of the content are not in the textbooks.

7. Oblivious of the Career Prospectus and Idea of Job Insecurity.

Another reason for why students are less interested in learning history is that they don't see much scope in learning history. As per the findings, only jobs listed in the questionnaires were Teacher, Researchers, historian, and Guides. They are unaware of the jobs related to history such as Museum Curator, Consultants, Lawyers and others in the field of administration. Students are aware of only few jobs available in the market related to history. The feeling of job insecurity or less availability of the jobs could be one of the reasons for the declined passion among the students in learning history.

8. Need to Apply Varied but Suitable Techniques of Teaching to Facilitate Learning

The students in the 21st century are indifferent to the conventional methods of teaching. 32.5% strongly agree and 45% agree to the need of multi teaching methodologies. Library based research, presentations, project works, oral research and Classroom Assessment Tools were used as an intervention, unlike sticking to the conventional methods.

Recommendations

- a. History teachers can form the group or create the Professional Learning Centers among the history teachers if the same schools or by collaborating with the teachers of other schools. This is for the personal growth and professional development that would equip the teachers with enhanced knowledge and skills.
- b. It is time in conscience that realizing the vitality of the subject, teachers ought to inspire and motivate the students and attract them towards learning history as well. Their morale and outlook towards the subject to the students so that they generate interest in learning it.

- c. Students must be taught the techniques to remember all the Five Components of history such as Dates, Events, Names of the People and Places, Results and Significances. This will enable students to learn history better.
- d. Dates must not be the area of focus, instead students must take away good lessons from history that would ultimately aid them in becoming better human beings.
- e. Students must be taught not only the texts, but also the techniques to tackle difficult questions such as the open-ended and the 'creative' level of questions. One of the way to solve it is to alter or reverse the results and the significance. Another way is to brainstorm the points and use the mapping methods to outline the points before responding to the questions.
- f. Besides teaching, students must be taught even the career prospectus related with history. Once they remove the idea of job insecurity, students would take interest in the subject.
- g. Sticking to the conventional methods would not serve the purpose, instead it will dwindle the passion and learning of the students. Hence the teaching strategies must be innovated as per the needs to the time. For those chapters which seems difficult for the students to garner the concept, teachers can assign them the internet based research of the library based research project where in the students takes the ownership of learning.
- h. Students must be acquainted with the different Note-Taking Methods. Since majority of the students lacks the note taking skills, they shall be introduced to different note-taking skills such as the Mapping, Cornell, Charting, Outline, Sentence and other methods.
- i. To check the understanding of the students, various Classroom Assessment Techniques can be applied. There are as many as 50 different CAT's and to evaluate them, class test or question answering sessions can be conducted at the end of a chapter/block/unit.
- j. Students can be asked to maintain the history journal where they can pen down the topics they did not understand, maintain the new words and meanings, etc. This can help to a great deal in the understanding of the subject matter.
- k. Another wonderful way of memorizing the historical facts and figures is with the use of Mnemonics. For example, the causes of the First World War can be remembered as MINA that accounts to Militarism, Imperialism, Nationalism, and Alliances.
- l. Above all respecting the nature and importance of the subject, it is the mandate of the policy makers and the stakeholder to assess the status of history and is advisable to make the study of history at par with other subjects.

Conclusion

As per the research and findings, it has been found out that history is also one of the most important disciplines that is taught in the secondary schools across Bhutan. Despite its importance, many students and even the teachers finds history subject difficult to be learnt. The core difficulties lie within the natural components of the subjects such as the dates, events, names of the people and the places. It is also compounded by the lack of resources available for the study, especially with the inception of the New Normal curriculum. Other difficulties include the complexity of certain topics and concepts, especially in the World History, inability to apply different teaching methods due to the time constraints and having to complete the syllabus on time. However, the study reveals that all these complexities and hurdles can be removed and overcome if we try to teach history in a simplified manner but without losing its purpose. As cited in Boadu (2015), "Effective History teaching encompasses knowing history, doing history, and scaffolding history learning." Teachers must find new ways and means so that the problem within the periphery of history gets resolved to

enhance sound learning among the students. Teachers are for students and vice versa.

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