



Developing Writing Competence through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Multilingual Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal's secondary classrooms are rich in linguistic and cultural diversity. However, traditional writing instruction frequently overlooks students' lived experiences and multilingual backgrounds. In this regard, this study examines how culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) can enhance writing competence by integrating students' home languages, local knowledge, and cultural narratives into classroom practices. The purpose is to assess the impact of CRP-based strategies on students' writing skills, engagement, and sense of identity. Drawing on pilot interventions conducted in three districts, the study involved classroom observations, teacher interviews, and analysis of student writing samples. Learners participated in writing tasks that encouraged the use of their mother tongues and community storytelling traditions. Results show that students produced more coherent, expressive, and structurally diverse texts. Teachers also reported a shift toward more interactive and meaningful writing instruction, leading to increased student motivation and participation. The findings demonstrate that CRP not only improves grammatical accuracy and genre understanding but also fosters a deeper sense of ownership and confidence in writing. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for curriculum and policy reforms that recognize linguistic diversity and cultural heritage as essential resources for effective writing instruction.

Keywords: Linguistic diversity, multilingual education, cultural identity, linguistic empowerment

Introduction

Nepal is a multilingual and multicultural country with 124 distinct mother tongues and 142 caste and ethnic groups (National Statistics Office, 2023; Saud, 2024).



Despite this rich multilingual landscape, educational practices particularly in writing instruction continue to reflect a predominantly monolingual orientation, privileging Nepali and English as the primary languages of instruction. This narrow linguistic focus often marginalizes the home languages and cultural expressions of students from indigenous, rural, and historically underrepresented communities. As a result, many learners experience a disjunction between their lived experiences and the content and form of academic writing tasks. This disconnection can lead to feelings of exclusion, reduced engagement, and persistent underachievement in literacy development, particularly among students whose linguistic and cultural identities are not reflected in the classroom.

This systemic privileging of dominant languages such as Nepali and English not only erodes students' confidence but also delegitimizes their home languages and cultural narratives. By reinforcing a hierarchy of knowledge that prioritizes standardized linguistic norms over local epistemologies, the education system marginalizes the diverse voices of learners. Writing, within such a framework, is often reduced to a mechanistic exercise emphasizing grammar and correctness, rather than a creative, reflective process rooted in personal voice and cultural relevance. This model fails to engage students meaningfully, particularly those whose linguistic repertoires are excluded from mainstream curricula. As Phyak (2013) notes, many children are compelled to write in languages that do not reflect their home experiences, rendering writing a disconnected and disempowering activity. This linguistic misalignment hinders students' ability to express themselves authentically and diminishes their emotional and cognitive investment in learning. Consequently, writing instruction that ignores students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds risks alienating them from the very act of literacy it seeks to cultivate.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) presents a transformative alternative to this deficit-oriented model. Initially developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and later expanded by Geneva Gay (2010), CRP emphasizes the importance of using students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and language practices as essential tools for learning. When applied to writing instruction, CRP encourages teachers to view cultural diversity not as a barrier but as a resource for enhancing literacy. By integrating local stories, oral traditions, and multilingual strategies into the classroom, educators can empower students to write from a place of authenticity, thereby fostering deeper engagement, improved linguistic competence, and the affirmation of cultural identity. This paper explores how CRP can be meaningfully implemented to strengthen writing development in Nepal's multilingual education system, with a focus on equity, inclusion, and educational justice.

Literature Review

In recent decades, increasing attention to educational equity and inclusion has led to the widespread adoption of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. CRP emphasizes the integration of students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and identities into the teaching and learning process, with significant implications for academic achievement, identity development, and the cultivation of critical consciousness. In the context of writing instruction, CRP aligns closely with sociocultural theories of learning, highlighting how students' linguistic and cultural repertoires can be meaningfully harnessed to enhance engagement, creativity, and communicative competence. This literature review examines the theoretical foundations of CRP and its evolution into culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), focusing specifically on its application within multilingual writing classrooms. By synthesizing key studies and frameworks, this review aims to illuminate the pedagogical potential of CRP and CSP in transforming writing instruction to be more inclusive, empowering, and responsive to diverse learners.

CRP is a transformative educational approach that emphasizes the centrality of students' cultural identities in shaping meaningful learning experiences. Ladson-Billings (1995) conceptualizes CRP as a framework that empowers learners intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by embedding cultural referents into the teaching of knowledge, skills, and values. Rather than viewing students' cultural backgrounds as barriers, CRP recognizes them as critical assets that enrich classroom instruction. Gay (2010) further defines CRP as the practice of using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as essential tools for more effective teaching. This pedagogical orientation not only supports academic achievement but also fosters students' critical consciousness and sociopolitical awareness (Paris & Alim, 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Together, these perspectives underscore the transformative potential of CRP in promoting inclusive, equitable, and culturally affirming education.

Gay's (2010) model of CRP emphasizes the importance of embedding students' cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and worldviews into the curriculum to create more meaningful, inclusive, and accessible learning environments. By affirming students' identities and making instruction culturally relevant, this approach not only strengthens academic engagement but also fosters a deeper connection between learners and the content being taught. Expanding on this foundation, Villegas and Lucas (2002) argue that CRP functions not only as a strategy for improving academic performance but also as a powerful vehicle for cultivating students' critical consciousness. Through culturally responsive teaching, students are encouraged to recognize, question, and challenge social inequalities, thereby developing the analytical tools necessary to

engage with issues of power, privilege, and injustice. This pedagogical orientation positions learners not merely as recipients of knowledge, but as active agents capable of transforming oppressive structures within their schools, communities, and broader society. In doing so, CRP contributes to a more equitable and socially just education system that values diversity as a strength rather than a deficit.

In the context of writing instruction, CRP aligns closely with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that cognitive development is socially mediated and deeply rooted in cultural and linguistic contexts. Vygotsky argues that higher-order thinking skills emerge through dialogic interactions and scaffolded support within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Consequently, writing should be understood not merely as an isolated cognitive task but as a socially and culturally situated practice (Moll et al., 1992; Wertsch, 1991). When educators intentionally incorporate students' linguistic repertoires and cultural narratives into writing instruction, they validate students' identities, enhance engagement, and promote a stronger sense of agency in the writing process (González et al., 2005). This approach transforms writing into a collaborative and meaningful activity, fostering both academic competence and personal expression.

Recent scholarship in literacy education has shifted toward Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), which extends the principles of CRP by emphasizing the ongoing support and development of students' cultural and linguistic identities (Paris, 2012). This pedagogical evolution reflects a nuanced understanding of culture as dynamic and ever-changing, necessitating instructional approaches that not only validate students' backgrounds but also equip them with critical literacy skills to engage with and transform cultural narratives (Alim & Paris, 2014). As such, embedding CRP and by extension, CSP into writing instruction contributes not only to academic success but also to the cultivation of students as critical thinkers and agents of social change.

Methods and Procedures

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, enriched by elements of action research, to examine how culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) influences writing competence in multilingual classrooms in Nepal. The case study design enables an in-depth, contextually grounded exploration of how teachers integrate students' cultural identities, mother tongues, and community narratives into writing instruction. By focusing on a purposively selected group of schools that reflect Nepal's linguistic and cultural diversity, the study aims to capture the lived realities of both educators and learners as they navigate and negotiate CRP practices. Data collection involves classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students,

and analysis of student writing samples, allowing for triangulated insights into the pedagogical process.

Action research principles are embedded within the case study framework to facilitate collaborative inquiry and reflective practice. Through cycles of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection, teachers co-develop and test CRP-based writing strategies in real-time classroom settings. This integration of action research enhances the case study by promoting iterative adaptation and responsiveness to local needs, while also positioning educators as co-researchers in the pedagogical transformation. The combination of case study and action research is particularly effective for investigating complex, situated phenomena such as writing development in multilingual contexts, as it allows for both descriptive depth and practical intervention. Together, these methodologies provide a robust framework for understanding and improving writing instruction through culturally responsive approaches.

Results and Discussion

The following section presents the findings from the study and offers a detailed discussion of how culturally responsive pedagogy impacts writing competence in Nepal's multilingual secondary classrooms. Drawing on qualitative data collected through classroom observations, interviews, and student writing samples, this analysis highlights the ways in which integrating students' cultural identities, home languages, and local narratives influences their engagement, writing quality, and sense of agency. The discussion contextualizes these results within existing theoretical frameworks and prior research, exploring both the successes and challenges encountered in implementing CRP strategies. Through this lens, the study elucidates the transformative potential of culturally grounded writing instruction while also addressing the complexities and constraints faced by educators and learners in diverse linguistic settings.

The implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy in Nepal's multilingual classrooms demonstrated a significant positive impact on students' engagement with writing tasks. Classroom observations and interviews revealed that when students were encouraged to incorporate their home languages and cultural narratives into writing assignments, their participation and enthusiasm visibly increased. For example, one teacher from a public school named Adarsha Secondary School, Madhyapur Thimi, Bhaktapur remarked, "When students write stories from their own culture, they become more excited and confident about sharing their ideas" (Teacher Interview, March 2025). A student from the same school similarly shared, "Writing in my mother tongue makes me feel that my voice matters" (Student Interview, March 2025). These testimonies align with Ladson-Billings's (1995) framework, which argues that students who see their cultural identities reflected in learning materials develop stronger motivation and

connection to the content. Similarly, Gay (2010) emphasizes that culturally relevant pedagogy fosters emotional and cognitive investment by validating students' lived experiences.

Beyond engagement, students' writing quality improved notably when CRP principles were applied. Analysis of student writing samples showed richer narrative structures, increased use of culturally specific idioms, and greater linguistic complexity, especially when students were allowed to write in their mother tongues or engage in translanguaging practices. One teacher from private school named Orbit English School, Madhyapur Thimi, Bhaktapur observed, "I noticed that when children use their home languages alongside Nepali, their writing became more expressive and meaningful" (Teacher Interview, April 2025). These findings support Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that cognitive development—including writing competence—is mediated by cultural and linguistic tools embedded in social interaction. González et al. (2005) further argue that leveraging students' cultural resources enhances both identity affirmation and academic skill development. The study's findings reinforce this notion, showing that culturally grounded writing instruction fosters both narrative depth and genre awareness, contributing to more authentic and confident writing.

A critical outcome of the study was the empowerment students experienced through CRP-informed writing instruction. Many learners expressed a stronger sense of agency and ownership over their texts, as they were no longer required to suppress their linguistic identities in favor of dominant languages. One student of Orbit English School, Madhyapur Thimi, Bhaktapur noted, "For the first time, I feel proud to write stories that reflect my life and traditions" (Student Interview, April 2025). Teachers also reported a shift toward more student-centered and dialogic classroom dynamics, with one commenting, "Our role changed from correcting grammar to facilitating meaningful conversations about culture and identity through writing" (Teacher Interview, March 2025). This echoes Villegas and Lucas's (2002) emphasis on CRP as a means to foster critical consciousness and challenge traditional power relations in schooling. These voices illustrate how CRP enhances not only writing skills but also identity affirmation and socio-emotional development.

Despite these promising results, the study uncovered several challenges in operationalizing CRP in Nepal's educational context. Resource constraints, including limited availability of culturally relevant materials and insufficient teacher training on CRP, hindered the full realization of its potential. One teacher from public school named Bal Premi Secondary School, Madhyapur Thimi, Bhaktapur reflected, "I want to teach in a culturally responsive way, but I don't have enough resources or training to do it effectively" (Teacher Interview, May 2025). Moreover, systemic pressures to prioritize Nepali and English for national examinations created tensions that discouraged the extensive use of mother tongues in writing instruction. These obstacles reflect broader

issues documented in multilingual education research, where institutional policies and dominant language ideologies often marginalize minority languages (Cummins, 2001; Hornberger, 2003). Addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms that align policy, teacher development, and curriculum design with the goals of linguistic inclusivity and cultural responsiveness.

In light of these findings, this study underscores the importance of integrating CRP strategies into writing pedagogy to support multilingual learners effectively. Practices such as mother tongue scaffolding, community-based writing projects, and reflective classroom dialogues emerged as particularly effective in promoting linguistic empowerment and writing competence. One student from Bal Premi Secondary School shared, “Working on stories from my village helped me see that my culture is important in school too” (Student Interview, April 2025). However, sustainable implementation depends on policy support, professional development, and the production of culturally relevant teaching resources. Aligning with Moll et al.’s (1992) advocacy for funds of knowledge, educational stakeholders must recognize and build upon the rich cultural and linguistic assets students bring to the classroom. Ultimately, this approach has the potential to transform writing instruction in Nepal, making it more inclusive, engaging, and empowering for all learners.

Case Example

A Writing Workshop in a Limbu Community School

In a pilot writing workshop conducted in a primary school in eastern Nepal, students were encouraged to write short poems and stories in both Nepali and Limbu. One child wrote a story about her grandmother’s weaving practice—a narrative deeply rooted in her ethnic heritage. The integration of her home language and cultural knowledge allowed the student to weave a rich and vivid narrative that transcended the constraints of standardized writing tasks. She described intricate weaving techniques passed down through generations, reflecting not only her linguistic fluency in Limbu but also her profound connection to cultural traditions. Her work, which would typically have been limited by a formulaic approach to writing in Nepali, became a powerful and coherent expression of identity and family history. This example highlights the potential of culturally responsive pedagogy to bridge the gap between academic expectations and students’ lived experiences, demonstrating how culturally situated writing tasks can lead to more authentic and expressive outcomes.

A Writing Workshop in a Magar Community School

In a school located in the hill regions of Nepal, a similar workshop was conducted with students from the Magar community. The students were asked to write about the significance of the Magar New Year (Maghe Sankranti), incorporating both their personal experiences and cultural practices surrounding the festival. One student,

deeply engaged in the task, wrote about the preparation of traditional food, the rituals involved, and the sense of unity that the festival brings to the community. The student's narrative, written in Nepali, was enriched with Magar vocabulary and descriptions of local customs, which would not have been possible in a purely monolingual writing context. The student's writing, far more detailed and evocative than typical classroom essays, reflected a deep understanding and connection to cultural heritage. This example underscores how CRP allows students to express their cultural identities in their writing, fostering a sense of pride and belonging while simultaneously enhancing language and writing skills.

A Writing Workshop in a Chepang Community School

In another pilot workshop held in a remote Chepang community in central Nepal, students were tasked with writing about the significance of the forest in their daily lives—an essential aspect of Chepang culture and livelihood. One student wrote a compelling piece about the traditional methods of hunting and gathering, describing the forest as a place of both sustenance and spiritual connection. This story, deeply embedded in the student's cultural context, was far richer and more vivid than typical assignments in Nepali, which often lacked such cultural depth. The use of the Chepang language in preliminary drafts allowed the student to fully articulate their experiences, which were then translated into Nepali, preserving the cultural nuances. Through this exercise, the student not only honed their writing skills but also engaged in a form of cultural storytelling that affirmed their identity and heritage. The success of this workshop exemplifies the power of CRP to foster an environment where students can express themselves freely, strengthening both their cultural understanding and literacy skills.

The pilot writing workshops conducted in Limbu, Magar, and Chepang community schools in Nepal vividly demonstrate the transformative potential of culturally responsive pedagogy in multilingual classroom settings. By encouraging students to write in both Nepali and their respective mother tongues, these workshops enabled learners to draw deeply on their cultural knowledge and lived experiences, producing narratives rich in detail, emotional resonance, and cultural significance. For example, a Limbu student's story about her grandmother's traditional weaving, a Magar student's reflection on the Maghe Sankranti festival, and a Chepang student's vivid depiction of forest life all illustrate how CRP fosters authentic self-expression and reinforces cultural identity. These culturally grounded writing tasks not only heightened students' engagement and motivation but also challenged prevailing notions of linguistic diversity as an obstacle to literacy development. By validating students' home languages and cultural practices, CRP cultivated inclusive learning environments in which writing served as both a tool for academic advancement and a means of cultural affirmation, effectively bridging the divide between standardized curricula and students' sociocultural realities.

Implications for Educational Policy and Pedagogical Practice

To genuinely transform writing pedagogy in Nepal and ensure equitable opportunities for all students to develop their writing competence, comprehensive educational policy reforms are imperative. Foremost among these is the development and institutionalization of multilingual curricula that actively incorporate students' home languages alongside dominant languages such as Nepali and English. This multilingual approach is vital not only for preserving and promoting linguistic diversity but also for advancing cognitive development and academic achievement. Research consistently shows that allowing students to engage with their full linguistic repertoires facilitates deeper comprehension, more nuanced thinking, and richer expressive abilities in writing (Cummins, 2001; García & Wei, 2014). For Nepal's diverse classrooms, multilingual curricula would bridge the linguistic divide, enabling students to connect formal education with their lived realities.

Implementing such curricula necessitates a fundamental overhaul of existing teaching materials to authentically represent Nepal's cultural and linguistic heterogeneity. Textbooks, learning aids, and digital resources must be enriched with examples drawn from a wide array of indigenous languages, oral histories, and community traditions. By embedding these cultural references, educational materials can foster students' cultural pride and identity affirmation, thereby narrowing the disconnect between students' home experiences and school-based literacy practices. Such culturally inclusive content is essential for creating learning environments where students feel seen, valued, and motivated to engage meaningfully with writing tasks.

Equally critical is the prioritization of sustained professional development programs that equip teachers with the pedagogical expertise and cultural competence necessary for effective implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers must be prepared not only to recognize but to honor the linguistic and cultural identities of their students as foundational assets in the learning process. As Gay (2010) asserts, "Culturally responsive teaching demands that educators understand, respect, and utilize the cultural frames of reference of their students" (p. 35). Professional development should emphasize practical strategies for integrating students' personal and communal experiences into writing instruction such as incorporating local narratives, oral traditions, and community knowledge by transforming writing from a decontextualized exercise into a meaningful, identity-affirming practice.

Moreover, educational policies must reconceptualize writing as a powerful form of self-expression and identity construction rather than merely a tool for assessment. Encouraging students to explore and articulate their own stories through writing fosters a greater sense of agency, ownership, and intrinsic motivation (Paris & Alim, 2017). This shift aligns with culturally sustaining pedagogy's goal of not only validating students' cultural identities but actively nurturing their ongoing linguistic

and cultural growth. By fostering writing as a creative, reflective, and socially relevant act, educators can cultivate learners' confidence and critical consciousness, ultimately enhancing both academic success and socio-emotional development.

To sum up, transforming writing pedagogy in Nepal requires coordinated policy efforts that integrate multilingual curricula, culturally relevant teaching materials, and comprehensive teacher training. Such reforms must be underpinned by a commitment to viewing students' cultural and linguistic diversity as educational strengths rather than obstacles. By embracing these principles, Nepal's education system can create more inclusive, empowering, and effective writing instruction that honors students' identities while preparing them for academic and civic participation in an increasingly interconnected world.

Conclusion

Developing writing competence in Nepal's multilingual classrooms requires pedagogical approaches that genuinely recognize and incorporate students' linguistic and cultural assets. The findings of this study reveal that traditional writing instruction often grounded in standardized, monolingual norms frequently marginalizes students who speak minority languages or come from culturally distinct communities. Such approaches fail to reflect students' lived realities, leading to disengagement and limited progress in writing. In contrast, the implementation of writing tasks that encouraged the use of home languages, community narratives, and local cultural knowledge significantly increased student participation and engagement. Learners responded enthusiastically to assignments based on storytelling, oral histories, and culturally relevant themes, as these allowed them to write with authenticity and personal investment. These results suggest that when students are empowered to use their full linguistic repertoires, they develop a stronger sense of voice, ownership, and confidence in their writing abilities.

Moreover, the study's discussions underscore that when instruction affirms students' identities and cultural backgrounds, writing evolves from a mechanical task into a dynamic means of self-expression and cultural affirmation. Students reported feeling more connected to writing activities when they could incorporate elements of their daily lives, traditions, and languages by indicating a deeper emotional and intellectual engagement with the process. This connection not only enhanced their academic growth but also fostered a stronger sense of agency and pride in their heritage. The observed improvements in writing fluency, creativity, and coherence among participants further affirm the potential of culturally grounded instruction to enhance writing competence. By centering education on students' lived experiences

and linguistic diversity, educators can create inclusive, empowering classrooms where all learners are equipped to thrive both academically and socially. Thus, these findings point to the urgent need for policy and curriculum reforms that institutionalize culturally responsive writing practices across Nepal's diverse educational settings.

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