

Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Writing English Recount Texts

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Abstract: English writing proficiency is essential for secondary school students, including those in Madrasah Aliyah, particularly in composing recount texts that narrate past experiences chronologically. This study explores the difficulties faced by students in writing English recount texts at Madrasah Aliyah Kota Tanjungbalai and the factors influencing these challenges. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, involving writing tests, interviews, and document analysis with tenth-grade students and English teachers. Findings reveal that students struggle with using the simple past tense, limited vocabulary, incorrect sentence structures, and inadequate understanding of text organization, including orientation, events, and re-orientation. These difficulties are shaped by internal factors, such as low motivation and confidence, and external factors, including limited writing practice, constrained classroom time, and insufficient feedback. The study underscores the importance of contextualized teaching strategies, regular writing exercises, and continuous guidance to enhance students' writing skills. The results provide insights for educators and policymakers to develop more effective English writing instruction in Madrasah Aliyah, contributing to both theoretical and practical advancements in language education.

Keywords: English Writing, Recount Text, Writing Difficulties.

A. Introduction

English language proficiency is one of the essential competencies that students must possess at the secondary education level, including in Madrasah Aliyah. In the context of globalization and the rapid development of information technology, mastery of English serves not only as a tool for international communication but also as a means for academic advancement and enhancing students' competitiveness (Karim & Siti, 2024). Therefore, English language instruction in Madrasah Aliyah is aimed at developing the four interconnected language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Among these four skills, writing is considered the most complex. Writing requires students to integrate various linguistic aspects, such as vocabulary mastery, grammar, text structure, and the ability to organize ideas logically and systematically. In English learning at Madrasah Aliyah, one of the essential text types students must master is the recount text. Recount texts function to retell past

experiences or events chronologically, following specific text structures and linguistic features (Amalina & Yulianto, 2024). However, in practice, students' ability to write recount texts still faces various challenges.

Based on observations in Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City, many students experience difficulties in writing English recount texts. These difficulties are evident in students' low ability to express ideas, inaccurate grammar use particularly in the past tense limited vocabulary, and errors in organizing the text structure, which should include orientation, series of events, and reorientation. This condition affects the quality of students' writing, which does not yet meet the linguistic and communicative criteria expected in the curriculum.

Students' difficulties in writing recount texts stem from both internal and external factors. Internal factors include low learning motivation, insufficient understanding of the concepts and characteristics of recount texts, and limited mastery of English linguistic elements. External factors may involve suboptimal teaching strategies, limited time for writing practice, and minimal use of media and constructive feedback during the learning process. If these issues are not analyzed in depth, the objectives of English writing instruction in Madrasah Aliyah are unlikely to be fully achieved.

Research on students' difficulties in English writing has been extensively conducted at both junior and senior secondary school levels. (Wulandari, Nadrun, Husen, & Anisya, 2022) report that students' main challenges in writing English texts include grammar mastery, limited vocabulary, weak ability to organize ideas, and low cohesion and coherence across paragraphs. Specifically, studies on recount texts reveal that students frequently make errors in using the past tense, sequencing events, and adhering to the proper text structure according to genre conventions.

Nevertheless, most previous studies (Lestari, Novari, & Riandi, 2022) have focused on general secondary schools and have not sufficiently explored the characteristics of English learning in Madrasah Aliyah. Madrasah Aliyah has its own unique features, including students' backgrounds, a curriculum that integrates general and religious education, and relatively limited time allocated for English lessons. This research imbalance indicates a gap: the lack of empirical studies specifically analyzing the difficulties of Madrasah Aliyah students in writing English recount texts in a contextualized manner.

Furthermore, studies by (Sahputra, Wahyuni, Sari, Kurniati, & Iskandar, 2024) on recount text writing difficulties are predominantly quantitative, focusing on error analysis without deeply exploring students' learning experiences. This opens an opportunity for qualitative research capable of revealing the dynamics of students' difficulties from their own perspectives and classroom practices. Therefore, research focusing on analyzing students' writing difficulties in a specific local context, such as Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City, is both relevant and urgent.

Based on this research gap, the novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on examining the difficulties of Madrasah Aliyah students in writing English recount texts, considering the characteristics of the madrasah institution and the local context of Tanjungbalai City. This study not only identifies the types of linguistic difficulties experienced by students but also explores internal and external factors influencing their writing skills.

Moreover, this study provides a contextual perspective that has not been widely addressed in previous research, offering both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of English writing instruction in Madrasah Aliyah. Consequently, it is expected that this study will enrich the body of knowledge on English language learning, particularly in genre-based writing skills, and serve as a reference for educators and policymakers in designing more effective teaching strategies tailored to the needs of Madrasah Aliyah students.

B. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, aiming to conduct an in-depth analysis of students' difficulties in writing English recount texts at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on understanding phenomena holistically, naturally, and contextually, particularly regarding students' learning experiences and classroom practices (Creswell, 2024). The descriptive design is used to systematically describe the forms of writing difficulties experienced by students without applying treatments or manipulating variables.

The research subjects were tenth-grade students at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City who had studied recount texts in their English classes. The subjects were selected using purposive sampling, considering students who had received recount text materials and exhibited varying writing abilities. In addition to the students, English teachers were involved as supporting informants to obtain data regarding the teaching process and factors influencing students' writing skills. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the collected data were relevant to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2024).

Data collection was carried out through several techniques, including writing tests, interviews, and documentation. Writing tests were used to obtain primary data in the form of students' written recount texts. Through these tests, the researcher could identify students' difficulties in text structure, grammar, vocabulary, as well as coherence and cohesion (Moleong, 2024). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and English teachers to explore their perceptions of writing difficulties and the factors influencing them. Documentation was also used to supplement the data, including syllabi, lesson plans (RPP), and examples of students' writing assignments.

Data analysis was conducted in stages, following a qualitative data analysis model consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Arikunto, 2021). In the data reduction stage, the researcher filtered and focused on data relevant to students' difficulties in writing recount texts. The data were then presented in the form of narrative descriptions and tables categorizing writing difficulties, such as grammatical errors, text structure issues, and idea development. The final stage involved drawing conclusions by interpreting the findings in depth and relating them to relevant theories and previous studies.

To ensure data validity, this study employed triangulation techniques, including both source and method triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing data obtained from students and teachers, while method triangulation compared the results of writing tests, interviews, and documentation (Yin, 2024). Consequently, the data obtained are expected to possess a high level of credibility and reliability. Through this research methodology, it is anticipated that a comprehensive understanding of students' difficulties in writing English recount texts at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City, as well as the underlying factors, can be obtained. The findings are expected to contribute meaningfully to the improvement of English writing instruction.

C. Results and Discussion

Results

Forms of Students' Difficulties in Writing English Recount Texts at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City

Based on classroom observations of English learning at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City, it was found that students experience various difficulties in writing recount texts. The primary challenges are related to linguistic aspects, particularly inconsistent use of the simple past tense, limited vocabulary, and errors in sentence structure. Many students still transfer Indonesian language patterns into their writing, resulting in sentences that are grammatically incorrect.

In terms of text structure, students demonstrate an incomplete understanding of the organization of recount texts, especially in distinguishing the orientation, events, and re-orientation sections. Their writing tends to be descriptive-narrative without a clear chronological sequence. Regarding writing mechanics, frequent errors were observed in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

These difficulties are also influenced by students' low self-confidence in expressing ideas in writing and the lack of structured writing practice. These findings indicate the need for more contextual and process-oriented teaching strategies to enhance students' recount writing skills. These observational findings are further supported by interview results, as presented below.

English Teacher:

"Students often struggle to use the simple past tense correctly and to choose appropriate vocabulary. They understand the story in general, but find it difficult to write grammatically correct English sentences. They also have not mastered the structure of recount texts well, so their writing is not chronological."

Eleventh-Grade Student:

"I feel less confident writing recount texts because my vocabulary is limited, and I am confused about changing verbs into the past tense. I usually translate directly from Indonesian into English, which makes my writing rigid and full of mistakes. We rarely get writing exercises with proper feedback."

Principal:

"Students' English writing skills still need improvement through more practical learning. Limited lesson time and focus on exam scores have made the development of writing skills less optimal. Contextual and continuous teaching strategies are needed so that students can write recount texts more effectively."

Based on observations and interviews, it can be concluded that students at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City face significant difficulties in writing recount texts. The main challenges include using the simple past tense, limited vocabulary, sentence structure errors, and inadequate understanding of text organization (orientation, events, re-orientation). Students' writing tends to be descriptive-narrative without a clear chronological sequence, and there are still many mechanical errors such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

The factors causing these difficulties include students' low self-confidence in expressing ideas in writing, limited structured writing practice, and restricted lesson time focused on achieving exam scores. Findings from interviews with teachers, students, and the principal reinforce the observations, emphasizing the need for more contextual teaching strategies, regular writing practice, and continuous guidance to improve students' ability to write recount texts.

Factors Affecting Students' Difficulties in Writing English Recount Texts at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City

Based on classroom observations of English learning at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City, several factors were found to influence students' difficulties in writing recount texts. The first factor is linguistic, including limited vocabulary, uncertainty in using the simple past tense, and errors in sentence structure. Second, students' insufficient understanding of the organization of recount texts, including the orientation, events, and re-orientation sections, results in writing that is not chronologically or logically structured.

In addition to internal factors, external factors were also identified, such as limited structured writing practice, restricted lesson time, and a lack of in-depth feedback from teachers. Psychological factors also play a role, where students' low self-confidence in expressing ideas in writing makes them reluctant to experiment with English. These findings indicate that difficulties in writing recount texts are not only linguistic but are also influenced by a combination of cognitive, psychological, and classroom learning conditions. These observational findings are consistent with the results of the interviews, as presented below.

English Teacher:

"Students' difficulties in writing recount texts usually stem from limited vocabulary and their unfamiliarity with using the simple past tense correctly. They are often confused about distinguishing orientation, events, and re-orientation. Other influencing factors include a lack of regular writing practice and insufficient in-depth feedback from teachers."

Eleventh-Grade Student:

"I find it difficult to write recount texts because my vocabulary is still limited, and I often make mistakes in changing verbs to the past tense. Limited class time means we rarely get enough writing practice, and sometimes I am afraid of making mistakes, so I hesitate to write freely."

Principal:

"Students' difficulties are not only linguistic but also related to classroom learning conditions. Limited time and focus on exam scores have made writing skills development less optimal. In addition, students' low self-confidence is also an important factor affecting their ability to write recount texts."

Based on observations and interviews, it can be concluded that students' difficulties in writing recount texts at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City are influenced by several factors. Internal factors include limited vocabulary, uncertainty in using the simple past tense, sentence structure errors, and insufficient understanding of text organization (orientation, events, re-orientation). External factors include limited structured writing practice, restricted lesson time, and lack of in-depth teacher feedback.

Moreover, psychological factors play a significant role, as students' low self-confidence in expressing ideas makes them hesitant to write freely or experiment with English. These findings suggest that difficulties in writing recount texts result from the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and classroom learning aspects. Therefore, more contextual teaching strategies, regular writing practice, and continuous guidance are required to improve students' recount writing skills.

Discussion

Forms of Students' Difficulties in Writing English Recount Texts

The findings of this study indicate that English writing instruction at Private Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City, particularly in recount text learning, has been carried out through guided writing tasks, teacher explanations, and occasional student discussions. However, the learning process is still at a basic level and remains largely product-oriented. This finding aligns with the study by (Abdullah & Mahmood, 2023), which states that writing instruction at the secondary school level generally focuses on text production with limited attention to linguistic accuracy, text organization, and the development of higher-order writing skills.

In the initial stage of writing instruction, teachers emphasize general understanding of the story and introduction to the structure of recount texts, including orientation, events, and re-orientation. This is consistent with (Sinaga & Iskandar, 2024), who highlight that understanding text organization is a crucial foundation for developing students' writing skills. Nevertheless, as revealed in this study, students' understanding remains partial, and many still transfer Indonesian sentence structures into English, resulting in texts that are grammatically incorrect and lacking chronological order. This finding also supports (Samuels & Braine, 2021), who report that students' difficulties in writing recount texts often stem from insufficient grammar mastery, limited vocabulary, and low confidence in expressing ideas.

During the main stage of instruction, teachers provide exercises on the use of the simple past tense, vocabulary development, and sentence construction, often accompanied by teacher correction. This practice aligns with (Rahman, Yusuf, & Juhana, 2025), who assert that focused grammar and vocabulary exercises can help students produce more accurate texts. However, this study shows that students' ability to independently apply grammatical rules, choose appropriate vocabulary, and organize ideas coherently remains limited. This finding reinforces (Kiuk, 2024), who argues that teacher-centered instruction and limited opportunities for structured writing practice hinder students' fluency and confidence in English writing.

Moreover, the teacher's role as a facilitator in writing instruction has begun to emerge but has not been optimally implemented. Teachers still primarily guide and correct students' work intensively, with limited opportunities for peer collaboration or independent writing exploration. This condition is consistent with (Putri, 2025), who notes that many teachers face challenges in implementing participatory and process-oriented writing strategies due to limited lesson time and differences in students' abilities.

In the final stage of instruction, reflection on the writing process and formative evaluation are carried out inconsistently. Assessment tends to focus on the students' final products rather than on the processes of drafting, revising, and editing. This finding aligns with (Yahrif, Sirajuddin, & Dahniar, 2025), who report that writing assessment in schools is often product-oriented, with limited attention to process aspects such as idea development, text organization, and students' self-reflection.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce previous research indicating that English writing instruction at the secondary school level requires significant improvement, particularly in consistent grammar practice, vocabulary development, mastery of text organization, and structured opportunities for students to build confidence in writing. Limited lesson time, low student confidence, and variations in language competence remain major challenges. Therefore, systematic efforts, including context-based and process-oriented writing strategies, are highly needed to enhance students' ability to write recount texts effectively, accurately, and coherently.

Factors Affecting Students' Difficulties in Writing English Recount Texts

The findings of this study indicate that instruction in writing recount texts at Private Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City has been conducted through guided writing tasks, teacher explanations, and class discussions; however, the learning process remains at a basic level and is largely instructional. This finding aligns with (Wulandari, Nadrun, Husen, & Anisya, 2022), who report that secondary school writing instruction generally still focuses on producing simple texts and has not been fully directed toward developing students' critical and reflective thinking skills.

In the initial stage of instruction, the teacher's activities aimed to build students' preliminary understanding of recount text structures, including orientation, events, and re-orientation. This supports the view of (Purba, Tampubolon, & Sinambela, 2023), who emphasize that understanding text organization is a fundamental foundation for writing instruction. Nevertheless, as revealed in this study, these initial activities remain highly guided and provide limited opportunities for students to explore texts independently. Similarly, Lestari, Novari, and Riandi (2022) found that routine writing activities in class often serve only as initial practice without promoting higher-order thinking skills.

During the main stage of instruction, the teacher integrated exercises on the use of the simple past tense, vocabulary development, sentence construction, and simple discussions. This finding aligns with (Sulaiman, 2023), who states that integrating grammar, vocabulary, and writing practice helps students recognize main ideas and key information in texts. However, the results of this study show that students' ability to independently apply grammatical rules, select appropriate vocabulary, and organize ideas chronologically remains limited. This supports (Sinta & Astutik, 2021), who argue that limited variations in teaching strategies and the dominance of

question-and-answer methods hinder the development of higher-order thinking in writing instruction.

Furthermore, the teacher's role as a facilitator in writing instruction has begun to emerge but has not been implemented optimally. Teachers still largely control the flow of discussion and determine students' comprehension paths. This condition is consistent with (Amalina & Yulianto, 2024), who report that many teachers still face difficulties in implementing collaborative and participatory writing strategies due to limited time and differences in students' abilities.

In the final stage of instruction, reflection and evaluation of the writing process are carried out inconsistently. Assessment tends to focus on students' final written products rather than on the writing process itself. This finding supports (Sitorus, Sipahutar, Nasution, Purnama, & Iskandar, 2025), who indicate that school writing evaluation is still product-oriented, with limited attention to process aspects, such as idea development, text structure, and student self-reflection.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce previous research showing that secondary school instruction in writing recount texts requires significant enhancement, particularly in diversifying teaching strategies, increasing scaffolding and guidance for students, and optimizing writing activities oriented toward developing critical thinking skills. Limited lesson time, differences in students' abilities, and teachers' pedagogical competence remain major challenges. Therefore, systematic efforts are needed to improve the quality of writing instruction so that English education can more effectively foster students' critical, creative, and communicative abilities.

D. Conclusions

Based on the findings, students at Madrasah Aliyah in Tanjungbalai City experience significant difficulties in writing English recount texts, particularly in the use of the simple past tense, limited vocabulary, sentence structure errors, and insufficient understanding of text organization (orientation, events, re-orientation). These difficulties are exacerbated by students' low self-confidence, limited structured writing practice, restricted lesson time, and insufficient teacher feedback. The findings highlight the need for contextual, consistent, and practice-oriented teaching strategies, including structured writing exercises, in-depth feedback, and the development of students' self-confidence. The limitations of this study include the sample being confined to a single madrasah and one subject, as well as the qualitative descriptive approach, which does not measure the level of difficulty quantitatively. For future research, it is recommended to expand the sample, combine quantitative and qualitative methods, explore the use of digital media or literacy-based learning, and investigate students' motivation and learning strategies to improve recount writing skills.

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