

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the background of the study, research questions, purpose of the study, scope and limitation of the study, the significance and limitation of the study, and state of the art.

1.1 Background of the Study

As a global language, English helps people across the globe interact, access educational materials, follow technological developments, and open career pathways (Crystal, 2003). In Indonesian secondary schools, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* treats English as a foreign language with an emphasis on building students' communicative ability across listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Kemendikbudristek, 2025). Out of these four core skills, writing presents the biggest challenge for foreign language learners (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Writing goes beyond transferring spoken words onto paper. The process requires mental effort because writers must plan ideas, structure information in logical order, and edit their text through several revisions before finishing the final draft (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Clear written communication also relies on proper vocabulary, correct grammar, and standard mechanics (Hyland, 2019). These linguistic elements are particularly important in text-based instruction, where students are expected to produce different genres by applying appropriate language features according to the purpose and structure of each text.

Text-based instruction focuses on how students understand and produce texts based on their social purpose, structure, and language features (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). The curriculum for Indonesian junior high schools requires students

to master several text types, such as descriptive, recount, and narrative texts (Kemendikbudristek, 2025). A descriptive text describes specific objects or people, and a recount text tells past events in order. Meanwhile, a narrative text presents a different challenge for eighth-grade EFL students. A narrative text tells an imaginative or real story with specific characters, settings, and a plot that moves from a problem to a solution (Anderson & Anderson, 2003; Labov & Waletzky, 1997). This main goal makes narrative writing hard for students. Students cannot just list past actions when they write a narrative text. They need to combine literary elements like plot, conflict, and character traits with grammar rules like past tense, action verbs, direct speech, and time connectors (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). As a result, junior high school EFL students often face great difficulties when they try to write narrative texts.

To study this topic, three concepts need clear distinction: writing errors, writing problems, and writing difficulties. Writing errors are visible mistakes that violate English grammar rules in a student's text, such as wrong verb forms, bad spelling, or misplaced punctuation (Ferris, 2011). Writing problems are the hidden linguistic, cognitive, or emotional issues that cause those mistakes (Byrne, 1988). Writing difficulties connect these concepts, as they represent the challenges students face during the writing process that stop them from creating good texts, which appear through difficulties in their final work (Harmer, 2007; Hyland, 2019).

Evaluating the quality of a piece of writing cannot be done from only one angle. Based on the framework proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981), writing quality can be seen through five main components: content, organization, vocabulary, language use (grammar), and mechanics (spelling and punctuation). Content and

organization relate more to the overall structure and the flow of ideas in a text, while grammar, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary act as the basic elements that support written language itself. For junior high school students who are still learning English, these lower-level linguistic aspects often become the biggest obstacle when they try to express their ideas in writing. A limited vocabulary makes it hard for students to develop and convey their ideas clearly, and grammar mistakes often reduce how clear the meaning of a sentence is. Difficulties in spelling and punctuation also affect how readable and how good a text looks as a whole (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019; Ferris, 2011; Hyland, 2019). For this reason, a closer study of these core linguistic components gives a clear picture of the exact grammatical and mechanical problems that students face when they write narrative texts.

Aside from the difficulties themselves, another matter that deserves attention is how students respond to those difficulties. In the process of writing, students do not act as passive recipients of problems; they show different levels of self-initiated thought, feeling, and effort as they try to reach their writing goals (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997, as cited in Teng et al., 2022). This study centers on self-initiated strategies, which refer to the learning actions that students use on their own to solve problems that arise during the writing process. Such strategies reflect students' active attempt to manage and support their own learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Based on Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are actions started by the student to help the process of language learning. Even though some strategies involve contact with other people, for example when students ask friends or teachers for help, they still count as self-initiated because students choose to use them on their own to solve the difficulties they face in

learning. These independent strategies reflect students' active and conscious part in the management of their own language learning (Cohen, 2014).

During the teaching practicum program (*Praktik Keterampilan Mengajar*) at SMPN 99 Jakarta, the preliminary observation showed that most eighth-grade students struggled a lot when they wrote English recount texts. Their writing showed the same grammatical mistakes, and one example that appears often was the mix of present and past tense within one paragraph. This finding matches what Pratiwi et al. (2025) reported, that the most common grammatical mistakes in eighth-grade students' recount texts were found in past tense verb forms, subject-verb agreement, and preposition use, and these mistakes were mostly caused by intralingual factors such as overgeneralization and rules that the students had not mastered fully. Their vocabulary choice was also limited, so their sentences often sounded plain and repeated the same expressions. Spelling mistakes were common too, and punctuation marks such as periods and commas were often placed in the wrong spot. Each student handled these difficulties in their own way while they completed the writing task. Some sought help from a classmate, some checked a word in a dictionary, and some just left a sentence unfinished. This is in line with what Asnas and Hidayanti (2024) found, that EFL students used a mix of manual and automatic strategies, such as reference checks, self-correction of their writing, or the use of digital tools, when they faced difficulty during academic writing. Even though this situation happened often in the classroom, no study had given close attention to why it happened or how students handled it by themselves. Anjani and Zuhri (2026) note that previous research on grammatical difficulties in recount text writing tends to concentrate on identifying the types of difficulties that appear,

rather than looking into what actually causes them. While numerous empirical studies have evaluated EFL writing difficulties (e.g., Amelya et al., 2022; Falihah et al., 2022; Mulyaningsih, 2013), limited studies have thoroughly investigated how junior high school students' specific linguistic difficulties intersect with their autonomous, self-initiated learning strategies within a single qualitative inquiry. Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative case study approach to conduct an in-depth investigation into the specific writing difficulties (content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics) experienced by eighth-grade students at SMPN 99 Jakarta in writing narrative texts, alongside the self-initiated strategies they employ to overcome those difficulties based on Oxford's (1990) theoretical framework.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What writing difficulties across the five analytical components—content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics (specifically spelling and punctuation)—do eighth-grade students at SMPN 99 Jakarta face when writing narrative texts?
2. What self-initiated strategies do eighth-grade students at SMPN 99 Jakarta employ to overcome their difficulties in writing narrative texts?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

Based on these two research questions, this study aims to look closely at the writing difficulties faced by eighth-grade students at SMPN 99 Jakarta when they write narrative texts, covering the five components of content, organization,

vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, particularly spelling and punctuation, to understand where and how these difficulties appear. Besides that, this study also tries to describe the self-initiated strategies that these students use on their own to deal with and solve the writing difficulties they face, so that a clearer picture can be built regarding both the problems students face in narrative writing and the ways they attempt to handle those difficulties without relying only on the teacher's guidance.

1.4 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study narrows the scope of writing difficulties to five surface-level components, namely content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, which cover spelling and punctuation. These five components come from the analytical writing framework by Jacobs et al. (1981), who divided writing quality into those categories. As for the strategies side, this study only covers autonomous strategies that students start and carry out on their own, based on the concept proposed by Oxford (1990).

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to several parties, both theoretically and practically.

1) Theoretical significance

This study contributes to the literature on EFL writing pedagogy by providing empirical evidence on how lower-secondary students navigate linguistic difficulties in narrative writing. It enriches the application of Jacobs et al. (1981)

writing assessment theory and Oxford's (1990) language learning strategy classification within the Indonesian junior high school context.

2) Practical significance

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to several parties as follows:

a. English Teachers

The insights gained from this study can assist teachers in diagnosing specific student weaknesses in content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, thereby enabling them to design targeted corrective instruction and promote autonomous strategy training in the classroom.

b. Students

The study raises students' metacognitive awareness regarding their own writing obstacles and introduces practical self-initiated strategies that they can apply independently to improve their writing proficiency.

c. The Researcher and Future Researchers

The findings and qualitative framework can serve as a valuable reference for future researchers investigating EFL writing challenges, learner autonomy, or strategy use across different genres and educational levels.

1.6 State of the Art

To establish the novelty and necessity of this research, this study builds upon and positions itself in relation to previous empirical investigations in the field of EFL writing.

Several researchers have looked at writing difficulties among students at different school levels. Faliyah et al. (2022) studied narrative writing difficulties among senior high school students and found that grammar and vocabulary stood as the main challenges. Mulyaningsih (2013) conducted a case study at junior high school level and found that students with low and middle ability struggled with past tense and other features of narrative language. Asiah et al. (2020) looked at the causes of writing difficulties among eighth grade students and found that low motivation, weak reading habits, and first language interference were the main causes. Amelya et al. (2022) paid close attention to mechanical difficulties and reported that spelling and punctuation mistakes appeared often in the narrative drafts of secondary students.

Even so, a real gap still exists in the literature. Most past studies only view writing difficulties from the teacher's side or from a diagnostic angle, or they test teaching methods chosen by the teacher, such as mind mapping or picture series. Few studies pay close attention to how students' language difficulties, whether in grammar, spelling, punctuation, or vocabulary, relate to the strategies that students build on their own, within one qualitative study at junior high school level.

This study tries to close that gap through two viewpoints at once, within a qualitative case study design. With the criteria from Jacobs et al. (1981) for the diagnosis of language difficulty, along with Oxford's (1990) classification of self-initiated strategies, this research studies students' real writing together with their own account of the strategies they build on their own to handle writing problems. Because of this, the study offers a fresh, student-centered angle for EFL writing research in Indonesian junior high school setting.