

REVIEW ARTICLE

LEARNING NEPALI THE SOAS WAY

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*Teach Yourself Nepali: A Complete Course in Understanding, Speaking and Writing.* 1999. Michael Hutt and Abhi Subedi. London: Teach Yourself Books, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd. xi + 308 pages. 2 cassettes. UK book price: £14.99. Nepali price: Nrs 465. ISBN 0-340-71130-2.

**Introduction**

Despite being relatively small both in terms of size and population, Nepal and her national language have exerted a considerable influence across the northern reaches of South Asia. Home to more than 80 languages hailing from four different language families, Nepal has more need of a common tongue than many other countries twice her size. Outside of Nepal's present borders, Nepali is widely used in Sikkim and Darjeeling, prompting its recognition as a major language in India by the Indian Constitution. Even in the mountainous kingdom of Bhutan, the Nepali language is both spoken and understood. Nepali is, in short, a *lingua franca* of the central and eastern Himalaya.

Since the opening of Nepal's borders in 1951, a whole new group of potential Nepali language learners has emerged. Foreign volunteers, teachers, doctors, academics, missionaries, hippies and businessmen, to mention but a few of the interest groups coming to Nepal, have all sought to learn the national language over the past 40 years. It is surprising that despite the high profile of these visitors to Nepal and their relatively large numbers, no single pedagogical textbook has emerged which answers their needs. On one level, of course, the diversity of these foreign learners and their differing priorities provides the explanation. Some students have need of a language course which places an emphasis on conversational Nepali, particularly useful in a village context, whilst others prefer more literary

approaches to the language—learning the script alongside Sanskritic vocabulary.

The publication earlier this year of the newest addition to the *Teach Yourself Books* series is a cause for joy to scholars and students of the Nepali language. *Teach Yourself Nepali*, co-authored by Dr. Michael Hutt and Professor Abhi Subedi, is no small achievement, particularly since it covers the most salient grammatical features of the language in just over 300 pages. The book marks a watershed in courses for learning the Nepali language in at least two ways. First, it dispels the assumption that learning Nepali is necessarily difficult by presenting grammatical features of the language as well as key vocabulary in an intelligent and extremely accessible manner. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the book once and for all demonstrates that fluency in the spoken vernacular can be achieved alongside an aptitude in literate written Nepali. The importance of this second feature of the *Teach Yourself Course* must not be underestimated and it is a point to which I will return later in the article. To properly assess the strength of Hutt and Subedi's book, however, their contribution needs to be situated in the context of other works on the Nepali language, and it is to these that I now turn.

### **The Tourist-Oriented Phrasebook**

It is not so much the lack of textbooks and primers that is to be lamented, but rather their inconsistent nature and often dubious quality. Aside from the more serious attempts which I will deal with in due course, Nepali pedagogical materials have ranged from the unclear to the downright misleading. To cite but a few: *Nepalese Companion & Instructor* (Simple Self Taught Series, Kathmandu); *Learn Nepali In A Month Through English And Hindi* (Simple Smooth Scientific, Read Well Publications, New Delhi); *Beginning Nepali: For Foreign Learner* [sic] (Sajha Press, Kathmandu) and *Get By In Nepalese: A Crash Course For Tourists And Visitors* (Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu). One such primer deserves particular attention. The *Nepali Phrasebook: A Pilgrims Key to Nepali*, published by Pilgrims Book House with neither date nor author, claims that: "there are three principal languages, Sanskrit, Newari, and Nepali, used in Nepal since the Kingdom's earliest history...After the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the common use of Sanskrit diminished in the Valley. However, even today it is considered the refined language of literature and religion" (Introduction: 1). The ignorance and bias shown by this anonymous phrasebook are demonstrably clear, and the pamphlet warrants no further attention.

The 'quick results approach', in which accuracy is sacrificed for basic communication, is symptomatic of many of these less professional Nepali

language primers and phrasebooks. A regrettably persistent fallacy seems to be in operation here: that new learners of a foreign language must be protected from the more complicated grammatical constructions until they are already somewhat advanced in their studies. There is nothing worse for a student's confidence than to learn one 'simpler' form at the beginning of a language course, only to be informed some lessons later that the construction is actually undesirable. Given that learning a new language is a challenge whichever way one approaches it, it seems only prudent to learn the correct form from the outset (even if this requires a little more patience), than to have faithfully learnt a construction which is then jettisoned three chapters further on.

### **The Peace Corps Approach**

Of the four pedagogical works I will deal with, only one was written solely by native speakers. Entitled *Basic Course in Spoken Nepali* (most recently reprinted in 1996), and written by Tika B. Karki and Chij K. Shrestha, the book has become well-known for its Peace Corps connection. The authors, "Trainers and Language Specialists" (Preface: ii) with the Peace Corps, wrote the book "with the needs of ...the volunteers of Nepal in mind" (Preface: i). For some time it was the only Nepali language course widely available in bookshops in Kathmandu, and as a result has guided and influenced many foreign learners of Nepali. The book's popularity is well-deserved, and its lasting impact on generations of foreign volunteers in Nepal is unquestionable. It does, nevertheless, have a couple of drawbacks, the most important one being the chosen transliteration system. Rather than using the tried and tested method of Indological transcription, the authors opt for the somewhat unsightly *aa* for *ā*, *T* for *ṭ*, *D* for *ḍ* and *chh* for *ch*. This leads to unwieldy romanized examples such as "wahāākaa āākhaa khulaa chhan ki banda chhan?" (page 69). The absence of the Devanāgarī script in the body of the text is all the more regrettable given that the authors use it in their "Introduction To The Nepali Sound System", which takes up the first 15 pages (i-xv), but then dispense with it for the rest of the book until the "Reading and Writing Section" which starts some 258 pages later. The course is geared to getting the student conversant in Nepali, and this is achieved admirably, but somewhat at the expense of accuracy and literacy. For example, the *-eko* form is introduced in Lesson One, with the following disclaimer:

"In informal situations the **eko** form is commonly used in Simple Past, Past Perfect and Present Progressive Tense. However, in formal speech conjugated forms of verbs which will be introduced later, are more common." (page 5)

Perhaps it would have been better to introduce the simple past tense before the potentially confusing *-eko* form, since the authors even acknowledge that its use is undesirable. All in all though, any pedagogical book must be measured according to its stated objective. In *Basic Course in Spoken Nepali*, the aim is for the student to be speaking chatty and conversational Nepali (in a very short time) which he or she has learnt through an informal and fun course. This end is successfully achieved.

### **Clark's Introduction to Nepali**

The three remaining contributions to Nepali language materials which I will deal with in this article have come from scholars at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. SOAS has long been a centre of excellence within Europe for South Asian languages, and the academic lineage of the various scholars of Nepali through the generations would make for an interesting study in itself.

The first Nepali language handbook to come from SOAS was T. W. Clark's *Introduction to Nepali*. First published in 1963, it took over 25 years before it was finally reprinted in India in 1989 by the Nepali publishing house, Ratna Pustak Bhandar. Clark was 'Sometime Professor of Bengali' at the University of London, and met Puskar Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana when he travelled to Nepal in 1951, with whom he worked until Rana's death in 1960. Not only was Rana, who worked as Clark's language assistant, a well-established figure in Kathmandu at the time, but the other Nepali national directly involved in this project, whose voice can be heard on the audio cassettes which were to accompany the course, later became famous in his own right. These tape recordings were made by none other than Dor Bahadur Bista, whose association with the University of London was not limited to Clark. As a young man, Bista worked as a research assistant alongside Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Professor of Anthropology at SOAS, during the latter's field trips to Mustang and Dolpo. The author of many influential books, Bista himself went on to become Professor of Anthropology at Tribhuvan University.

Clark's *Introduction to Nepali* is an excellent introductory textbook to the language. Nevertheless, students have been, and will continue to be, put off by the layout, typesetting and content of the book, all of which have not aged well. One of the most intriguing, and at points irritating, features of Clark's book is the inclusion of what he terms "intonation notings, which mark both stress and relative pitch" but which he suggests "call for no special explanation" (page 1). If the latter is true, then one cannot help wondering why these 'notings' are used so pervasively from Exercises 1 through 13. Throughout these exercises, they only serve to distract the

reader's eye from the content of the examples. Other readers will be forgiven for finding some of the sample sentences a little outdated and old-fashioned, such as "Fifteen pice will not be enough to buy all that" (page 42) or "Oh, I thought you were a captain already, but you are only a lieutenant" (page 270). However, in terms of clarity of grammatical explanation, and well-chosen examples to clarify the explanations, Clark's book is excellent. One of the best features of the textbook, which has not been replicated elsewhere, is the choice the author gives the reader of learning Nepali either through Devanāgarī or through his accurate home-grown system of phonemic romanization. His deviation from standard Indological transliteration should be excused because he offers his own phonologically-sound transcription. A few small quibbles aside then, *Introduction to Nepali* remains a veritable achievement.

#### **Matthews' *A Course in Nepali***

Such unreserved praise can unfortunately not be extended to the second contribution to the field of pedagogical materials for Nepali learners emerging from London. Written by David Matthews, Senior Lecturer in Urdu and Nepali at SOAS, and entitled *A Course in Nepali*, it is already in its second edition and even in its second Indian reprint, despite being published comparatively recently (1984). Although more widely available than Clark's *Introduction* (which is at present being reprinted), as well as slightly more user-friendly, Matthews' *Course* adds little to Clark's careful and more definitive work. Moreover, Matthews makes some basic errors, a few of which have thankfully been weeded out in the new edition (see Publisher's note: iii). Some mistakes remain, however, most notably in his awkward explanation of the difference between *ho* and *cha*, both third person singular forms of the verb 'to be'. Rather than clarifying a subtle grammatical point, Matthews' explanation only serves to blur the distinction, and his prescriptive rules in many cases would lead any reader to formulate ungrammatical sentences (see pages 23-24). A further problem with Matthews' *Course* is that he consciously deviates from indigenous standards of orthography. The sample of Nepali handwriting offered on pages 21-22 is manifestly non-native and the vowel alternates on page 22 seem to replicate a typewriter more than any genuine Nepali penmanship. Whilst Matthews rightly dispenses with Clark's idiosyncratic 'intonation notings', he adds a new quirk of his own: the indiscriminate use of the *halanta* or *virām*. On page 3 Matthews informs us that its use is "unfortunately sporadic" in Nepali books, and so he decides to use it "consistently throughout this course". Although his motive is noble, namely to assist Nepali language learners who might well be unsure

whether or not the final *a* is mute at the end of any given word, the result is as typographically unsightly as it is inconsistent. Matthews would have done better to take the lead from literary Nepali where the use of the *virām* is not as sporadic as he suggests. For a full discussion of the uses of this symbol, see van Driem (forthcoming). Perhaps a thorough re-write by a native speaker would make Matthews' *Course* a more useful resource.

### **The SOAS Heritage**

A point of concern is the absence of any reference to Clark in the Preface or Introduction of either Matthews' or Hutt and Subedi's books. This is all the more surprising given that John Burton-Page, in the *Editor's Preface* to the re-edition of Clark's *Introduction to Nepali*, expresses his gratitude to Matthews, some of whose "suggestions", we are told, he has been able to incorporate (1989: xviii). Hutt and Subedi also include a *Further Reading* sub-section, but here the reader is referred only to Matthews' *Course* to "supplement [one's] understanding of Nepali grammar" (page 3). Not only is this a rather moot point, given that Matthews' views on Nepali grammar are unorthodox at best, but the lack of any reference in this section to Clark's far more informed (not to mention recently republished) textbook is surprising. Moreover, on page 165, Hutt and Subedi reproduce a text adapted from a passage of Clark's *Introduction*, but once again there is mention of neither the book's availability nor of its value as a Nepali language course. Given the high profile of the Nepali scholars at SOAS as well as their chronological lineage (from Clark, via Matthews, to Hutt), the absence of any reference to Clark's work is disconcerting. It appears that Clark has been forgotten along the way.

On a lighter and more ironic note, some readers will certainly have noticed that as the textbooks have decreased in length over time and across generations of SOAS scholars (Clark: 421 pages, Matthews: 344 pages, and Hutt and Subedi: 308 pages), so too their respective titles have become all the more comprehensive and impressive-sounding. Starting with the modestly-titled *Introduction to Nepali*, via *A Course in Nepali* to the all-inclusive *A Complete Course in Understanding, Speaking and Writing Nepali*. One can but wonder how much shorter the next Nepali coursebook to come from SOAS will be, and how much more all-encompassing its title will sound.

### **Hutt and Subedi's *Teach Yourself Nepali***

Both writers of this superb book were excellently suited to the project. Michael James Hutt is Reader in Nepali and Himalayan Studies in the Department of the Languages and Cultures of South Asia, School of

Oriental and African Studies, London, and has many years of experience teaching students Nepali. He is, moreover, the leading British expert on the Nepali language and its literature, and has an impressive list of excellent publications to his name. Abhi Subedi is Professor of English as well as Chair of the Central Department of English at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu. Subedi has established a name for himself in various disciplines, including poetry and literary criticism. The publication last year of *Ekai Kawaguchi: The Trespassing Insider* clearly shows him to be an accomplished prose writer, whilst recent articles of his deal with the pragmatic and contextual uses of both Nepali and English. My emphasis on the qualifications of the two authors is intentional. In a joint enterprise such as writing a language course, effective collaboration is essential, and it is clear that Hutt and Subedi have each been able to contribute their respective expertise and experience to the project. The fact that all other substantial pedagogical materials on the Nepali language have been authored solely by a native speaker or by a non-native speaker has been one of their greatest failings. The need for native speaker fluency together with the perspective of a non-native speaker seems self-evident, and in this respect *Teach Yourself Nepali* is a new departure. That their book captures the very flavour of the Nepali language is a tribute to Anglo-Nepali collaboration.

*Teach Yourself Nepali* has a human edge, from the user-friendly grammatical explanations to the real-life conversations and dialogues with which the reader is presented in each chapter of the book. The risk of such an approach is, of course, that what is gained in terms of simplicity of explanation is met with a concomitant loss in thoroughness. The authors were careful to avoid such a trap, and in the process have produced an excellent pedagogical work which fills a genuine gap in the market. *Teach Yourself Nepali* will be read, studied and used by academics, development workers, mountaineers, tourists and linguists alike.

The language course is divided into 24 chapters, each containing one or more true-to-life Nepali conversations. Whether it be a little gossip about the wealth of Jyoti's father, the pros and cons of village versus urban life, or bargaining with a shopkeeper at the market, Hutt and Subedi manage to capture and crystallise the essence of an archetypal Nepali discussion. On occasion, the authors include a sidebar on some social or cultural feature of Nepali life, such as an insightful explanation of the concept of *jūtho* (page 110), an aside on Nepali poets (page 133) and even an overview of religion in Nepal (page 205). Although a little short, these cultural observations are invariably interesting and well-written. Perhaps there could even have been a few more of them on topics such as caste or nationalism. One noteworthy

absence, however, is the lack of any reference to shamanism or animism in the page-long review of religion in Nepal.

In their **Introduction**, Hutt and Subedi make an important point. The Nepali language, we are informed, “has a range of different styles and levels of sophistication” (page 1) and when in doubt, the authors have chosen to “err towards the more grammatically correct” (page 2). To anyone who has spent much time in the Kingdom of Nepal, the diglossia between spoken and written Nepali, as well as the significant local variations in grammar and vocabulary, is a very real feature of the language. It is a credit to the authors that they have managed to tread a linguistic middle-way in their coursebook, and in so doing have found a register of the Nepali language which will be widely acceptable to all.

On the whole, clear and concise explanations are a hallmark of this book. Nepali phonology, or what they call the ‘sound system’, is carefully explained with the use of good examples (pages 6-19). The difference between *ra* and *ani* is presented in a way which is genuinely illuminating (page 60), and the authors are right to draw attention to the fact that in certain cases, the simple past tense in Nepal should be translated with the present perfect in English (page 109).

In a few situations, one could disagree either with the order in which grammatical features of Nepali have been presented or with the wording of the explanation itself. One example would be the decision by the authors to refrain from introducing the *-ne* infinitive form of the verb until over half way through the book. Although Hutt and Subedi are absolutely right that learners “sometimes use it excessively” (page 182), would not the fact that speakers nevertheless “find it so convenient” (ibid.) be a good reason for introducing it earlier in the course? A confusing inconsistency in the explanation of the plural suffix *-harū* may well cause learners some problems. The authors state that if “the number is plural, there is no need to add the plural suffix” (page 48), but then in each of the answers to the six questions in Exercise 9, the plural suffix is added. At no point do the authors clarify the situation and the learner is left unnecessarily confused. On page 125, the reader is introduced to the useful and idiomatic *ke re?* for hearsay information. Hutt and Subedi rightly note that *ke re?* is a “quick way” of asking, but fail to mention that it can also be quite rude in the wrong company. If, for example, when speaking with a senior, whom one would naturally address as *tapāī*, one were to use the phrase *ke re?* for asking a third person what he had said, it would come across as rather impolite. Two further omissions worthy of note: first the absence of any reference to the widely used verbal construction *bhaihālcha* or *bhaihālyo* which literally peppers everyday Nepali speech, but which is strangely

absent from their language course; and second the absence of the ‘contrary-to-expectation’ marker <po...ta>, a minor yet important feature of Nepali grammar. Aside from these quibbles, though, the reader is in good hands when it comes to grammatical explanations.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the accuracy of the spelling and type-setting. The single greatest shortcoming of *Teach Yourself Nepali* lies in the frightfully poor copy-editing and countless spelling mistakes. There are so many errors, in fact, that they can be broken down into different classes. For those readers who have already purchased a copy of *Teach Yourself Nepali*, it is the reviewer’s hope that the following corrections may function somewhat like a list of errata which should be pencilled in by hand. First come the widespread mistakes in transliteration. An abbreviated list runs as follows: **Ganeś** should be **Gaṇeś** (page 27); **gaũ** should be **gāũ** (Exercise 5, page 36); **ṭaḍhā** should be **ṭaḍhā** (page 57); **gaũharũ** should be **gāũharũ** (page 59); **buva** should be **buva** (Exercise 14, page 267) and **ṭhũlo** should be **ṭhũlo** (Exercise 18, page 269). The **English-Nepali Glossary**, which runs from pages 302-308, is the section of the book most badly affected by these oversights in spelling and transliteration. In just seven pages of a little over 500 lexical entries, there are six mistakes and one inconsistency—not a very high accuracy ratio for a pedagogical teaching aid to be used for self-study. The errors are as follows: **curā** should be **cūrā** (page 302); **gaī** should be **gāī** (page 303); **ṭaḍhā** should be **ṭaḍhā** (page 303); **miṭhāī** should be **miṭhāī** (page 307); **budhvār** should be **budhavār** and **āimaī** should be **āimāī** (both on page 308). Furthermore, on page 16, ‘sadness’ is transliterated as **duḥkha** whilst in the glossary it is rendered as **duḥkh** (page 306).

The second class of errors are those in the lost word or inconsistency department. In the last sentence on page 60, the word पक्का is present in Devanāgarī and yet totally absent from the transliteration; in Exercise 15 (page 65) there is a sudden and unexplained shift to lower case for personal names in transliteration, i.e. **gautam** rather than **Gautam**, when everywhere else in the book proper names are capitalised; on page 44, **chorāchorī** is transliterated as one word whilst in Exercise 17, it is hyphenated and rendered as **chorā-chorī** (page 67); and on page 263, the reader is offered two different spellings for the Nepali kinship term for ‘younger brother-in-law, son-in-law’ on the very same page. My point here is not that one spelling is necessarily right and that one is necessarily wrong, in fact even Sir Ralph Lilley Turner offers three different spellings, **juwāī**, **jawāī** and **jwāī** (1997: 221, line 42, right side), but simply that the Devanāgarī spellings and transliterations *have to be* consistent in a language coursebook. The page of kinship terms (page 263) seems to be

particularly badly affected by such mistakes. One more example will serve to prove the point: the authors offer a form for ‘mother’s brother’s wife’ which is not to be found in any Nepali dictionary. There are three possible spellings of which I am aware, *māiju*, *māijū* and *māijyū*; but *māija*, which the reader is offered on page 263, is either a mistake or an extremely unconventional form. Since the kinship term appears nowhere else in the course, not even in the glossary, learners will be left thinking that *māija* is the correct form for ‘maternal aunt’.

The final set of errors, which dog the **Key To Exercises** section at the end of the course, are the most irritating. *Teach Yourself Nepali* is a course marketed as being suitable for self-study. Alongside the otherwise excellent cassettes, the 308 page book is all that the student has in order to learn the language. Moreover, in a self-study course such as this one, exercises are the *only* way in which the student is tested on the grammatical constructions and vocabulary that he or she has learnt. Mistakes in the answers to these exercises, then, threaten to undermine the book’s integrity as a language course. Just two examples of such errors will suffice. First, in the answer to Sentence 5, Exercise 4, on page 264, the Nepali runs as: नयाँ राम्रो राजा whilst the transliteration offers only **rāmro rājā**. The unexplained presence of the word **nayā**, which is also absent from the question on page 33, will undoubtedly lead to confusion. Finally, an element of surrealism seems to have slipped into all three answers to Exercise 54. The student is asked to translate the following sentence into Nepali: “A kilo of ghee was not enough for the woman who cooked the food” (page 183), but the translation given on page 276 seems to be answering a completely different question: खाना पकाएकी आइमाईलाई दस रूपियाँले पुगेन, which could be rendered in English as: “Ten rupees was not enough for the woman who cooked the food”. Whilst the first edition of any book is bound to have a few such errors, the sheer volume of mistakes and inconsistencies in a relatively short pedagogical course book of this type simply fails to inspire confidence. No author can be expected to be able to pick out all such niggling errors from his or her own work, and the responsibility for these mistakes must lie fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the publishing house. It is shocking that a publisher of such high repute as Hodder & Stoughton failed to find a copy editor with fluency in Nepali. There are plenty of literate Nepalis living in London who would be itching for a prestigious job of this kind, not to mention a good few million living in Nepal itself. The reviewer would urge the publisher, Hodder & Stoughton, to print a corrected second edition of this otherwise invaluable Nepali language coursebook immediately. When they do so, let us hope that at least one of the three

samples of imperfect Nepali handwriting which appear on page 18 will be discarded and replaced by a model of exemplary Nepali penmanship worthy of such a book.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite the abundance of errors, the success of Hutt and Subedi's *Teach Yourself Nepali* lies in the authors' ability to have learnt from both the mistakes and the strengths of the previous language textbooks, and then to have added some genuine linguistic flair of their own. While Karki and Shrestha's *Basic Course in Spoken Nepali* is strong in the vernacular, it is short on clear transliteration and detailed grammar. Clark's *Introduction to Nepali*, on the other hand, although comprehensive in grammar and extremely well-conceived in structure, is both old-fashioned and quirky, and remains most suitable for a determined student comfortable with linguistic terminology. In contrast, *Teach Yourself Nepali* is grammatically accurate but never boring. It is a serious language coursebook, but at all points very accessible. It is intelligently-structured, well-written, and most important of all, fun, and in so being will become the definitive all-round Nepali language book for the foreseeable future.

### **Notes and Acknowledgements**

1. A much earlier and abbreviated form of this review will be published in *IIAS Newsletter*, No. 21, under the title 'A Nepali Language Feast (one full course)'. The earlier review deals only with the *Teach Yourself Nepali* book by Hutt and Subedi, and not with the other language textbooks.
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