

ENHANCING CREATIVITY IN ESL LEARNERS' DESCRIPTIVE ESSAYS THROUGH CULTURALLY RELEVANT ELT MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of culturally relevant ELT materials in enhancing creativity in ESL learners' descriptive essay writing. Acquiring creativity and descriptive writing competence is indispensable for ESL learners as they help them achieve expressive and content-rich write-ups. The study was conducted at Department of English Linguistics, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, and followed quasi-experimental, single group pre-test and post-test research design. A convenience sample of 30 ESL learners completed a pre-test post-test descriptive writing task. A 7 days long intervention of culturally relevant ELT materials was used to enhance the content development and creativity in the descriptive essays of ESL learners. Core Aligned Creative Writing Rubric was used to evaluate the pre-test and post-test descriptive writing task. A paired sample t-test was applied to compare pre-test and post-test mean scores, revealing a statistically significant improvement in learners' creative expressions. The results of the study showed that culturally relevant ELT materials serve as an important pedagogical tool to augment creativity and descriptive writing skills of ESL learners. The study recommends integrating localized cultural content into ESL classrooms to bridge linguistic gaps and promote creative language use.

Keywords Core Aligned Creative Writing Rubric, Creativity, Culturally Relevant ELT Materials, Descriptive Essays, Quasi-Experiment, Writing

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Creativity has become an important skill for learners in ESL classrooms, especially in writing tasks where students must express ideas and describe experiences (Hassan, 2023). In ESL contexts, learners often struggle to produce creative and vivid descriptive essays because they are not fully connected to the content they are expected to write about. Many ELT materials used in traditional classrooms contain themes, examples, and cultural references from foreign contexts. Such materials expose learners to global cultures, but they may also create a distance between the learner and the learning

task. When students cannot relate to the cultural content, their ability to generate ideas, imagine details, and express personal experiences becomes hampered (Malik & Imtiaz, 2025).

Researchers and educators have begun emphasizing the importance of culturally relevant materials. These are instructional resources that reflect learners' own cultural backgrounds, local settings, values, traditions, and everyday realities. Such materials help students draw upon their prior knowledge, lived experiences, and familiar contexts, making the learning process more meaningful and

engaging (Dumanig et al., 2017). When learners see their own culture represented in classroom content, they tend to participate more actively, connect ideas more easily, and develop a stronger sense of ownership in their writing. In descriptive essay writing, cultural relevance can play a particularly powerful role. Description requires imagination, sensory details, and emotional engagement (Marue & Pantas, 2019). When learners write about familiar festivals, local cultures, and community traditions, they can produce richer vocabulary, stronger imagery, and more authentic expression. Culturally relevant ELT materials may therefore serve as a bridge between the learners' real-life experiences and the creative demands of descriptive writing. In the Pakistani ESL contexts, learners often show dependence on memorized content or model answers because they lack confidence in generating original ideas. This issue becomes more visible in descriptive writing, where creative expression is essential (Dergaa et al., 2023). Incorporating culturally relevant materials may help address this gap by providing relatable input and stimulating learners' imaginative capacities.

Aim of the Study

- To find out how culturally relevant ELT materials enhance creativity in ESL learners' descriptive essays.

Research Question

- How do culturally relevant ELT materials enhance creativity in ESL learners' descriptive essays?

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant value for ESL teaching and learning by addressing a research gap in traditional writing pedagogy. Learners often struggle to produce creative, meaningful, and culturally rich descriptive essays. The present study offers an evidence-based approach that aligns writing instruction with learners' practical experiences. The findings will support teachers in adopting more inclusive and context-specific teaching strategies that go beyond formulaic writing drills and enhance genuine creativity. For curriculum designers, the study provides practical insights into how can culturally rooted content be embedded within ESL writing tasks to enhance learner

achievement. Furthermore, the study contributes to existing literature by empirically demonstrating the role of cultural relevance in creative writing development. This area is under-explored in Pakistani ESL contexts. Hence, this research will benefit learners by improving their ability to express ideas imaginatively and authentically. The study in hand will inform educational policymakers towards designing more culturally responsive, academic practices.

Literature Review

Maley (2015) defined creativity as, "any form of writing with an effective or aesthetic nature" (p. 48). Creativity is a diverse concept involving various artistic tasks such as plays, poetry, and stories. The liberty of mind to recreate emotional experiences is called creative writing (Oral, 2003). Creativity entails using imagination to state feelings and ideas about a specific topic. Akkaya (2014) emphasises teachers to make their students practise creative writing in ESL contexts since learners do not receive enough practice of this vital skill in many ESL/EFL classrooms. Elebdali (2016) conducted a study in which the researcher suggested that if creative writing pedagogy is incorporate into the curriculum, it might improve learning and teaching in schools. Creative writing fosters positive attitude among students and it maximizes the academic achievement of learners. Writing is a demanding skill that requires the attention of teachers and learners, so different creative and innovative procedures should be incorporated in ESL classrooms to enhance learner motivation for writing and to develop good writing attitudes (Senel, 2025). One such practical solution is the incorporation of culturally relevant ELT materials in ESL writing tasks which is the core focus of the study. ESL classrooms have a diversity of students who speak multiple languages, so Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) has become a prominent approach in academia and research (Malik & Imtiaz, 2025). Proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995), CRP, as a pedagogical approach, has laid a strong emphasis on the inclusion of students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into their educational settings. The incorporation of creative, cultural activities

into their descriptive writing tasks can significantly improve the learning and writing process (Nadeem et al., 2024). CRP is an important pedagogical tool to bridge the gap between Standard English and learners' own experiences in ESL/EFL education. As per many researchers, CRP is a proven productive strategy in ESL learning environment, yet its practical inclusion is obstructed by structural, institutional, and pedagogical limitations. Moreover, educational policies can also limitise ESL/EFL teachers' authority to fully implement CRP in classrooms. Hamid and Nguyen (2021) discussed the exam-oriented stance of Pakistani education system where the success of learners is determined by their performance in various Standard English proficiency tests.

Research Methodology

The design of the study is quasi-experimental. The study is single group pre-test and post-test research design and the distribution of participants is non-randomized. A sample of 30 ESL learners was collected via convenient sampling because naturally formed group was taken. A sample of 30 participants is considered appropriate for quasi-experimental studies in educational settings (Gay et al., 2012). The research site for the study was Department of English Linguistics, The Islamia University of

Bahawalpur and the sample included the students of graduate level. A pre-test was taken under the supervision of researchers. The time allowed and test questions were adapted from the official website of IELTS according to the need of the study. IELTS academic writing task 2 requires the learners to write a 250 word essay in 40 minutes. The assignments were graded by adopting *Core Aligned Creative Writing Rubrics*. These rubrics are provided beneath in table 1. Total score is of 20. The study adopted the scoring rubrics from *Core Aligned Creative Writing* to ensure standardized assessment of writing quality while adapted IELTS conventions for time, sample questions, and word count (200–250 words) to maintain task validity and comparability. Treatment was imparted in the form of series of lectures for 10 days in which the researchers incorporated culturally relevant ELT materials in ESL classrooms. Zhang (2013), in his study, delivered 10 sessions of after-class workshop to determine the impact of instruction on synthesis writing. This treatment aided in finding the cause and effect link between the independent variable (culturally relevant ELT materials) and dependent variable (creativity in descriptive essay writing skills).

Table 1: Creative Writing Rubrics, Adopted from *Core Aligned Creative Writing Rubrics*

Standard	Above Mastery 5 points	Mastery 4 points	Near Mastery 3 points	Below Mastery 2 points	No Points 0 points
Sequence events to create a coherent whole.	Events are sequenced both logically and creatively (you took a sequencing risk and it worked out)	All events make logical sense	Most events make logical sense	Some events make logical sense	Story makes no logical sense
Write using effective techniques.	Uses three or more effective examples of figurative language.	Uses two examples of effective figurative language	Uses one example of effective figurative language	Use of figurative language is ineffective	Does not attempt to use figurative language
Produce clear and coherent	No distracting grammatical	1-3 distracting grammatical	4-6 distracting grammatical	7-9 distracting grammatical	10+ distracting grammatical

writing for the task and audience.	errors AND 450-500 words	errors OR over 500	errors OR 400-449 words	errors OR 300-399 words	errors OR not even 300 words
Develop and strengthen writing by editing.	Multiple drafts show 5 or more improvements	Multiple drafts show 3-4 improvements	Multiple drafts show 2 improvements	Multiple drafts show 1 improvement	Only a final draft was submitted OR No improvements were made

The activities that the researchers implemented in the ESL classroom are given below. These activities are adapted from the studies of Kong et al. (2022), Matiso. (2023), and Paluanova (2024).

1. Culturally familiar texts for paraphrasing tasks
2. Cultural write-ups, e.g; holidays, customs, traditions
3. Provision of materials involving local cultures like news, songs to explore contextualized vocabulary
4. Asking students to bring personal cultural artefacts and describing them in English while linking language use to their lives
5. Role-play activities involving discussion on cultural scenarios

After the series of lectures, the researchers went for a post-test. The same process of grading the assignments was followed. In order to ensure the inter-rater reliability, all the researchers graded the assignments individually. The scores of all the raters were subjected to inter-rater

reliability test. The value of Cohen's kappa was calculated which turned out to be 0.78 and this is considered as an above average value. The pre-test and post-test, in this study, did not possess the same questions because, according to Sanders (2019), since students get acquainted with the questions in pre-test so they might perform better in post-test because of their prior familiarity with the questions and not because of the attainment of required skill. However, the level of difficulty was kept same. A paired sample *t*-test was carried out in order to compare the pre-test and post-test scores and to determine the difference between them. The *t*-test is an inferential statistic to demarcate the means of pre-test and post-test. The research tool of the study was the writing tasks that the students attempted in pre-test and post-tests. Research ethics like consent, elimination of fear, withdrawal of threat, anonymity, confidentiality, and publication of results were considered. The prompts for pre-test and post-test are provided in table 2.

Table 2: Pre-Test Post-Test Writing Prompts

Pre-Test	Describe a place in your city that reflects its culture and history. Explain what makes it special and how it represents your community.
Post-Test	Describe a memorable festival or cultural event you have attended. Explain the sights, sounds, and experiences that made it significant to you.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

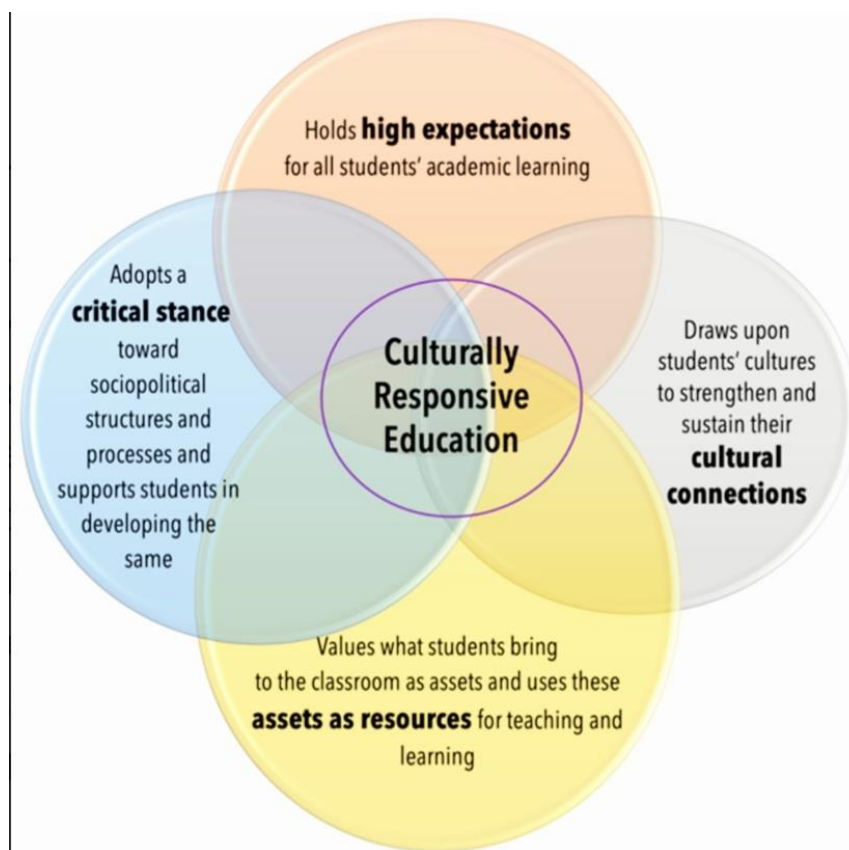
The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in the principles of *Culturally Responsive Education*, which provides a lens for understanding how culturally relevant ELT materials can enhance creativity in ESL Learners' descriptive essays. This framework

highlights four interconnected dimensions that shape effective, culturally responsive learning environments.

1. First, it emphasizes the importance of holding high expectations for all learners, ensuring that students are challenged to express ideas

- imaginatively and produce vivid, meaningful descriptive writing.
 2. Second, it draws upon students' cultural backgrounds to strengthen cultural connections, allowing learners to write creatively by relating writing tasks to familiar experiences, traditions, and community knowledge.
 3. Third, the framework values students' cultural and linguistic assets as resources for teaching and learning.
 4. Finally, the framework adopts a critical stance towards socio-political structures by encouraging teaching practices that validate students' identities and experiences, ultimately empowering them to express themselves more freely and confidently.
- Together, these elements create a supportive learning environment where culturally relevant ELT materials encourage greater engagement, originality, and expressive depth in learners' descriptive essays.

Figure 1: Culturally Responsive Education, Adopted from Wallace et al. (2022)



Discussions and Findings

Since the study comprises a single group pre-test quasi-experiment, the researchers supervised the successful conduct of both the descriptive writing tasks. Tests were scored by

following *Core Aligned Creative Writing Rubric*. The scores obtained in both the writing tasks are presented in the below mentioned table. The 30 students are labelled as S1, S2,...,S30.

Table 3: Pre-test Post-test Scores of ESL Learners

Students	Pre-test Scores	Post-test Scores
S1	10	17

S2	12	16
S3	10	16
S4	9	14
S5	9	15
S6	11	17
S7	7	13
S8	5	13
S9	10	17
S10	11	16
S11	7.5	14
S12	7.5	14
S13	8	15
S14	11	16
S15	12	16
S16	10	15
S17	10	16
S18	5	10
S19	8.5	13
S20	9	15
S21	10	17
S22	11	13
S23	11	13
S24	10	14
S25	8	13
S26	7	15
S27	9.5	13
S28	10	15
S29	11	17
S30	12	17

Table 4: *t*-test

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-Test	9.4000	30	1.86806	.34106
	Post-Test	14.8333	30	1.72374	.31471

The *Paired Sample Statistics Table* shows the descriptive results of the scores of students before and after the intervention. The pre-test scores have a mean value of 9.40 (N=30), and a standard deviation of 1.87. This indicates that students initially performed at a relatively low level with moderate variation in their descriptive essay scores. However, the post-test

scored show a higher mean value of 14.83, and a standard deviation of 1.72. This depicts improvement in performance of learners after intervention. The standard error of the mean is 0.34 for the pre-test and 0.31 for the post-test which entails that average scores are estimated reliably.

Table 5: Paired Samples *t*-test

Paired Samples Test									
Paired Differences									
95% Confidence Interval of the Difference									
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Pair 1 Pre-Test - Post-Test	-5.43333	1.47819	.26988	-5.98530	-4.88137	-20.132	29	.000	

The *Paired Samples Test Table* indicates a statistically significant improvement in students' creative writing performance. The mean difference between the pre-test and post-test scores was -5.433 which shows that post-test scores were higher by an average of 5.44 points. The *t*-value of -20.132 with 29 degrees of freedom is quite high in magnitude, and it shows a strong effect of intervention. The *p*-value is 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) confirms that the difference between pre-test and post-test scores is statistically significant.

The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranges from -5.985 to -4.88. This indicates that the true average improvement in writing scores is unlikely to fall outside this interval. The negative values reflect that post-test scores were higher than pre-test scores.

Interpretation of Analysis Through the Lens of Conceptual Framework

The significant improvement in learners' pre-test and post-test scores aligns strongly with the principles of *Cultural Responsive Education Framework* used in the study. The intervention of culturally relevant ELT materials assisted the students in drawing their *cultural connections*. This helped them to express ideas more creatively in their descriptive essays. The lessons of intervention were based on students' lived experiences (*learners' assets as resources*) which enhanced their confidence in writing. The greater post-test scores also reflect the component of *high expectations* since the intervention required students to apply critically imaginative and contextually relevant thinking. The findings of the study also resonate with the construct of *critical stance* used in the framework because learners reflected on their cultural meanings, social

realities, and personal identities through writing.

Conclusion

The findings of the study prove that culturally relevant ELT materials significantly enhance creativity in a ESL learners' descriptive essays. The distinct improvement from pre-test to post-test confirms that when learners engage with cultural content, they write with greater creativity, clarity, originality, expression, coherence, and cohesion. The intervention made students produce richer ideas, organize thoughts, and develop stronger creative voice. These outcomes validate the central focus of the study that culturally grounded materials strengthen learners' creative involvement with the writing tasks. However, the findings of the study are also in conformity with the *Culturally Responsive Education Framework* as they highlight the value of cultural connections, learner assets, and higher expectations in promoting academic success.

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