

Identifying Cultural Schemas in Pakistani Academic Writing: Implications for ELT and Cross-Cultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

The concept of cultural schemas in Cultural Linguistics examines the interrelation between language, culture, and cognition. These schemas are particularly significant in shaping how people construct multiple meanings and express their ideas in different contexts, including academic writing. This study investigates the influence of different cultural schemas on the academic writing of Pakistani intermediate-level students. The primary objective is to explore how students embed cultural conceptualizations, develop their argumentation strategies, and organize opinion paragraphs. The study contributes to English Language Teaching (ELT) by emphasizing the need to recognize and integrate local and global cultural patterns into academic writing pedagogy. Data were collected from 30 second-year intermediate-level students. Each student wrote a 10-12-line opinion paragraph on the topic "The Benefits of Education in Individual and Social Life." The paragraphs were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, and descriptive statistics were computed using MS Excel and SPSS. The results were presented through SPSS tables and RStudio graphs. The analysis identified four dominant cultural schemas: religious, economic, marriage, and social interactional. These schemas influenced the content and mode of argumentation, which are not fully aligned with widely accepted international academic writing norms. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations to bridge students' local cultural identities and global academic writing conventions.

Keywords: Cultural Linguistics, cultural schemas, academic writing, Pakistani learners, ELT

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing proficiency in English is increasingly essential for students of all levels, particularly in countries like Pakistan, where English is taught as a second language. This proficiency enables students to engage critically with global knowledge communities and succeed in academic and professional domains (Bhatia, 2014). Despite the significance of academic writing, many Pakistani students struggle to produce an acceptable piece of writing that aligns with international writing conventions, and it is often attributable to deeply rooted cultural influences on cognition and expression (Mahmood, 2010; Rehman, 2014). Cultural schemas, the mental frameworks shaped by cultural experiences, play a pivotal role in how individuals organize and express knowledge (Sharifian, 2017). These schemas impact students' choices of writing topics, lexical choices, sentence structures, and argumentation styles, yet remain underexplored in research on Pakistani academic writing. In the context of Pakistani society, certain cultural schemas, for example, religious, economic, marriage, and social interaction schemas, frequently shape discourse and practices of conveying specific contextual meanings. These culturally embedded cognitive patterns strongly influence how students perceive and express their ideas in writing. This study aims to identify the underlying cultural schemas that influence Pakistani students' thoughts and the way they express them in their writing. These findings can guide the reform of writing English textbooks and teaching methods to facilitate students' shift from local writing conventions to globally recognized standards.

Theoretical Background

Cultural linguistics is an interdisciplinary framework that examines the dynamic relationship among language, cognition, and culture (Sharifian, 2017). The core components of the cultural linguistics framework are cultural schemas, which refer to the cognitive constructs, such as cultural categories, metaphors, and values, that guide individuals' understanding and communication (Sharifian, 2011; 2017). In academic writing, these schemas influence how students conceptualize knowledge and frame their arguments (Al-Sulaiti & Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). Pakistani students, who navigate a complex sociocultural landscape and blend indigenous traditions with Western educational models, demonstrate writing patterns shaped by this intersection (Mahmood, 2010). Recognizing these cultural schemas is crucial for addressing the challenges that students face in adopting globally recognized academic writing norms (Hyland, 2003). Therefore, this study aims to identify various types of cultural schemas reflected in Pakistani students' academic writing to develop more culturally responsive instructional practices and writing curricula.

Significance of the Study

The study contributes to research on cultural dimensions of academic writing by focusing on Pakistani intermediate-level students. By systematically identifying various types of cultural schemas in students' writing, the research offers educators empirical data to tailor instructional methods that respect students' cultural backgrounds while promoting academic conventions. Moreover, policymakers, curriculum developers, and language materials designers may utilize these findings to design writing curricula that effectively bridge local sociocultural contexts with global academic standards. This research aims to improve students' writing performance and their ability to engage in academic discourse across cultures.

Research Questions and Objectives

The objective of this study is to identify cultural schemas in students' academic writing through the following research questions. The findings of the study can be utilized to enhance students' academic writing by aligning their local cultural expressions with global standards through appropriate curriculum design and effective teaching practices.

1. What types of cultural schemas are commonly reflected in the academic writing of Pakistani intermediate-level students?
2. How do these cultural schemas influence the structure, argumentation, and expression in students' academic writing?
3. How might these cultural schemas lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations by international academic audiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The impact of culture on academic writing has been extensively studied in second language writing research. Early work by Kaplan (1966) highlighted how native language discourse conventions influence English writing, and often cause challenges for ESL/EFL learners. Leki (1991) and Connor (1996) elaborated on how cultural discourse patterns such as indirectness and collectivism appear in the writing of Asian students. In Pakistan, studies by Mahmood (2010) and Rehman (2014) demonstrate that students' writing reflects indigenous cultural norms including respect for authority, collectivism, and oral storytelling traditions. These norms sometimes conflict with Western academic expectations of explicit argumentation

and linear organization, and may lead to misunderstandings. Sharifian's cultural linguistics (2017) offers a comprehensive and theoretically grounded framework for examining these phenomena by connecting language use with cultural conceptualizations. Sharifian identifies multiple types of cultural schemas, which include individualism, collectivism/community, respect for authority, religious, gender roles, patriotic/national pride, educational achievement, fatalism/determinism, hospitality and generosity, honour and shame, social stratification, cultural values, and economic/materialism schemas. He also outlines a wide range of cultural schemas across diverse linguistic communities, including schemas related to kinship, landscape, animal relations, food, governance, and others. These schemas influence how individuals organize knowledge and express meaning, particularly in academic discourse. Some studies have applied this cognitive framework of cultural schemas to language learning contexts in the Gulf and Australia (Al-Sulaiti & Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Majid & Wierzbicka, 2014), but little has yet been done specifically to address cultural schemas in Pakistani academic writing, which highlights the need for the present study. While Sharifian (2017) identifies a broad collection of cultural schemas across linguistic communities, this study limits its focus to four dominant cultural schemas that are frequently found in the English academic writing of Pakistani intermediate-level students. They are the religious schema, economic schema, marriage schema, and social interaction schema. The frequent use of these cultural constructs reflects culturally embedded conceptualizations that shape students' ways of reasoning and expressing ideas. However, such schemas may also lead to miscommunication or misinterpretation when read by international audiences who are unfamiliar with these culturally specific frameworks. Therefore, these schemas should be explicitly addressed in the teaching of academic writing in Pakistan.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, supported by basic quantitative frequency analysis, to investigate how cultural schemas influence the academic writing of Pakistani intermediate-level students. A random sampling technique was employed to select 30 second-year students from three different classes at a private college in Samanabad, Faisalabad, Pakistan. Data were collected through a single writing task. Each participant was asked to write a well-focused and organized opinion paragraph of 12–15 lines on the culturally relevant topic, "The Benefits of Education in Individual and Social Life." This topic was purposefully chosen because it is related to the students' first-hand experiences and cultural conceptualizations. This study concentrates on four primary schemas: the religious schema (conceptualizations of beliefs, rituals, and moral values), the economic schema (ideas associated with money, livelihood, and financial security), the marriage schema (conceptualizations of romantic relationships and matrimonial norms), and the social interaction schema (norms and practices guiding interpersonal communication and relationships). Each student's paragraph was carefully read and examined to identify explicit or implicit references to these schemas. Each paragraph was manually coded for linguistic expressions and thematic content that reflected the core meaning of a cultural schema. Expressions were considered representative of a schema when they conveyed culturally shaped beliefs and values related to any of the four conceptual categories. A researcher-designed checklist was used to record the presence and frequency of each schema, marked as Yes, No, or by number. The recorded data were tabulated and analyzed using Microsoft Excel, and visualizations were created in RStudio. This integration of qualitative analysis and frequency analysis enhanced interpretive reliability and facilitated a context-sensitive understanding of the distribution of cultural schemas across students' paragraphs.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic content analysis, supported by basic frequency counts. Four dominant cultural schemas: the economic, the religious, the marriage, and the social interaction were identified in the opinion paragraphs of students. Each schema was analyzed based on recurring phrases,

expressions, and conceptual patterns in the data. The economic schema emerged as the most frequently occurring, with 75 instances. It was marked by expressions such as “*better future*” (25 instances), “*private and government job opportunities*” (23 instances), “*with good education, earn by own business*” (17 instances), and “*job with institutional authority and legal power if I pass my CSS exam*” (10 instances). The religious schema appeared 52 times and reflected students’ spiritual and scriptural associations with education. Common expressions included “*a blessing to be educated, not ignorant*” (32 instances), “*The Quran and the Prophet say to get knowledge*” (9 instances), and “*Educated and uneducated are not the same*” (11 instances). The marriage schema was evident in 32 instances and reflected how students linked education with marital prospects. For example, “*Get married in a good family*” (25 instances) and “*Parents do not want their daughter to marry an uneducated person*” (7 instances) were typical representations. The social interaction schema (30 instances) encompassed social behaviour and interaction. Students wrote that “*Education brings respect in society*” (22 instances) and “*An educated person deals with people in a better way*” (8 instances), reflecting how education was seen as improving interpersonal dynamics. These schema instances highlight the mindsets of Pakistani intermediate-level students and how they conceptualize education and connect it with everyday life domains.

Cultural Schemas

The frequency-based thematic patterns described above reflect how the four predefined cultural schemas, economic, religious, marriage, and social interaction, shaped students’ reasoning about education. These schemas were not only quantitatively dominant but also culturally significant, as students connected their educational benefits with personal aspirations, religious values, family expectations, and social behaviour. While this study focused on these four schemas, occasional references to other cultural influences such as national pride and political ideas were also observed, but they were not included in the core analysis due to their limited recurrence. The following table presents a summary of each schema’s dominant expressions and frequency across the 30 students’ opinion paragraphs.

Table 1: Frequency Table of Cultural Schemas in Students’ Opinion Paragraphs (N = 30)

Students’ No	Economic Schema	Religious Schema	Marriage Schema	Social Interaction Schema
01	2.0	1.0	2.0	1.0
02	3.0	0.0	0.0	2.0
03	2.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
04	3.0	1.0	0.0	1.0
05	1.0	2.0	0.0	1.0
06	2.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
07	1.0	2.0	1.0	1.0
08	2.0	3.0	1.0	1.0
09	3.0	1.0	2.0	1.0
10	1.0	4.0	1.0	1.0
11	3.0	2.0	0.0	0.0
12	1.0	2.0	1.0	2.0
13	3.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
14	3.0	3.0	0.0	0.0
15	1.0	3.0	1.0	2.0
16	4.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
17	3.0	2.0	1.0	1.0

18	1.0	2.0	1.0	1.0
19	2.0	4.0	1.0	1.0
20	3.0	1.0	2.0	4.0
21	5.0	1.0	2.0	1.0
22	5.0	1.0	3.0	1.0
23	4.0	2.0	1.0	1.0
24	2.0	1.0	2.0	1.0
25	4.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
26	2.0	4.0	1.0	1.0
27	3.0	1.0	1.0	0.0
28	3.0	2.0	1.0	2.0
29	2.0	3.0	1.0	1.0
30	1.0	2.0	1.0	0.0
Total	75	52	32	30

Interpretation of Results

The analysis of students’ opinion paragraphs reveals distinct patterns in the use of cultural schemas, and highlights how learners conceptualize the benefits of education through culturally embedded frameworks. Among the four primary schemas examined in this study, the economic schema emerged as the most dominant, with 75 occurrences in 30 opinion paragraphs. This pattern suggested that students strongly associate education with financial security, employment opportunities, and socioeconomic mobility. This also reflects the prevailing societal narrative in Pakistan, where education is widely regarded as a pathway to economic benefits. The religious schema appears 52 times, which indicates that many students, even in this age of economic and material competition, think of their education within Islamic moral and ethical paradigms. The marriage schema, with 32 instances, suggests a moderate level of influence by demonstrating how education is perceived to enhance one’s suitability and desirability in marital contexts and how it reflects traditional societal expectations. Most students believe that securing a well-paid job increases their chances of marrying into a respectable or well-established family; therefore, their focus tends to be on employment and financial stability rather than directly discussing marriage. The social interaction schema, recorded 30 times, was the least frequently observed. However, it illustrates students’ awareness of how education contributes to shaping interpersonal relationships, promoting social respect, and fulfilling communal responsibilities. Overall, these findings reveal that students’ perceptions of education are largely shaped by socio-economic concerns, religious values, and deeply rooted cultural norms, thus illustrating the embeddedness of cultural schemas in academic writing within the Pakistani context.

Table 2: Descriptive Summary Table of Cultural Schemas in Students’ Opinion Paragraphs (N = 30)

Schemas	Min	Max	SD	Mean	Median	Sum
Economic Schema	1	5	1.17	2.50	2.5	75
Religious Schema	0	4	1.17	1.73	2.0	52
Marriage Schema	0	3	0.69	1.07	1.0	32
Social Interaction Schema	0	4	0.83	1.00	1.0	30

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the four cultural schemas identified in students' opinion paragraphs. The *Economic Schema* recorded the highest mean score ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.17$), indicating its dominance in students' conceptualizations of education. This was followed by the *Religious Schema* ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.17$). In contrast, the *Marriage Schema* ($M = 1.07$, $SD = 0.69$) and the *Social Interaction Schema* ($M = 1.00$, $SD = 0.83$) showed lower mean frequencies, suggesting they were less prominent. These findings reflect variation in the prominence of different cultural concepts within Pakistani students' academic writing.

Figure 1: Total Frequency of Cultural Schemas in Students' Opinion Paragraphs (N = 30)

Figure 1 presents the total frequency of the four cultural schemas across all student paragraphs. The Economic and Religious schemas occur most frequently (75 and 52 occurrences respectively), while the Marriage and Social Interaction schemas occur less often (32 and 30 occurrences), which show a noticeable drop in frequency compared to the first two schemas.

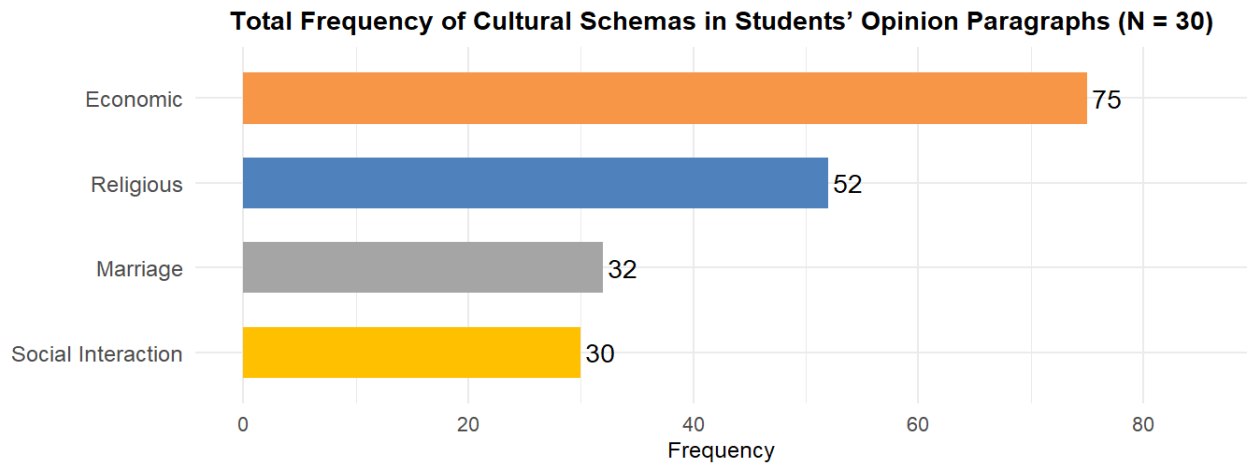


Figure 2: Distribution of Cultural Schema by Individual Students in the Paragraphs (N = 30)

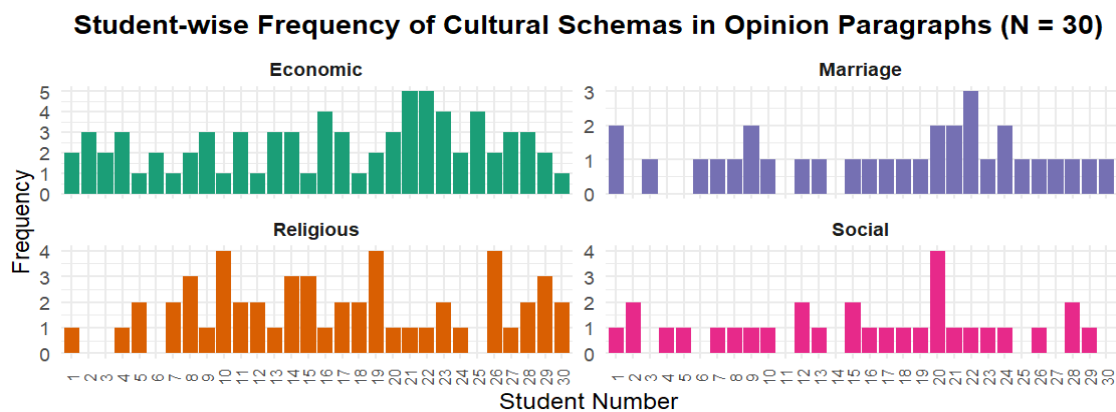


Figure 2 shows the student-wise distribution of cultural schema references across the four categories (Economic, Religious, Marriage, and Social) for 30 students. The chart illustrates that schema references vary considerably from student to student, with some students producing multiple references in a category while others produce none.

Interpretation of the Bar Graphs

These bar graphs visually represent the frequency with which each of the four cultural schemas, religious, economic, marriage, and social interaction schema, occurred in students' opinion paragraphs. The data mirror the frequency results, with the economic schema (75 instances in 30 paragraphs) most frequently occurring with closely followed instances of the religious schema (52 instances in 30 paragraphs). These findings confirm the prominent roles of financial concerns and religious responsibilities in students' perceptions of the benefits of education. In contrast, the marriage (32 instances in 30 paragraphs) and the social interaction schema (30 instances in 30 paragraphs) appeared less frequently, which indicates a relatively lower but still significant influence of traditional family expectations. Figure 1 illustrates the total frequency of cultural schemas identified in students' opinion paragraphs, while Figure 2 presents the distribution of cultural schema references across individual students. These figures visually support the patterns observed in the frequency data. They also highlight the relative prominence of the four cultural schemas within the students' opinion paragraphs. The dominance of the economic and religious schemas visually supports students' strong association of education with financial benefits and religious obligations. This association is aligned with the prevailing socio-economic and cultural narratives in Pakistan. Moreover, the marriage and the social interaction schemas appeared less often, but they still play an important and meaningful role in how students think about education, especially in relation to family and social expectations. Collectively, these findings reveal the complex interplay among socio-economic aspirations, religious values, and traditional norms in the construction of educational discourse among Pakistani students.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Building upon the thematic and quantitative analyses presented earlier, this section presents the principal findings and critically examines the four dominant cultural schemas identified in students' opinion paragraphs: economic, religious, marriage, and social interaction. These schemas not only represent recurring patterns in students' academic writing but also reflect deeply embedded cultural conceptualizations that inform how Pakistani intermediate-level students perceive and effectively explain the benefits of education. Guided by Sharifian's (2017) cultural linguistics framework, the discussion interprets how these schemas shape rhetorical structures, lexical choices and communicative preferences. Thus, it reveals the culturally grounded nature of students' academic discourse and its implications for English language teaching in Pakistan.

Economic Schema

The economic schema, with 75 occurrences in 30 opinion paragraphs, emerged as the most dominant among the four by suggesting that students predominantly frame the value of education in terms of financial security, career prospects, and improve their socioeconomic status. This reflects the larger societal narrative in Pakistan, where education is widely regarded as a vehicle for economic prosperity. Such associations are consistent with previous findings by Rehman (2014), who noted that education in Pakistan is often tied to pragmatic goals rather than epistemic pursuits. While this schema reflects students' socioeconomic realities, it may also narrow the scope of academic discourse by limiting discussions to utilitarian outcomes rather than engaging with abstract or critical perspectives.

Religious Schema

The religious schema, with 52 instances and ranking second in frequency, reveals the strong influence of Islamic values and ethical teachings on students' academic writing. Many students conceptualized education as a religious obligation or a moral duty, often by referencing divine reward, spiritual enlightenment, or prophetic traditions. This finding resonates with Sharifian's (2011) assertion that religious schemas serve as powerful conceptual tools in many cultural communities by shaping moral reasoning and rhetorical emphasis. While such schema-laden expressions enrich writing with cultural depth and personal conviction, they may not align with secular academic norms prevalent in international discourse, potentially leading to interpretive gaps or miscommunication.

Marriage Schema

The marriage schema was less frequent, with 32 instances, than the economic and religious schemas, and it appeared notable across student paragraphs. Education was often linked with improved marital prospects, personal worthiness, and social approval in the context of future relationships. This reflects a traditional view of education as a means to fulfil expected social roles rather than purely intellectual development. This observation aligns with earlier findings by Mahmood (2010), who identified social conformity and gendered expectations as influential factors in Pakistani students' discourse. From an academic standpoint, however, the marriage schema may appear less relevant or culture specific to international readers who are unfamiliar with such contextual linkages.

Social Interaction Schema

The social interaction schema appeared least frequently, with 30 instances, though it still contributed meaningfully to students' arguments. Students discussed the role of education in enhancing communication skills, respect, and societal participation. These reflections demonstrate an awareness of social interaction and community awareness associated with education. However, the rhetorical organization often remained indirect by employing analogies, moral tales, or proverbs rather than structured argumentation. This supports Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric theory, which suggests that students from oral-traditional and collectivist cultures often prefer circular or indirect ways of writing. Although these styles are culturally natural, they can make it harder for students to meet international academic standards that emphasize clear, coherent, and logical writing.

Overall, the study shows that cultural schemas in Pakistani students' writing have two main roles: they provide cognitive frameworks for reasoning on familiar social and cultural values, and they also pose challenges to meeting international academic standards. These results highlight the need for teaching approaches that do not just focus on correcting culturally influenced "mistakes" but also build on students' existing knowledge to support clearer and more widely understood academic discourse. As Hyland (2003) explains, good academic teaching should respect students' cultural backgrounds while helping them learn about academic writing styles and audience expectations. In conclusion, the discussion shows that cultural schemas are not minor factors but core elements of how students write. Recognizing and working with these schemas in teaching is crucial for developing academic skills that are both culturally meaningful and globally relevant.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has demonstrated the significant influence of cultural schemas on the academic writing of Pakistani students. The findings reveal that conceptual frameworks related to economic aspirations,

religious beliefs, marriage expectations, and social norms shape how students construct and express their arguments. These culturally grounded patterns often diverge from the conventions of international academic discourse, which tends to favour linear reasoning, explicit argumentation, and individual-centred expression. Acknowledging the significant role of cultural schemas is crucial for formulating pedagogical approaches that honour students' cultural identities and support their participation in international academic communities. Instead of treating these cultural influences as limitations, educators should view them as valuable resources. When critically examined and effectively integrated, they can broaden students' rhetorical and linguistic capabilities. In response to these findings, the study proposes a set of pedagogical recommendations aimed at reorienting English Language Teaching (ELT) in Pakistan through Cultural Linguistics and English as an International Language (EIL).

Culturally Responsive Curriculum

This approach helps design writing curricula that integrate discussions of cultural schemas with instruction in academic rhetorical conventions. It enables students to critically examine the relationship between their cultural backgrounds and institutional academic norms, thus promoting more conscious, flexible and effective writing practices.

Explicit Instruction in Academic Writing Norms

This approach offers systematic instruction in key academic writing skills by including topic sentence and thesis statement writing, argumentative structure, counter-argument, evidence integration, and paragraph coherence. This instruction should explicitly highlight the differences between local communicative practices and international academic standards and enable students to adapt to international standards without marginalizing their cultural identity.

Use of Comparative Writing Models

Comparative writing models use paired samples of culturally influenced and conventionally academic texts to develop metacognitive awareness among students. Through comparative analysis, learners can better understand the rhetorical expectations of diverse audiences and academic disciplines and learn to adjust their writing style accordingly.

Reflective Writing Activities

These writing activities encourage students to examine how their cultural beliefs shape their writing choices. Activities such as reflective journals and guided self-assessments develop critical self-awareness and empower learners to navigate the balance between cultural authenticity and academic appropriateness with greater confidence and intention.

These pedagogical implications advocate a shift from prescriptive models of writing instruction toward more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches. By acknowledging and integrating students' cultural schemas into the teaching of academic writing, ELT practitioners in Pakistan can lead more effective learning environments aligned with the realities of English as an international and intercultural language.

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