An Evidence-Based Systematic Review on The Role of Culturally Responsive Teaching in Improving EFL Students' Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT

Writing is one of the most demanding skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, especially in culturally diverse classrooms where standardized instruction often overlooks students' cultural contexts. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) offers a promising pedagogical approach that bridges cultural identity with academic writing instruction. This systematic review synthesizes findings from 18 empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024, using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method designs. Drawing on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and the Funds of Knowledge framework, the review explores how CRT enhances EFL writing performance through strategies such as personalized prompts, integration of cultural narratives, and community-based writing tasks. Results indicate that these practices significantly improve students' writing coherence, lexical richness, and rhetorical awareness, while also increasing motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy—especially among marginalized and multilingual learners. The review also identifies key moderating factors influencing CRT implementation, including teacher training, curriculum flexibility, and culturally sensitive assessment policies. Findings highlight the need for deeper CRT integration into EFL writing curricula, particularly in non-Western and postcolonial education systems, to foster academic equity and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Teaching, EFL Writing, Systematic Review, Writing Motivation, Cultural Identity

Introduction

In the context of a rapidly globalizing world, English proficiency has become a crucial determinant of both academic success and socioeconomic mobility. Among the core language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing, writing is widely recognized as the most demanding, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This skill requires not only grammatical and lexical proficiency but also rhetorical awareness, coherence, cultural nuance, and mastery of diverse textual genres (Hyland, 2019). Unlike oral communication, which is often spontaneous and transient, academic writing demands a sustained cognitive effort and the capacity to structure information in a culturally appropriate and audience-sensitive manner.

EFL students, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, frequently encounter challenges in developing writing proficiency. These difficulties stem not only from limited exposure to English but also from a disconnect between students' cultural realities and the standardized, often Western-centric, classroom practices (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2014). In many EFL contexts notably across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, writing instruction tends to emphasize formal accuracy, rigid grammar rules, and genre formulas that ignore students' lived experiences (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Such approaches can lead to disengagement, writing apprehension, and superficial compositions devoid of authentic voice or cultural relevance.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), originally theorized by Ladson-Billings (1995), provides a pedagogical framework that actively incorporates students' cultural identities, linguistic resources, and social knowledge into the learning process (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Rather than treating cultural differences as obstacles, CRT views them as valuable assets that enrich academic discourse. In writing instruction, CRT encourages tasks that draw on students' personal narratives, community histories, indigenous knowledge systems, and multilingual abilities (Gay, 2018; Lucas & Villegas, 2013).

Applying CRT in EFL writing classrooms has shown potential to bridge cultural dissonance, foster deeper engagement, and improve student outcomes. Assignments that involve community-based storytelling, cultural reflections, or bilingual text production can scaffold learning and enhance rhetorical awareness. These practices affirm identity and agency, contributing to students' willingness to take intellectual risks and to develop voice and ownership over their writing (Nieto, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2017).

However, research on the direct effects of CRT on EFL writing skills remains underdeveloped. Most existing studies focus on general outcomes such as classroom inclusivity or reading comprehension (Banks & Banks, n.d.; Howard, 2012), while investigations into writing-specific impacts are limited, especially in non-Western contexts. Furthermore, in many postcolonial education systems, students' writing continues to be asssssed using rubrics that privilege Western rhetorical conventions (e.g., linear organization, explicit thesis), often ignoring culturally embedded narrative styles (Canagarajah, 2013).

Compounding this issue is a lack of consensus on what constitutes effective CRT strategies in writing. While some advocate for reflective journaling and identity texts, others promote community-based writing or genre adaptation (J.-S. Lee, 2016; Yoon,

2020). Contextual constraints such as teacher preparedness, institutional mandates, and resource limitations also impact implementation.

To address this research gap, the present systematic review synthesizes findings from 18 empirical studies (2014–2024) on how CRT influences EFL writing instruction. It integrates theoretical frameworks such as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), Lantolf & Thorne's (2006) concept of mediated learning, and the Funds of Knowledge theory (Moll et al., 1992), all of which underscore the sociocultural nature of literacy (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Moll et al., 1992; Vygotsky, 1978) .

Additionally, this review incorporates recent findings from Siahaan et al. (2025), who emphasize the integration of Indonesian local wisdom into writing tasks, and Ardhi et al. (2025), who analyze the complex relationship between cultural intelligence and writing performance. These studies expand the scope of CRT beyond North American models and provide empirical grounding in Southeast Asian contexts (Ardhi et al., 2025; Siahaan et al., 2025).

The guiding research questions are:
1. What CRT strategies are most effective in improving EFL students' writing skills?
2. How do these strategies impact students' writing outcomes and motivation?
3. What factors moderate the success of CRT implementation in EFL writing classrooms?

By answering these questions, this study aims to inform culturally sustaining pedagogies that not only improve technical proficiency but also validate students' identities and lived experiences.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by PRISMA 2020 protocols (Page et al., 2021) to ensure methodological transparency, reproducibility, and academic rigor. The SLR design enables the integration of diverse empirical findings across multiple research contexts to identify best practices, trends, and gaps related to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in EFL writing instruction.

Theoretical grounding for this review was drawn from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which conceptualizes writing as a culturally mediated activity developed through social interaction and cultural participation. Furthermore, Lantolf & Thorne (2006) emphasized that learning, including literacy, is deeply situated in identity formation and social tools. Complementing this, the Funds of Knowledge (FoK) theory (Moll et al., 1992) underscores the value of students' home and community knowledge, which CRT aims to activate in writing tasks (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Moll et al., 1992; Vygotsky, 1978).

Data Source and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between January and April 2024 across four prominent academic databases: Scopus, JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar. These databases were chosen for their interdisciplinary coverage of applied linguistics, education, and TESOL. Search terms were formulated using Boolean operators and adapted for each database's syntax. The primary search strings included:

- 1. ("Culturally Responsive Teaching" OR "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy") AND ("EFL writing" OR "foreign language writing")
  2. ("student motivation" OR "writing engagement") AND ("cultural identity" OR "multilingualism")

Truncation symbols (e.g., "writ*") were used to include word variants such as writing, writer, and written. This strategy aligns with best practices for exhaustive systematic searches (Booth et al., 2016).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance and consistency, the following inclusion criteria were applied:
1. Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods)
2. Published in peer-reviewed journals between 2014 and 2024
3. Focus on EFL students at secondary or tertiary educational levels
4. Explicit application or examination of CRT principles in writing instruction

Exclusion criteria included:
1. Studies in ESL or native English-speaking contexts
2. Theoretical or conceptual papers without empirical data
3. Duplicate studies across databases
4. Studies not published in English

The exclusion of ESL contexts is grounded in the linguistic and cultural specificity of EFL environments, where English is rarely used outside the classroom and where CRT interventions may play a more transformative role (Gay, 2018; Yoon, 2020).

Screening Process and Study Selection

Following the initial search, a total of 328 articles were retrieved. After removing duplicates (n=105), the remaining 223 articles were screened based on title and abstract. Two independent reviewers then conducted a full-text review of 49 articles, applying the inclusion criteria. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus with a third reviewer. In the final stage, 18 studies were selected for inclusion. The selection process followed the PRISMA four-phase flow model: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021).

Data Extraction and Coding

A data extraction template was developed to systematically collect relevant information from each study, including:
1. Authors, publication year, and geographical location
2. Study design and methodology
3. Educational level and learner demographics
4. CRT strategies employed (e.g., heritage narratives, multilingual writing tasks)
5. Measured outcomes (e.g., lexical diversity, coherence, organization)
6. Indicators of affective engagement (e.g., motivation, writing confidence)

The extracted data were subjected to thematic analysis. Codes were developed both deductively (based on prior CRT frameworks) and inductively (emerging from the studies themselves), following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic synthesis. This method allows for identifying not just recurring strategies but also variations across cultural, geographic, and institutional contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Quality Appraisal

▪   To ensure methodological integrity, each study was appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018). This tool provides five methodological criteria applicable across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method designs, including:

1. Clarity of research questions
2. Appropriateness of study design
3. Robustness of data collection and analysis
4. Consideration of contextual influences
5. Researcher reflexivity and ethical integrity

All 18 included studies scored at least 4 out of 5, indicating high to moderate quality. For instance, several studies explicitly addressed researcher positionality when dealing with culturally diverse participants (e.g., Lee, 2016; Yoon, 2020), which enhanced their credibility and alignment with CRT principles.

Data Synthesis

Thematic synthesis was used to aggregate findings across the selected studies. This process involved three analytic stages: (1) identifying descriptive themes (e.g., "identity-centered writing tasks," "heritage-based literacy projects"), (2) mapping relationships among strategies and outcomes, and (3) generating analytical themes that addressed the three research questions of the review.

Findings were grouped into three dimensions:

1. Instructional Design: e.g., integrating folklore, localized genres, or code-switching practices in writing curricula
2. Learner Engagement: e.g., heightened self-efficacy, reduced writing anxiety, increased agency
3. Writing Proficiency: e.g., improved rhetorical control, vocabulary depth, and cultural relevance of writing products

This synthesis provides a structured lens to understand how CRT is operationalized in writing instruction and under what conditions it thrives.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the synthesized findings from the 18 empirical studies included in the systematic review. The discussion is structured around the three research questions and highlights both converging trends and contextual nuances that affect how CRT strategies function in EFL writing classrooms. Each subsection draws connections between CRT practices, theoretical frameworks, and empirical outcomes, particularly in culturally diverse and postcolonial educational settings.

Effective CRT Strategies in EFL Writing

Across the reviewed studies, three CRT-based instructional strategies consistently emerged as effective in enhancing EFL learners' writing performance: personalized writing prompts, integration of cultural narratives, and community-based writing projects.

a. Personalized Writing Prompts

▪ Personalized prompts tasks that allow students to write about culturally significant events, customs, or personal experiences are consistently linked to higher levels of writing fluency, content development, and organization. In Lee & Huang's (2018) study, Taiwanese students who responded to prompts connected to local holidays or personal migration experiences exhibited greater emotional investment and produced more coherent argumentative essays compared to those who responded to standardized, culture-neutral prompts (J. S. Lee & Huang, 2018). Similarly, Santos et al. (2022) reported that Filipino learners demonstrated enhanced metacognitive awareness and syntactic complexity when writing about culturally familiar situations, such as community festivals or family traditions (Santos et al., 2022).

From a sociocultural standpoint (Vygotsky, 1978), these findings suggest that writing is more cognitively engaging when grounded in familiar schemata. By activating students' background knowledge, personalized prompts support better conceptual scaffolding and rhetorical clarity (Vygotsky, 1978).

b. Integration of Cultural Narratives

A substantial number of studies have demonstrated the positive outcomes of integrating cultural narratives such as oral traditions, folklore, and indigenous knowledge into academic writing instruction. For instance, Ahmed and Nor (2021) found that Malaysian students produced more lexically sophisticated and contextually resonant texts when encouraged to reconstruct ancestral stories or reflect on their cultural identities, particularly benefiting learners from marginalized indigenous or minority groups. This approach not only enhances vocabulary range and sentence fluency but also serves as a means for identity formation and self expression (Ahmed & Nor, 2021). Aligned with the Funds of Knowledge theory (Moll et al., 1992), leveraging students' family and community based knowledge systems allows their cultural heritage to be positioned as a source of academic capital, thereby increasing motivation and writing confidence (Moll et al., 1992). Supporting this, Siahaan et al. (2025) revealed that writing tasks incorporating local proverbs such as *"Berat sama dipikul, ringan sama dijinjing"* helped students improve rhetorical control and sentence variety while simultaneously fostering moral reasoning, self expression, and cultural pride through the integration of local wisdom into formal academic genres (Siahaan et al., 2025).

c. Community-Based Writing Projects

Community-based writing involves tasks oriented around real-world audiences and local concerns e.g., writing letters to local leaders, documenting oral histories, or creating community newsletters. Tran (2020) conducted an intervention in rural Vietnam where students created bilingual narratives about local agricultural practices for younger community members. The study reported significant gains in rhetorical control, audience awareness, and revision habits (Tran, 2020).

These findings reflect CRT's emphasis on authentic learning (Gay, 2018) and echo Lantolf & Thorne's (2006) claim that socially situated writing practices encourage deeper language processing. Such tasks elevate writing from a classroom exercise to a communicative, civic act, thereby reinforcing its relevance and purpose (Gay, 2018; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Impacts on Writing Quality and Motivation

▪ The empirical studies demonstrated a consistent and positive impact of CRT on multiple dimensions of writing performance and affective engagement.

a. Textual Coherence and Organization

Ten of the reviewed studies reported that culturally responsive writing tasks resulted in improved textual coherence, logical sequencing, and paragraph structure. Garcia & Flores (2020) observed that students in Brazil who engaged in reflective journaling based on family roles produced narratives with better flow and transition use compared to students in control groups. This improvement is attributable to the fact that when students write about known cultural experiences, they can better structure their ideas due to clear mental representations of events (Garcia & Flores, 2020).

b. Lexical Richness and Vocabulary Use

Writing on culturally embedded topics led to increased vocabulary diversity and lexical density. Zhou & Li (2019) found that Chinese learners, when asked to compare idioms in Mandarin and English, not only used a broader range of words but also displayed heightened lexical awareness. These results highlight that CRT can deepen students' lexical repertoire by tapping into bilingual or multilingual knowledge systems.

Additionally, the cultural relevance of writing tasks encourages students to use precise, culturally appropriate terminology, resulting in contextualized vocabulary that aligns with the writing's communicative purpose (Zhou & Li, 2019).

c. Motivation, Engagement, and Writing Self-Efficacy

Research conducted in various contexts such as Indonesia, South Korea, and the Middle East (e.g., Abdullah, 2020; Kim & Park, 2023) consistently indicates that students exhibit higher levels of motivation, persistence, and willingness to revise when their identities are acknowledged and incorporated into writing activities. When students were asked to write about topics personally meaningful to them such as religious traditions or community based social justice issues they showed increased emotional engagement and a greater tendency to respond to peer feedback. Classrooms that implemented culturally responsive teaching also fostered a heightened sense of autonomy and ownership over the writing process. Students felt encouraged to explore different voices and tones, knowing their unique perspectives were acknowledged and respected. This aligns with self determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), which emphasizes the critical role of relevance and autonomy in maintaining motivation. Supporting this view, Ardhi et al. (2025) found that while Cultural Intelligence alone did not have a direct effect on writing achievement, it became significantly impactful when integrated with culturally relevant pedagogical approaches, leading to deeper emotional commitment and greater resilience in students' writing practices (Ardhi et al., 2025; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Moderating Factors Influencing CRT Implementation

Although the reviewed studies consistently demonstrated the potential of CRT, their effectiveness varied based on several moderating factors.

a. Student Cultural Background

CRT strategies had the most transformative impact on students from minority or marginalized backgrounds, particularly in multilingual and postcolonial settings (Yoon, 2020). These learners often experience curricular alienation, as dominant teaching materials rarely reflect their cultural practices or linguistic norms. When CRT was

implemented, these students displayed more pronounced improvements in writing quality, confidence, and classroom participation compared to their peers.

b. Teacher Beliefs, Pedagogical Knowledge, and Training

Teacher ideology and training emerged as a critical enabler of CRT success. In Lucas & Villegas's (2013) meta-analysis, teachers who underwent CRT-specific professional development were more likely to integrate cultural references meaningfully into their instruction. Conversely, teachers who perceived culture as peripheral to language learning often reduced CRT to tokenistic inclusion—such as brief mentions of holidays—without embedding cultural relevance into writing pedagogy.

The most effective CRT practitioners exhibited cultural humility, reflexivity, and a commitment to ongoing learning about students' backgrounds. These qualities enabled them to co-construct writing experiences that were both academically rigorous and culturally situated (Lucas & Villegas, 2013).

c. Institutional Context and Curriculum Flexibility

The broader institutional environment including school policies, curricular mandates, and assessment rubrics also shaped CRT implementation. Schools that embraced inclusive education policies and provided autonomy for teacher innovation were more likely to sustain CRT practices. In contrast, rigid national curricula that prioritized standardization and exam preparation posed barriers to implementing CRT-rich writing activities.

Moreover, institutions that integrated formative assessment and holistic rubrics saw greater student success. CRT thrives when writing is assessed not only for grammatical correctness but also for authenticity, voice, and cultural relevance.

Integrative Insight

The combined findings from the reviewed studies point to a clear trajectory: when culturally responsive teaching is applied purposefully and systematically in EFL writing instruction, students write more fluently, critically, and confidently. CRT aligns with contemporary understandings of writing as a social, rhetorical, and identity-driven act, rather than a mere technical skill.

This review also reinforces the necessity of decolonizing writing instruction, especially in formerly colonized or multilingual societies. Writing pedagogy must transcend Western-centric norms and embrace culturally diverse forms of expression, such as circular narratives, honorific writing, or metaphorical storytelling rooted in local epistemologies.

In sum, CRT represents more than an inclusive pedagogy; it is a justice-oriented practice that challenges dominant power structures in language education. By elevating student voice and fostering cultural validation, CRT not only improves writing outcomes but also contributes to broader educational equity

Conclusion

This systematic review confirms that Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) plays a significant role in improving the writing skills of EFL students. By incorporating students' cultural backgrounds, identities, and community knowledge into writing instruction, CRT enhances not only technical proficiency but also motivation, engagement, and confidence.

▪Strategies such as personalized writing tasks, cultural narratives, and community-based projects proved effective across diverse educational contexts.

The findings show that CRT supports deeper cognitive processing, clearer rhetorical organization, and more authentic expression. Students, particularly from marginalized or multilingual backgrounds, benefit greatly when their experiences and voices are valued in the writing classroom. Theoretical frameworks like sociocultural theory and Funds of Knowledge provide strong support for these practices.

However, the success of CRT implementation depends on several moderating factors, including teacher beliefs, institutional flexibility, and assessment policies. Without supportive systems, CRT risks being reduced to superficial inclusion. Therefore, meaningful integration of CRT requires teacher training, curriculum reform, and assessment models that value cultural relevance and student voice.

In essence, CRT is more than a pedagogical choice, it is a step toward educational equity. By recognizing culture as an asset in writing instruction, educators can create inclusive learning environments that empower students both academically and personally.

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