

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN WRITING PROFICIENCY AMONG INDIGENOUS STUDENTS OF UDAYAPUR DISTRICT, NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

Writing proficiency is a critical academic skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, particularly in countries like Nepal where written English strongly influences educational and career opportunities. Despite its importance, limited research has explored gender differences in writing achievement among indigenous learners in rural Nepal. This study investigates English writing proficiency among secondary-level students in Udayapur District, focusing on gender-based differences. Using a quantitative descriptive-comparative design, data were collected from indigenous Grade 10 students in two community schools through a standardized writing test assessed with an analytic rubric. Descriptive statistics and a chi-square test were employed to examine proficiency distribution across gender. The findings indicate a statistically significant gender gap, with female students more likely to achieve higher proficiency levels while male students are disproportionately represented in lower bands. The study highlights the intersection of gender, socio-cultural factors, and educational inequality, and recommends gender-responsive pedagogy and targeted writing interventions to improve literacy outcomes in marginalized contexts.

Keywords: *Gender differences; Writing proficiency; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Indigenous students; Secondary education; Nepal; Literacy achievement; Educational inequality; Writing assessment; Rural education*

Introduction

Writing proficiency occupies a central position in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education because it represents both linguistic competence and higher-order cognitive ability. Unlike speaking, which is often spontaneous and supported by contextual cues, writing demands deliberate organization, lexical precision, grammatical accuracy, and rhetorical awareness. Hyland (2003) explains that writing is a socially situated practice that requires writers to construct meaning for specific audiences within particular discourse communities. Similarly, Richards and Renandya (2002) argue that writing is the most demanding of the four language skills, as it integrates cognitive processing, linguistic knowledge, and metacognitive

control. For EFL learners, especially in exam-oriented systems, writing proficiency becomes a decisive indicator of academic achievement and educational mobility.

In Nepal, English functions as a compulsory subject throughout formal schooling and as a gatekeeping mechanism for higher education and employment. Despite this institutional emphasis, writing remains one of the weakest language skills among Nepalese students (Awasthi, 2003; Phyak, 2011). Phyak (2011), in his examination of English language teaching practices in Nepal, notes that classroom instruction often prioritizes product-based approaches focused on grammatical accuracy and memorization rather than process-oriented writing development. As a result, students receive limited opportunities to develop fluency, coherence, and critical expression. These challenges are amplified in rural and community schools where resources, teacher training, and exposure to English are comparatively limited.

Within the broader discourse on writing proficiency, gender has emerged as an important variable in explaining differences in literacy achievement. International large-scale assessments consistently show that girls outperform boys in reading and writing across diverse contexts (OECD, 2019). Empirical research has further demonstrated that females tend to produce higher-quality texts and demonstrate greater writing fluency than males (Al-Saadi, 2020). In her study of undergraduate Omani students, Al-Saadi (2020) found that females outperformed males in both writing fluency and text quality, and that this advantage was partially mediated by language proficiency. Her findings highlight the importance of examining the underlying factors—such as linguistic competence and cognitive processing—that may account for observed gender differences.

From a motivational perspective, Pajares (2003) emphasizes that writing self-efficacy significantly predicts writing performance. He argues that female students often report stronger confidence in their writing abilities, which contributes to higher engagement and achievement. Similarly, Hidi and Boscolo (2006) suggest that girls tend to adopt more elaborative writing strategies and demonstrate greater concern for audience and organization. These cognitive and affective dimensions may explain persistent gender gaps in literacy outcomes. However, while such trends are well-documented internationally, their applicability to marginalized or indigenous contexts remains underexplored.

In Nepal, indigenous students frequently navigate multilingual realities in which their home languages differ from Nepali (the national language of instruction) and English (the foreign language being learned). According to Phyak (2011), this layered linguistic environment can complicate English acquisition, particularly in writing, where lexical and syntactic precision are essential. Furthermore, socio-economic constraints and traditional gender roles may differentially shape

educational engagement among boys and girls in rural communities. For instance, boys may face early economic responsibilities that reduce academic focus, whereas girls may perceive educational success as a pathway to empowerment. Yet empirical research investigating the intersection of gender, indigeneity, and writing proficiency in Nepal is scarce.

Although international research, including Al-Saadi's (2020) study, demonstrates that gender differences in writing are often mediated by linguistic proficiency and writing fluency, such process-oriented investigations have not been systematically conducted in rural Nepal. There remains a significant gap in understanding whether similar patterns exist among indigenous secondary-level learners in districts such as Udayapur. Addressing this gap is crucial for promoting equitable literacy development and for informing pedagogical interventions tailored to local realities.

Therefore, this study aims to examine gender differences in English writing proficiency among indigenous secondary students in Udayapur District, Nepal. By situating gender within the broader socio-cultural and educational context of rural Nepal, the research seeks to contribute to theoretical discussions on writing proficiency while offering practical insights for EFL pedagogy, curriculum development, and educational policy.

2. Context of the Study

Understanding gender differences in writing proficiency requires close attention to the educational and socio-cultural environment in which learners develop literacy skills. Writing achievement is not shaped solely by cognitive and linguistic ability; rather, it is strongly influenced by contextual factors such as educational policy, classroom practices, access to resources, and social expectations. As Hyland (2003) argues, writing is embedded within specific social and institutional contexts, and learners' opportunities to develop writing skills depend heavily on the environments in which they learn. Therefore, examining the Nepalese educational setting—particularly rural and indigenous contexts—is essential for interpreting patterns of writing proficiency.

2.1 English Language Education in Nepal

English occupies a unique position in Nepal as both a compulsory school subject and a symbol of academic and socio-economic mobility. Students study English from the early grades, and written English plays a central role in secondary-level examinations and university entrance requirements. Richards and Renandya (2002) note that in many EFL contexts, writing serves as the primary mode of assessment, making it a decisive factor in academic success. This observation is particularly relevant in Nepal, where written examinations dominate evaluation systems.

Despite its importance, research indicates that English language teaching in Nepal remains largely examination-oriented and product-based. According to Phyak (2011), classroom practices often emphasize grammar, memorization, and model essays, leaving limited opportunities for students to engage in extended writing practice. Awasthi (2003) similarly highlights that writing instruction frequently prioritizes correctness over creativity and critical thinking. As a result, students may develop limited writing fluency and struggle to express ideas coherently.

These challenges are especially pronounced in rural community schools, where limited infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, and scarce learning materials constrain English language instruction. In such contexts, writing is often treated as a peripheral skill rather than a process requiring sustained practice and feedback. Consequently, disparities in writing proficiency between urban and rural learners are common.

2.2 Indigenous Learners in Rural Nepal

The present study focuses on indigenous secondary students in Udayapur District, a rural region characterized by linguistic diversity and socio-economic challenges. Indigenous learners in Nepal often grow up in multilingual environments where their home languages differ from Nepali (the language of instruction) and English (the foreign language being learned). Phyak (2011) explains that this layered linguistic context can create additional challenges for language acquisition, particularly in writing, which requires advanced control of vocabulary and grammar.

Socio-economic factors further shape educational outcomes in indigenous communities. Limited access to books, internet resources, and supportive learning environments can restrict opportunities for literacy development. International research has shown that marginalized learners frequently experience lower literacy outcomes due to structural inequalities (OECD, 2019). These broader educational disadvantages provide an important backdrop for understanding writing proficiency in Udayapur.

2.3 Gender and Educational Participation in Rural Communities

Gender roles and expectations also influence educational engagement in rural Nepal. Although gender parity in school enrollment has improved significantly, differences in learning experiences and outcomes persist. International evidence consistently demonstrates that girls outperform boys in literacy-related tasks (OECD, 2019). Al-Saadi (2020) further found that female students produced higher-quality texts and demonstrated greater writing fluency, with language proficiency acting as a mediating factor in gender differences. These findings suggest that

gender disparities in writing may be shaped by both cognitive and socio-cultural influences.

In rural Nepal, socio-cultural expectations may affect boys' and girls' engagement with schooling in different ways. Boys are often expected to contribute to household or economic activities, which may reduce time available for academic work. In contrast, girls may perceive education as an important pathway to social mobility and empowerment. Pajares (2003) argues that motivation and self-efficacy play crucial roles in writing performance, and differences in these factors may contribute to gender disparities in literacy achievement.

2.4 Rationale for the Present Study

While international and regional research suggests that gender differences in writing are widespread, empirical evidence from rural Nepal remains limited. Moreover, the intersection of gender and indigenous identity has rarely been explored in relation to writing proficiency. Al-Saadi (2020) emphasizes the importance of examining the mediating factors that explain gender differences in writing performance, particularly in under-researched contexts.

By focusing on indigenous secondary students in Udayapur District, the present study seeks to address this gap and provide context-specific evidence on gender differences in English writing proficiency. Understanding these contextual factors is essential for developing pedagogical interventions and policies that promote equitable literacy development in Nepal's diverse educational landscape.

3. The Current Study

Building on prior research that has identified gender as a significant variable in writing performance, the present study aims to investigate whether gender differences exist in English writing proficiency among indigenous secondary-level students in Udayapur District, Nepal, and to explore the potential factors underlying such differences. While international research has increasingly examined gender disparities in writing fluency and text quality (Al-Saadi, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019), empirical studies in rural and indigenous contexts of Nepal remain scarce. This gap is particularly significant given that writing proficiency is closely linked to academic success in EFL settings (Hyland, 2003; Richards & Renandya, 2002).

The current study focuses specifically on the effect of gender on writing proficiency, operationalized through overall text quality and performance across defined proficiency bands. Unlike process-oriented keystroke studies that measure writing fluency in real time (e.g., Zhang et al., 2019), the present research adopts an assessment-based approach appropriate to the secondary school context in rural

Nepal. Nevertheless, it is informed by the broader literature suggesting that differences in language proficiency, motivation, and engagement may mediate gender-based disparities in writing outcomes (Al-Saadi, 2020; Pajares, 2003).

By investigating gender differences among indigenous learners, this study seeks to extend existing scholarship into a marginalized and under-researched educational context. Indigenous students in Nepal often navigate multilingual environments and socio-economic constraints that may influence literacy development (Phyak, 2011). Understanding whether gender differences persist within such contexts can contribute to both theoretical discussions on writing proficiency and practical efforts to promote educational equity.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does English writing proficiency among indigenous secondary students vary according to gender?
2. Are the observed gender differences in writing proficiency statistically significant?
3. How can any identified gender differences be interpreted in light of existing research on writing, literacy achievement, and socio-cultural influences?

The objectives of the study are threefold:

- To assess the distribution of writing proficiency levels among indigenous secondary-level students.
- To compare writing performance across gender groups in two different schools.
- To provide pedagogical and policy recommendations to address observed gender disparities.

Through these questions, the study aims to provide context-specific evidence on gender and writing proficiency, thereby contributing to the broader field of EFL writing research and informing pedagogical interventions in rural Nepal.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate gender differences in English writing proficiency among indigenous secondary-level students in Udayapur District, Nepal. A mixed-methods approach was selected because writing proficiency is both a measurable academic outcome and a socially situated practice influenced by contextual and motivational factors. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argue, mixed-methods designs are particularly effective when researchers seek not only to identify statistical patterns but also to explain the underlying reasons behind those patterns. In the first phase of the study, quantitative data were collected and analyzed to determine whether

statistically significant gender differences existed in writing proficiency. In the second phase, qualitative data were gathered to interpret and contextualize the quantitative findings. This integrated design is consistent with recommendations in writing research, which emphasize the importance of combining performance-based assessment with contextual analysis (Hyland, 2003).

4.2 Research Population and Sample

The target population of this study consisted of Grade 10 indigenous students enrolled in community secondary schools in Udayapur District. These schools primarily serve learners from Rai, Limbu, Tamang, and Magar communities. The population was considered finite because the total number of Grade 10 students in the selected schools during the academic year was known and documented by school records. The total accessible population across the two selected schools was approximately 120 students.

The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations, which is expressed as $(n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2})$, where (n) represents the required sample size, (N) the population size, and (e) the margin of error set at 0.05. Substituting the values into the formula yielded a required sample of approximately 92 students. However, due to logistical constraints, school schedules, and voluntary participation, a final sample of 50 students was selected. Although smaller than the calculated maximum, this sample size remains adequate for comparative educational research, as group comparison studies typically require a minimum of 30 participants per group to ensure sufficient statistical power (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The final sample consisted of 26 male and 24 female students aged between 14 and 16 years.

A two-stage sampling strategy was employed. First, purposive sampling was used to select two community schools that predominantly serve indigenous students. Purposive sampling is appropriate when research focuses on a specific population with particular characteristics relevant to the study objectives (Creswell, 2014). Second, stratified sampling based on gender was applied to ensure balanced representation of male and female students within the sample. Stratified sampling enhances the validity of comparative research by reducing sampling bias and ensuring proportional subgroup representation (Cohen et al., 2018).

4.3 Quantitative Data Collection

Writing proficiency was measured using a standardized writing test designed to reflect the secondary-level English curriculum in Nepal. The test consisted of two tasks: an essay writing task requiring students to compose a 150–200 word composition on a familiar topic, and a letter writing task. These tasks were selected because writing performance tasks provide direct evidence of learners' productive

language ability and are widely recognized as appropriate measures of writing proficiency in EFL contexts (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Students completed the assessment in a 60-minute session under examination-like conditions to ensure consistency.

Student responses were evaluated using an analytic scoring rubric adapted from established ESL writing assessment frameworks (Jacobs et al., 1981). The rubric assessed five components: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Each component was assigned a weighted score to reflect its relative importance in overall writing quality. The analytic approach was chosen because it provides more detailed diagnostic information than holistic scoring and enhances scoring reliability (Hyland, 2003). Two trained English teachers independently rated all scripts. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using correlation analysis and yielded a coefficient of .87, indicating strong agreement and acceptable reliability according to established educational research standards (Cohen et al., 2018). Scores were converted into percentages and categorized into three proficiency bands: high proficiency ($\geq 60\%$), basic proficiency (41–60%), and low proficiency ($\leq 40\%$).

4.4 Qualitative Data Collection

To complement the quantitative findings and explore potential explanations for gender differences, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected students and English teachers, as well as classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe their attitudes toward writing, writing habits, motivational factors, and perceived challenges. This method is recommended in language education research for exploring affective and contextual dimensions of learning (Dörnyei, 2007). Teacher interviews provided insights into classroom participation patterns, gender engagement differences, and instructional practices. Classroom observations were conducted to document interaction patterns and writing-related activities. The use of multiple qualitative sources strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

4.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and percentages, were used to summarize writing proficiency levels. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare mean writing scores between male and female students. A chi-square test of independence was employed to examine the association between gender and proficiency bands. Effect size measures, including Cohen's *d* and Cramér's *V*, were calculated to determine the magnitude of observed differences. These statistical

procedures are widely recommended for examining group differences in educational research (Field, 2018).

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded systematically to identify recurring patterns and themes related to motivation, engagement, and socio-cultural influences. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings allowed for a more comprehensive interpretation of gender differences in writing proficiency.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from participating schools prior to data collection. Students and school authorities were informed about the purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. The writing assessment posed no academic risk to participants and aligned with the regular curriculum. These procedures adhered to established ethical guidelines for educational research (Creswell, 2014).

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings in direct relation to the research questions and the quantitative comparative research design adopted in this study. The analysis follows the explanatory sequential approach outlined in the methodology, beginning with descriptive statistics, followed by inferential statistical tests to examine gender differences in writing proficiency among indigenous secondary students in Udayapur District.

5.2 Overall Level of Writing Proficiency

To address the first research question, descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the overall level of writing proficiency among the participants. The analysis focused on mean writing scores and standard deviations across gender groups.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Writing Scores by Gender

Gender	N	Mean (%)	SD
Boys	26	47.38	9.62
Girls	24	58.54	10.11
Total	50	52.74	10.94

The overall mean score of 52.74% indicates that the majority of students fall within the **basic proficiency band**, suggesting that writing proficiency among indigenous secondary learners is moderate. This finding reflects the broader challenges of writing development in EFL contexts, particularly in rural community schools.

Importantly, the descriptive statistics also reveal a noticeable difference between male and female students, indicating the need for further inferential analysis to determine whether the difference is statistically significant.

5.3 Gender Differences in Writing Proficiency

To examine whether gender differences in writing proficiency were statistically significant, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. This test was appropriate because the research design aimed to compare the mean writing scores of two independent groups (male and female students).

Table 2

Independent Samples *t*-test Comparing Writing Scores by Gender

Variable	<i>t</i>	df	p-value	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Writing Score	-3.98	48	< .001	0.88

The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in writing scores between male and female students, $t(48) = -3.98$, $p < .001$. The effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.88$) indicates a **large effect**, demonstrating that gender had a substantial influence on writing performance.

This result provides strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis and confirms that female students significantly outperform male students in English writing proficiency.

5.4 Proficiency Level Distribution

In line with the comparative research design, a chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between gender and writing proficiency levels.

Table 3

Writing Proficiency Levels by Gender

Proficiency Level	Boys (n=26)	Girls (n=24)	Total
High ($\geq 60\%$)	3 (11.5%)	11 (45.8%)	14
Basic (41–60%)	15 (57.7%)	11 (45.8%)	26
Low ($\leq 40\%$)	8 (30.8%)	2 (8.3%)	10

The chi-square test indicated a statistically significant association between gender and proficiency level, $\chi^2(2, N = 50) = 7.89$, $p < .05$, with a moderate effect size (Cramér's $V = .40$).

The distribution shows that female students were considerably more likely to achieve high proficiency, while male students were overrepresented in the low proficiency category. This pattern reinforces the results of the *t*-test and confirms the presence of a gender gap in writing proficiency.

5.5 Interpretation of Gender Differences

The third research question aimed to interpret the observed gender differences in relation to the broader literature and the socio-cultural context of rural Nepal. The findings demonstrate a clear and statistically significant gender gap, with female students consistently achieving higher writing scores.

These results align with international literacy research, which consistently reports that girls outperform boys in writing and reading. The findings also support previous research indicating that female learners often demonstrate stronger writing engagement and motivation.

Within the context of the present research design, the observed gender differences may reflect variations in academic engagement, motivation, and learning opportunities. In rural indigenous communities, boys may experience greater involvement in economic and household responsibilities, which can reduce time available for academic practice. Conversely, girls may perceive education as an important pathway to social mobility, which may increase their motivation and engagement in writing tasks.

5.6 Integration of Findings with Research Design

The explanatory sequential design enabled the study to first identify statistically significant gender differences and then interpret these differences in a broader educational and socio-cultural framework. The quantitative findings provide robust evidence of gender disparities in writing proficiency, while the discussion situates these results within the wider literature on literacy and educational equity.

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