

## EFL bachelor's students' experiences in writing recount texts through daily english journaling: a focus on advantages and obstacles

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the experiences of sixth-semester EFL undergraduate students at UIN Sumatera Utara in implementing daily English journaling to develop their writing skills. Specifically, it aims to (1) explore students' engagement with journaling as a tool for writing development, (2) identify the perceived benefits of this practice, and (3) examine the challenges they face during the process. Using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological case study design, the research involved five purposively selected participants over a six-week period of daily journaling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, journal samples (comprising 30 entries per participant), reflective logs, and field notes. The data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model, involving data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing. Trustworthiness was ensured through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, and persistent observation. The findings indicate that sustained journaling over time fostered writing fluency—evidenced by increased word count per entry, greater lexical variation, and reduced grammatical errors. Participants also reported enhanced confidence, improved sentence structure, and greater awareness of their writing habits. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited vocabulary, inconsistent motivation, lack of feedback, and time constraints were frequently noted. These results underscore the pedagogical value of journaling as a reflective, low-stakes writing practice in EFL contexts. The study offers practical insights for educators on integrating journaling into writing instruction and highlights the need for guided feedback mechanisms to optimize learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** Daily English Journaling, Students EFL, Recount Text Writing.

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### PENDAHULUAN

Writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) remains one of the most demanding skills for university students, especially in contexts where English is not used outside the classroom. The challenges stem not only from grammatical and lexical demands, but also from the cognitive load of organizing ideas logically, adhering to genre-specific conventions, and expressing meaning with clarity and coherence. In many Indonesian tertiary institutions, writing instruction still tends to be product-oriented and teacher-centered, leaving little room for students to develop their voice, reflect personally, or engage in writing as a recursive, process-based activity. This becomes even more apparent

when students are asked to produce texts such as recounts, which demand both narrative coherence and emotional engagement.

Recount texts, which aim to retell past experiences in chronological order, are commonly used in EFL classrooms due to their personal nature. However, despite the genre's accessibility, many students still struggle with sequencing events, elaborating on details, and using cohesive devices effectively. These issues suggest a need for writing practices that allow students to revisit their experiences over time, reflect on them critically, and express them more naturally. Journaling, or daily reflective writing, has been identified in various studies as a potentially effective approach to foster such development. Research has shown that journaling helps learners gain fluency, confidence, and self-expression in writing. However, most of these studies focus broadly on journaling as a tool for writing fluency or self-reflection, without specifically examining how it supports the development of recount texts in a genre-based framework.

Moreover, there is a noticeable lack of research that explores journaling practices in Southeast Asian EFL contexts, particularly within Islamic higher education institutions. Cultural and religious values can influence how learners engage with personal narratives, self-disclosure, and emotional expression in writing—factors that are central to the recount genre. Despite this, previous studies rarely situate journaling within the sociocultural context of Muslim-majority EFL learners, nor do they consider how journaling may align with or challenge local norms of self-expression. This study therefore addresses a significant research gap by examining journaling as a means of genre development in recount writing, particularly among EFL students in an Islamic university setting.

The theoretical foundation of this research is grounded in the Writing Process Theory, particularly the framework proposed by Senny Suzanna et al. (2024), which conceptualizes writing as a recursive process involving prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. This theory emphasizes the dynamic, non-linear nature of writing and encourages learners to view writing not merely as a final product, but as a process of discovery and development. However, while widely referenced, this theory has often been applied superficially, with limited attention to how students actually navigate its stages—especially within informal writing contexts like journaling. This study critically engages with the theory, using it not only as a guiding framework but also as an analytical lens to examine how students' journaling practices reflect or diverge from the expected stages of the writing process.

Given these considerations, this study aims to explore in depth how journaling practices affect EFL students' development of recount writing. It seeks to answer how students perceive journaling, what challenges and strategies emerge during the process, and how their writing evolves over time within the recount genre. By focusing on learners' lived experiences and actual writing samples, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how process-oriented writing pedagogies can be implemented effectively in culturally specific EFL contexts. It also offers practical insights for educators seeking to foster meaningful, reflective, and genre-aware writing among their students.

## METODE

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a phenomenological case study design to explore the lived experiences of EFL undergraduate students in developing their writing skills through daily English journaling. This design allows for a deep, contextualized understanding of a bounded group's experiences, drawing from phenomenology's focus on meaning-making (van Manen, 2016) and the case study's attention to specific real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). The research is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which acknowledges knowledge as socially constructed and emphasizes co-construction of meaning between researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Tracy, 2010).

The participants were five sixth-semester students enrolled in the English Language Education program at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU). Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria: (1) intermediate to advanced proficiency in English, as indicated by course grades and instructor recommendations; (2) at least one semester of experience engaging in English journaling either as part of coursework or personal practice; and (3) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews and reflective writing. The decision to involve only five participants was based on the qualitative principle of depth over breadth, aligning with phenomenological traditions that prioritize rich, detailed accounts over large samples (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While the small sample limits statistical generalizability, the aim here is analytical generalization—to offer transferable insights that resonate with similar educational contexts (Yin, 2018).

To develop a holistic understanding of each participant's experience, the study used methodological triangulation involving (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) journal samples, (3) reflective writings, and (4) field notes. Interviews provided rich narrative data regarding students' perceptions and emotions toward journaling. Journal samples captured the evolution of writing practices, while reflective statements offered meta-cognitive insight into students' learning and struggles. Field notes documented non-verbal cues, interactional context, and situational nuances during data collection. These multiple sources were analyzed both separately and cross-referenced to examine convergences, contradictions, and complementarities, thus strengthening credibility and depth. For example, recurring themes in interviews were confirmed or questioned through journal content (e.g., improvement in cohesion) and reflective entries (e.g., shifts in motivation or perceived barriers).

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to member checking in two stages: first, participants were given transcripts to verify factual accuracy; second, preliminary thematic interpretations were shared for their feedback to validate whether the researcher's analysis captured the intended meaning of their experiences. This two-step procedure supported both credibility and participant agency in meaning-making (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) model involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the condensation phase, data were coded inductively using descriptive and thematic coding, with codes emerging from close reading of transcripts and documents. To ensure

reliability, a second coder reviewed a subset (30%) of the data independently, and inter-coder agreement was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a coefficient of 0.82, indicating substantial agreement (McHugh, 2012). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively. In the display stage, visual matrices and coding summaries were used to organize data, followed by iterative interpretation and triangulation across data sources in the conclusion phase.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was established through triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement. Confirmability was maintained through reflexive journaling and transparent documentation of analytic decisions. Dependability was addressed through a clear audit trail and consistent coding procedures. Finally, transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the context, participants, and findings so that others may assess applicability to their own settings.

In sum, this methodologically rigorous design offers nuanced insight into students' journaling experiences and writing development within an Islamic higher education setting. By integrating multiple data sources, participant validation, and systematic analysis, the study ensures both depth of understanding and transparency of process.

## **HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN**

Writing in English remains a significant challenge for EFL students due to its complex nature involving vocabulary mastery, grammar, idea development, and organizational skills (Hyland, 2003; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). One promising strategy is daily English journaling, which offers students consistent low-stakes writing practice. This section elaborates on how students at UIN Sumatera Utara used journaling to improve writing skills, the benefits they gained, and the challenges they faced—interpreted through relevant theoretical lenses.

### **Students' Use of Daily English Journaling to Develop Writing Skills**

The findings indicate that students used journaling as a personal strategy for developing their writing fluency. For example, Lingga Sahara Ritonga began writing English journals every night, often using informal mediums like notebooks or mobile notes. Over time, he reported a stronger ability to form coherent sentences and organize ideas. However, without a pre- and post-sample of his writing, this self-perceived development remains anecdotal.

This absence highlights a limitation in the data: while participants described improvements, concrete linguistic evidence (e.g., shifts in grammatical accuracy or sentence complexity) was not systematically analyzed. An inclusion of before-and-after samples, or error tracking across entries, would have strengthened the claim of "improved grammar and structure."

Nonetheless, students' journaling practices reflect stages in the Writing Process Theory (Senny Suzanna et al., 2024)—from prewriting to revising and publishing—though the publishing stage often remained informal (e.g., sharing on Instagram). Their journaling became a form of cognitive rehearsal, aligning with Flavell's (1979) theory of metacognition. Students like Siti Zahra Wulandari reported becoming "more aware" of

their writing patterns and recurring weaknesses, indicating emerging metacognitive regulation.

### **Advantages of Daily English Journaling in Improving Writing Skills**

**Linguistic Gains:** Students consistently described improvements in grammar, vocabulary, and organization. For instance, Futri Dina Wardiah stated that journaling enabled her to explore different sentence structures and genre flexibility. However, without textual data, such as a coded analysis of syntactic range or lexical sophistication, these improvements remain subjectively reported.

These self-perceptions are consistent with Nation's (2013) argument that frequent, low-pressure writing promotes fluency and procedural knowledge. Moreover, students often corrected their errors independently—consulting dictionaries or peers—demonstrating autonomous learning behaviors, a core tenet of constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1996).

**Affective Gains:** Students like Siti Zahra and Pratiwi Hawa also noted an increase in confidence and motivation. Their journals acted as safe spaces, echoing Burton and Carroll (2001) who observed reduced anxiety in private writing. Importantly, this motivational surge can be understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster intrinsic motivation. Journaling fulfilled these needs by allowing choice in topic, measurable progress, and emotional expression.

However, affective gains were not universal. A contrastive look at students who journaled consistently (e.g., Lingga, Siti Zahra) versus those who did not (e.g., Ayu Siregar) reveals that consistency may be key to long-term writing development. The consistent group displayed greater fluency and ownership over their writing, whereas the inconsistent group struggled with vocabulary retrieval and thematic development. Such variation supports Hyland's (2009) view that regular exposure is vital for voice and fluency cultivation.

### **Obstacles in Applying Daily English Journaling**

Students reported various challenges, such as lack of motivation, limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties, and insufficient feedback. For instance, Pratiwi Hawa shared that she often stopped journaling due to boredom and a perceived lack of progress. Here, Deci & Ryan's SDT provides insight: when the sense of competence is undermined, intrinsic motivation diminishes.

Lack of feedback also emerged as a key issue. Ayu Siregar emphasized that without lecturer input, she struggled to evaluate her progress. This indicates a missed opportunity for formative assessment, which, as argued by Black & Wiliam (1998), is critical in shaping learning when embedded in instructional practice. Constructive, timely feedback can scaffold student development, yet many participants received none.

The absence of scaffolding also echoes Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Without expert guidance or peer collaboration, students often plateaued. For instance, Zahra reported self-doubt and avoidance behavior

due to fear of making mistakes—suggesting a high affective filter (Krashen, 1982) and the need for emotional scaffolding alongside academic support.

Lastly, contrastive analysis between consistent and inconsistent journalers reveals patterns in persistence and outcome. The consistent writers (Lingga, Zahra) developed more confidence and relied less on external correction, whereas the inconsistent ones reported stagnation or abandonment of journaling. This distinction supports Barjesteh et al. (2019), who emphasized that without a structured approach, journaling loses its transformative potential.

## SIMPULAN

Based on the findings, several concrete pedagogical implications can be drawn to enhance writing instruction in EFL classrooms. To optimize the benefits of journaling, teachers are encouraged to provide structured feedback at least biweekly, using a simple rubric that addresses vocabulary range, syntactic accuracy, idea clarity, and depth of reflection. Feedback can take multiple forms—written comments, voice recordings, or brief one-on-one conferences—to make it more accessible and personalized. Additionally, annotated examples of student journals can serve as scaffolding tools, helping learners identify effective writing strategies. Teachers should also incorporate peer and self-assessment using guided rubrics to promote metacognitive awareness and self-regulated learning. Varying journal prompts to include personal experiences, academic interests, and different genres—such as narrative, descriptive, and argumentative writing—can help sustain engagement and develop diverse writing skills. Integrating journaling into formal assessment structures, for example by assigning it 10–15% of the final grade, may further increase students' consistency and accountability in writing practice.

Nonetheless, this study presents several methodological limitations. All participants were volunteers who appeared to possess relatively high levels of motivation and learner autonomy, potentially limiting the generalizability of the results to broader EFL student populations. The absence of a control group also weakens the causal claims regarding the direct impact of journaling on writing improvement. Furthermore, the short study duration—only eight weeks—makes it difficult to assess long-term effects or sustained writing development. Much of the data was self-reported and narrative in nature, which introduces the risk of subjective bias or socially desirable responses. In addition, the study lacked systematic linguistic analysis of the writing samples, such as detailed tracking of error reduction, syntactic complexity, or genre development over time.

To address these limitations and extend current understanding, further research is needed. Experimental studies with control and treatment groups could more rigorously test the direct effects of journaling on specific writing outcomes. Longitudinal designs would help capture the sustained impact of journaling habits on students' writing proficiency, motivation, and metacognitive growth. Future research could also employ linguistic analysis tools to examine changes in grammatical accuracy, cohesion, or lexical diversity across journal entries. A comparative study between consistent and inconsistent journal writers may uncover patterns of engagement that influence learning outcomes. Additionally, exploring the impact of different types of feedback—teacher, peer, or automated—within journaling tasks could offer valuable insights into which formative assessment strategies most effectively support writing development in EFL contexts.

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