



Analysis of Students' Proficiency in Writing Narrative Text

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Abstract

The skill of writing narrative texts is still very low and difficult for most students of SMPN 1 Kuala Batee. The objectives of this study are: 1) to measure the proficiency level of junior high school students in writing narrative texts under the Merdeka Learning Curriculum, 2) to identify the linguistic and cognitive challenges that contribute to students' poor writing performance. This study uses quantitative research. Data was collected through a narrative writing test and follow-up interviews. The research initially targeted 98 students, but only 17 participated in the actual writing test. The test is used as a data collection technique. The results of the study show that only 17 of the 98 students from SMPN 1 Kuala Batee who were targeted took the writing test. The results showed that among the 17 students, 4 (24%) demonstrated excellent writing proficiency, 6 (35%) performed at a sufficient level, 2 (12%) were categorized as poor, and 5 (29%) as very poor. The average score was 69.17, falling within the sufficient range, was the average score. Limited vocabulary and a lack of comprehension of the grammatical and structural elements of narrative texts were the main causes of low proficiency levels. The results indicate that enhancing students' writing skills requires both explicit teaching of narrative structure and focused vocabulary development.

Keywords: *proficiency, writing, narrative text.*

Introduction

Writing in English continues to be a major obstacle for junior high school students in Indonesia. In addition to having a precise vocabulary and syntax, writing calls on the capacity to swiftly and clearly arrange ideas. Since narrative writing needs inventiveness, temporal sequence, and adherence to particular

structural principles, it is the most challenging genre to teach at the secondary level. Despite the fact that narrative writing is a common topic in English schools, many students struggle to write coherent stories that adhere to genre norms.

In an attempt to address long-standing inequalities in learning outcomes and encourage student agency in their education, the Indonesian government introduced the Merdeka Learning Curriculum in 2022. Project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and flexible instructional design are all highly valued in this curriculum because they allow students to take an active role in education. In the framework of studying English, narrative writing is viewed as a way to enhance students' language competency, critical thinking abilities, and expressive powers (Rosalina & Asipi, 2025). However, despite the potential of this curriculum, writing performance among junior high school students remains below expectations.

Recent research has shed light on specific difficulties students face when learning to write narrative texts. Qatrinada and Apoko (2024) found that junior high school students in East Java had persistent difficulties with narrative structure, use of past-tense verbs, and coherence. The study also showed that students' ability to finish writing assignments was severely hampered by their low vocabulary and weak sentence structure abilities. Since many students were not familiar with story thinking patterns, these difficulties were not just linguistic but also cognitive. This is consistent with observations across various regions where students perceive English writing as a high-stakes, anxiety-inducing task.

Moreover, while the Merdeka Learning Curriculum encourages student-centered and flexible approaches to learning, its effectiveness in improving writing outcomes remains debatable. In their literature review, Widyartono and Basuki (2025) noted that many teachers lack sufficient training in applying innovative teaching methods, resulting in surface-level application of the curriculum. Hypothecating, for example, has been explored as an alternative strategy to motivate students and reduce writing apprehension, yet has not been widely adopted due to lack of awareness and support systems. As a result, writing instruction under the new curriculum often fails to reach its transformative potential.

Critical literacy practices have also been proposed as a strategy to deepen students' engagement with writing tasks. Susilowaty, Setyarini, and Gustine (2025) emphasized the importance of embedding social relevance and student voice into writing instruction. Their study in an Indonesian junior high school showed that when students were given opportunities to connect personal and cultural experiences to their narrative writing, their confidence and output improved. However, such pedagogical models remain limited in practical application, especially in under-resourced schools.

Although these studies have identified significant obstacles in writing instruction, few have directly measured students' actual performance in narrative text writing within the framework of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum. This presents a notable gap in the literature. Empirical data on how students perform, what linguistic and structural errors they make, and why they struggle in narrative composition is essential for refining instructional approaches and teacher training. The current study examines the degree of narrative writing competency among eighth-grade students at SMPN 1 Kuala Batee in order to close this gap. The school is representative of a rural setting with limited access to educational resources and little exposure to English. According to preliminary comments from the school's English professors, students struggle greatly when writing narrative texts in English, particularly when it comes to coming up with ideas, employing the proper tenses, and creating coherent paragraphs.

By analyzing the narrative writing skills of eighth-grade students at SMPN 1 Kuala Batee and pinpointing the key elements influencing their writing results, this study seeks to close that gap. The school was chosen because initial data indicated that students' proficiency in writing narrative texts in English was lacking. Observations and input from English teachers at the site also highlighted concerns about students' vocabulary and grammar control, despite regular exposure to writing instruction under the new curriculum.

By combining descriptive-quantitative analysis with interview-based qualitative insights, this study investigates the alignment between Merdeka Learning Curriculum expectations and students' actual writing products. Furthermore, it evaluates whether classroom instruction and assessment practices effectively support the development of narrative writing skills in line with curriculum goals. This research also considers the broader pedagogical and contextual factors that shape students' writing experiences and outcomes.

Thus, the objectives of this study are: 1) to measure the proficiency level of junior high school students in writing narrative texts under the Merdeka Learning Curriculum, 2) to identify the linguistic and cognitive challenges that contribute to students' poor writing performance. The research question for this study are 1) What is the level of junior high school students' proficiency in writing narrative texts within the framework of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum? 2) What linguistic and cognitive challenges do students face that contribute to their low performance in writing narrative texts?

Method

This study applies a descriptive-quantitative research design to assess the proficiency of junior high school students in writing narrative texts. A descriptive approach is chosen to describe the actual performance of students in narrative writing in detail, while quantitative analysis is used to categorize and statistically interpret scores. This design is appropriate to measure one variable in this case, the

student's narrative writing proficiency without manipulating any conditions (Creswell, 2012).

The target population is 98 eighth-grade students at SMPN 1 Kuala Batee, representing rural junior high schools in Indonesia. Universal sampling techniques are used, as the total population is less than 100 students. Only 17 students, meanwhile, provided a legitimate story writing sample. This disparity can be attributed to certain students' low self-esteem and small vocabulary, which deter them from completing English writing projects. The small sample size, which was recognized as a study flaw, led to self-selection bias.

Data was collected using two instruments: a narrative writing test and a semi-structured interview. With the following prompt, students must compose a concise narrative for the writing test: "Write a narrative story in English, based on your personal experience or imagination. The story should have a clear beginning, middle and end." In a classroom environment under supervision, students have sixty minutes to finish the work. Based on an analytical rubric modified from Hughes (2003), the writing assignment is intended to evaluate five primary components: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. The rubric allows for a maximum score of 100, distributed proportionally across five components.

In addition to writing assignments, semi-structured interviews are conducted with a subset of students and English teachers. The goal is to identify specific challenges that hinder writing performance, especially for students who do not complete the test. To guarantee participants' comfort and clarity, interviews are performed in Indonesian. They are then transcribed and subjected to theme analysis. To maintain objectivity and consistency in assessment, each student's writing is assessed by two independent assessors, both certified English teachers with experience in teaching narrative writing.

Before assessing the full set of responses, raters conducted a calibration session on five writing samples to align their interpretation of the rubric. Inter-rater reliability was measured using Kappa Cohen, resulting in a coefficient of 0.81, which reflects substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). This shows that the assessment procedure is reliable and replicable.

Regarding validity, the rubric undergoes content validation by aligning it with the curriculum objectives and relevant genre-based writing descriptors of the Indonesian English education standards. The trial was carried out to ensure the understanding and fairness of the rubric. In terms of instrument reliability, the dual grading system and the consistency of quantitative assessments across the five categories reinforce the credibility of the findings. This research was carried out in compliance with ethical standards.

Permission is obtained from the principal, and informed consent is given orally by the students and their guardians. Confidentiality is maintained by anonymizing student data and ensuring that participation is voluntary and non-

coercive. Students who choose not to write are respected and not punished in any way.

Despite the careful methodological design, the study acknowledges some limitations. The small number of valid writing samples limits the generalization of results. In addition, the absence of follow-up classroom observations limited the research's ability to triangulate instructional quality. Future studies may incorporate longitudinal data or experimental designs to assess the progress of writing over time and validate instructional interventions.

Results

Students' Writing Ability in Narrative Text

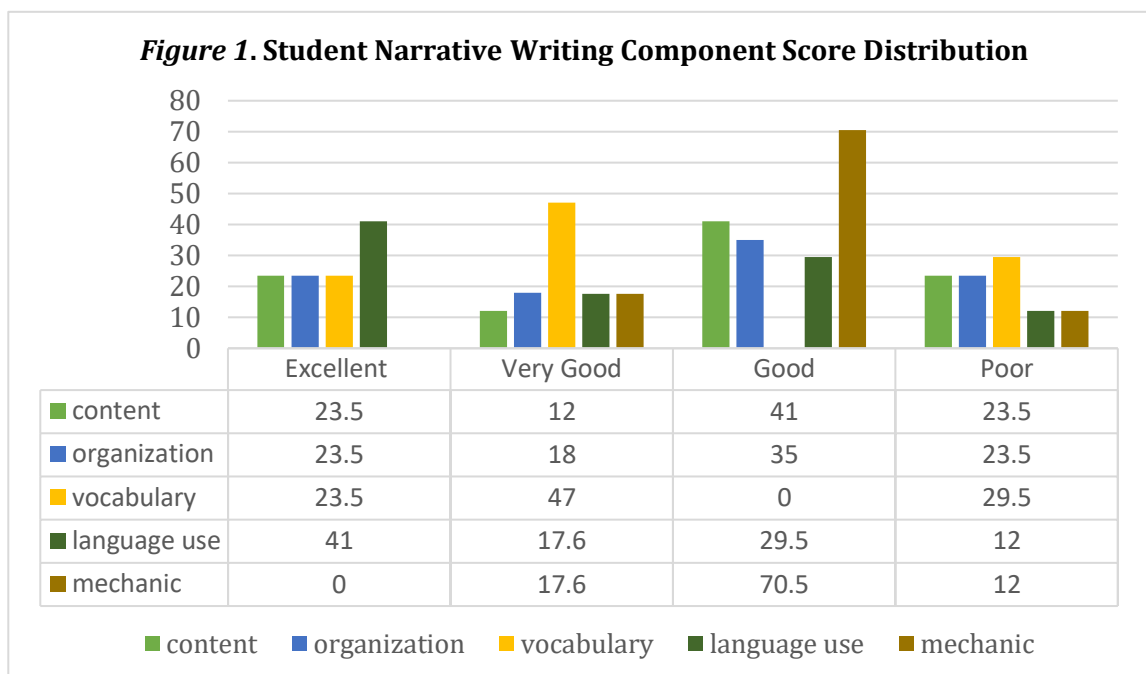
After the researcher collected data and administered the test to 98 people, out of a total of 98 students targeted for the study, only 17 students (17.3%) participated in the narrative writing test in English. A total of 81 students (82.7%) did not submit the narrative writing task, and this raised serious concerns about the representativeness of the data. Based on interviews, most students were not confident in writing narratives in English due to limited vocabulary, fear of making grammatical mistakes, as well as a lack of understanding of narrative text structures. This lack of confidence reflects self-selection bias and reduces the generalisability of the findings to the entire student population.

Of the 17 participating students, the total scores and categorisation of writing ability are as follows:

Table 1. Writing Proficiency Scores and Categories

Category	Score Range	frequency	Percentage
Excellent	90-100	4	23,5%
Sufficient	70-79	6	35,3%
Poor	60-69	2	11,8%
Very Poor	<60	5	29,4%

Of the 17 scripts assessed, it was found that 4 students (23.5%) showed writing ability in the excellent category (score 90 and above), 6 students (35.3%) were in the sufficient category (score 70-79), 2 students (11.8%) in the poor category (score 60-69), and 5 students (29.4%) were classified as very poor (score below 60). The overall mean score was 69.17 with a median value of 71 and mode of 72. The standard deviation of 17.41 indicates a significant variation in students' writing ability.



Analysis based on the five assessment components of content, organisation, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics showed an uneven distribution of abilities. In the content aspect, most students (41%) were in the good category, but there were still 23.5% students in the very poor category, reflecting the inability to develop ideas as a whole. The organisation aspect also showed that although 35% of students were in the good category, there were 23.5% who were still very deficient in compiling a logical story structure. In the vocabulary aspect, more than half of the students (47%) were in the very good category, but the other 29.5% still showed serious weaknesses, such as the use of words that did not fit the context or literal translation from Indonesian.

Language use or grammar skills are a striking aspect, with 41% of students in the excellent category, but 12% showing extreme weaknesses such as errors in tense and basic sentence structure. On the other hand, mechanical aspects such as spelling and punctuation were the most stable performing areas, with 70.5% of students rated as good enough.

Analysis based on the five assessment components of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics showed an uneven distribution of abilities. For example, one student in the "Sufficient" category wrote the following:

My Holiday at the Beach

"Last holiday, my family and I went to Lampuuk Beach. We arrived at 9 a.m. and the weather was sunny and hot. I played with the sand and built a big castle. My little brother was happy because he found many seashells. After that, we ate grilled fish together. I felt so happy and I hope to go again next year." Student B

This writing reflects moderately successful narrative structure, limited lexical variety, and some grammatical slips. The story has a clear sequence of events, but vocabulary remains basic and there are occasional verb tense mismatches.

In contrast, a “Poor” level student produced the following:

First Day in School

“I am going to school in the morning. My uniform new and clean. I meet my friends and say hello. The teacher tells about rules. I feel nervous but excited. Then I go to class and sit. School is big and many rooms. I like school. ” Student D

In the student's attempt to narrate a personal experience, the writing shows significant grammar issues (such as tense errors, subject-verb disagreements), and a lack of storyline. A lot of the same vocabulary, and simple phrase structures. These examples illustrate how student writing samples reflect varying levels of control across content development, grammatical structure, and lexical resource.

Interviews with students and teachers corroborated these quantitative findings. Many students stated that they had difficulty starting their writing because they did not know how to express their ideas in English. Teachers also confirmed that most students can only write in Bahasa Indonesia and tend to translate directly without understanding the English sentence structure. Students' statements such as ‘I don't know where to start because I don't know the words in English’ highlight the main obstacles in writing proficiency.

In general, these results show that only 10 out of 17 students (59%) were able to write narratives with a minimum level of success, and only 4 students out of the total population (about 4%) showed good proficiency of narrative writing. The main obstacles lie in vocabulary acquisition, understanding text structures, and anxiety in using English productively. The findings confirm the importance of pedagogical interventions that focus on improving lexical competence and teaching strategies that better support students' engagement in writing activities.

Causes of Low Scores and Non-Participation

The study identified several interrelated factors contributing to students' low narrative writing performance and the notably high rate of non-participation (82.7%). These factors can be organized into linguistic, cognitive, and affective categories, reflecting both internal limitations and contextual challenges.

Limited Vocabulary proficiency

One of the primary barriers encountered by students was their restricted lexical range. This limited vocabulary prevented them from elaborating on narrative ideas, constructing coherent sequences, and expressing key descriptive elements. Lomi, Aleksius, and Sahan (2024) found that junior high school students

with limited vocabulary struggled to write cohesive and engaging stories due to a lack of word retrieval ability and conceptual mismatch. Their study revealed that students often failed to transform culturally familiar stories into English narratives, not because of lack of ideas, but due to an inability to express them linguistically.

Poor Understanding of Narrative Structure

Many students demonstrated a poor understanding of the basic structure of narrative texts, particularly the elements of orientation, complication, and resolution, as emphasized in the Merdeka Learning Curriculum. Several compositions were limited to one or two unrelated sentences, lacking sequential coherence or thematic development. This suggests that genre-specific instruction may have been insufficient or ineffective in helping students internalize narrative organization.

This finding is supported by Fadilah and Hasanah (2024), who found that junior high school students in Indonesia often omit or misstructure key narrative elements due to unfamiliarity with genre features. Their analysis showed that students failed to identify or develop the complication and resolution stages in narrative tasks, indicating a need for more structured scaffolding in writing instruction.

Writing Apprehension and Low Self-Efficacy

Affective factors such as writing anxiety and low self-efficacy emerged as significant contributors to students' unwillingness to participate in the narrative writing task. Many students reported apprehension regarding grammatical errors, negative teacher evaluation, and the fear of being judged by peers. This aligns with findings by Romrome and Mbato (2023), who observed that EFL students in Indonesian junior high schools often experience emotional distress when writing in English, primarily due to low self-belief in their writing ability and fear of poor performance. Their research revealed that such anxiety impedes students' willingness to engage in the writing process, leading to avoidance behaviors and underdeveloped writing skills.

Literal Translation and Code-Mixing

Students who attempted the writing task frequently relied on literal translation strategies from Indonesian to English. This approach often resulted in grammatically incorrect and semantically awkward expressions, with some texts displaying extensive intra-sentential code-mixing, where Indonesian and English words appeared in the same clause. These patterns suggest a reliance on translation as a coping mechanism in response to limited language proficiency and syntactic awareness.

This phenomenon is consistent with the findings of Risna (2023), who analyzed code-mixing in English language instruction at Junior High School 3 Dumai. Her study revealed that students engaged in unconscious code-mixing and literal transfers, often unaware that their translated constructions deviated from English syntactic norms. She argues that insufficient exposure to full-English input and underdeveloped grammatical competence were key contributors to this interference pattern.

Instructional and Environmental Limitations

Teacher interviews also revealed that students had limited access to essential scaffolding tools such as guided writing models, vocabulary-building exercises, and real-world writing contexts. Moreover, instructional time allocated for writing practice was notably constrained, resulting in underdeveloped student competencies in organizing and elaborating ideas. These findings are supported by Endarwati, Anwar, and Maruf (2023), who found that teachers in urban and rural areas across Java Island frequently cited time limitations and a lack of structured scaffolding strategies as key obstacles in teaching writing. Their study emphasized that without adequate instructional planning, including visual aids like anchor charts or genre templates, students tend to rely on surface-level writing with limited creativity and cohesion.

In conclusion, the low participation and poor performance observed in this study reflect a combination of limited linguistic resources, cognitive gaps in genre awareness, affective barriers, and systemic instructional shortcomings. Addressing these challenges will require integrated pedagogical strategies that combine explicit instruction, affective support, and increased exposure to English narrative texts.

Discussion

This study examined the narrative writing proficiency of eighth-grade students at SMPN 1 Kuala Batee within the framework of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum. The findings provide valuable insights into both the students' linguistic challenges and the systemic factors influencing writing instruction. A particularly critical finding concerns the extremely low participation rate, with only 17 out of 98 students (17.3%) submitting narrative writing samples. This raises essential questions regarding the representativeness of the results. The students who participated likely represent a more confident and linguistically capable subgroup, while the remaining 81 students who abstained from the task may reflect a more severe level of writing difficulty. As such, the current results must be interpreted with caution, recognizing the possibility of selection bias and limited generalizability.

Nevertheless, the performance data revealed that even among the participating students, writing proficiency remained low overall. Only 4 students (23.5%) achieved scores categorized as "Excellent," and a significant portion (29.4%) were classified as "Very Poor." This finding supports the evidence presented by Aqila, Yanto, and Ahmad (2024), who emphasized that students' limited vocabulary size significantly hinders their ability to elaborate ideas, organize narrative flow, and select semantically appropriate expressions. Their study, which implemented vocabulary journals through digital narrative texts, found that insufficient lexical resources constrain students from expressing imaginative or descriptive elements of stories, resulting in overly simplistic or fragmented compositions.

The difficulties experienced by students extended beyond linguistic limitations. Many lacked familiarities with the standard narrative structure, including orientation, complication, and resolution components that are explicitly emphasized in the Merdeka Learning Curriculum. This issue is aligned with the findings of Fadilah and Hasanah (2024), who observed that many Indonesian junior high school students struggled to structure their narrative texts due to a lack of genre awareness and inadequate exposure to structured writing models. Their study highlighted that students often omitted or misused narrative stages, resulting in fragmented and incoherent stories, despite having ideas to convey.

This finding echoes the results of Qatrinada and Apoko (2024), who found that Indonesian junior high school students frequently fail to internalize narrative structures due to limited exposure and lack of explicit instruction. Furthermore, affective factors such as low self-efficacy and writing anxiety played a prominent role. Interviews with students revealed that many felt intimidated by writing in English and feared making mistakes, which ultimately deterred their participation. This supports the claims of Brown (2001) and Heaton (1988), who noted that affective variables significantly impact second-language writing performance.

In relation to the curriculum, the results suggest a gap between the intended pedagogical goals of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum and actual classroom implementation. Widyartono and Basuki (2025) observed that teachers often lack adequate training in genre-based instruction and differentiated learning strategies. In the case of SMPN 1 Kuala Batee, limited resources, insufficient scaffolding, and time constraints further hindered effective writing instruction. As a result, many students were unable to develop the skills necessary to meet curriculum expectations.

Pedagogically, the study underscores the need for targeted instructional strategies that explicitly teach narrative structure while also expanding students' lexical repertoire. Teachers could adopt scaffolded writing models, provide thematic vocabulary lists, and integrate collaborative writing activities to build student confidence and fluency. In particular, regular low-stakes writing opportunities may reduce anxiety and foster greater engagement. Given the rural

and under-resourced context of the school, leveraging technology such as interactive writing platforms and vocabulary applications may also offer a cost-effective means of improving writing instruction.

This study is not without limitations. The small sample size and high rate of non-participation limit the generalizability of the findings. The absence of classroom observations restricts the depth of contextual interpretation, and no pre- or post-intervention measures were employed to track student progress. These limitations highlight the need for more robust, triangulated methodologies in future research.

Future studies should consider adopting longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine the development of writing proficiency over time. Intervention studies that focus on vocabulary-building, confidence-enhancing strategies, and genre-based instruction would provide valuable evidence for practice. Additionally, broader investigations across different school contexts and regions in Indonesia would enhance the transferability of results. Research exploring cultural perceptions of English writing, student motivation, and attitudes toward assessment could further deepen our understanding of the complex factors influencing writing achievement in EFL contexts.

Conclusion

The researcher determined that the capacity of students to compose narrative texts at SMPN 1 Kuala Batee fell into the Very Poor category. It was demonstrated that 81 students were unable to write narrative texts entirely or fell into the Very Poor category, which most of them did not participate in the test. The result also indicated that the main reason for students' incapability of composing narrative text was a lack of proficiency in English vocabulary, which resulted in their non-participation in the survey. Moreover, insufficient understanding of recognizing the overall structure and language of narrative text features contributed to students' poor performance in writing narrative text.

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