A STUDY ON STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING SHORT STORIES AT GRADE IX IN SMP NEGERI 4 PEMATANGSIANTAR

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ABSTRACT

Writing a short story in English requires students to coordinate vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction, idea development, and organization. This research aimed to identify the difficulties experienced by Grade IX students of SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar in writing English short stories and to explore the factors contributing to those difficulties. A descriptive qualitative design was employed. The participants were 32 students of Grade IX-1, all of whom completed an individual writing task; five of them were then selected through purposive sampling for semi-structured interviews. The students' written texts and the interview data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification), and credibility was supported through methodological triangulation. The findings show that difficulties appeared in four of the five aspects examined. Grammar was the most evident difficulty, reflected in inappropriate tense use, omission of auxiliary verbs, incorrect verb forms, and omission of articles. The students also had difficulties in constructing complete sentences, in developing initial ideas into more complete story content, and, in a small number of data, in using vocabulary appropriately. Organization was not identified as a specific difficulty because the students were generally able to arrange the main events in a recognizable sequence. The interviews indicated that the difficulties may be related to internal factors (low motivation, low self-confidence, writing anxiety, limited linguistic knowledge, and cognitive demands) and one external factor (limited writing practice).

Keywords: writing difficulties, short story writing, Grade IX students, descriptive qualitative research, English writing

ABSTRAK

Menulis cerita pendek dalam bahasa Inggris menuntut siswa untuk mengoordinasikan kosakata, tata bahasa, penyusunan kalimat, pengembangan ide, dan organisasi tulisan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kesulitan yang dialami siswa kelas IX SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar dalam menulis cerita pendek bahasa Inggris serta mengeksplorasi faktor-faktor yang berkontribusi terhadap kesulitan tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif. Partisipan penelitian adalah 32 siswa kelas IX-1 yang seluruhnya mengerjakan tugas menulis secara individu; lima siswa kemudian dipilih melalui purposive sampling untuk mengikuti wawancara semiterstruktur. Teks tulisan siswa dan data wawancara dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles dkk. (pengumpulan data, reduksi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan kesimpulan dan verifikasi), dan kredibilitas data diperkuat melalui triangulasi metodologis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan muncul pada empat dari lima aspek yang dikaji. Tata bahasa merupakan

kesulitan yang paling menonjol, yang tampak pada penggunaan bentuk lampau yang tidak tepat, penghilangan kata kerja bantu, bentuk kata kerja yang salah, dan penghilangan artikel. Siswa juga mengalami kesulitan dalam menyusun kalimat yang lengkap, mengembangkan ide awal menjadi isi cerita yang lebih lengkap, dan, pada sejumlah kecil data, menggunakan kosakata secara tepat. Organisasi tidak teridentifikasi sebagai kesulitan yang spesifik karena siswa pada umumnya mampu menyusun peristiwa utama dalam urutan yang dapat dikenali. Hasil wawancara menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan tersebut mungkin berkaitan dengan faktor internal (motivasi rendah, kepercayaan diri rendah, kecemasan menulis, keterbatasan pengetahuan linguistik, dan tuntutan kognitif) serta satu faktor eksternal, yaitu keterbatasan latihan menulis.

Kata Kunci: kesulitan menulis, penulisan cerita pendek, siswa kelas IX, penelitian kualitatif deskriptif, menulis bahasa Inggris

A. Introduction

Based on the Learning Outcomes (*Capaian Pembelajaran*) for English in Phase D of the Merdeka Curriculum, students are expected to communicate their ideas and experiences through various types of written and multimodal texts, using appropriate text structures and language features, including simple and compound sentences, to convey meaning effectively (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan [BSKAP], 2025). Meeting these expectations may be challenging, particularly when students must express, develop, and organize ideas in English.

Writing is a productive language skill that enables learners to communicate ideas, thoughts, and information through written language and involves a process of developing and producing a written text (Harmer, 2004, as cited in Khamouja, 2025). It is also a complex skill because learners need to integrate grammar, vocabulary, and the organization of ideas (Richards & Renandya, 2002, as cited in Hartshorn et al., 2023), which becomes more evident when they have to produce a specific type of text such as a short story, which is a brief form of prose fiction that generally focuses on a limited number of characters, a focused sequence of events, and a unified effect (Shaw, 1983, as cited in Hastuti et al., 2023). Writing a short story requires students to develop ideas into connected events, organize them into a coherent narrative, and use appropriate language, thus coordinating vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction, idea development, and organization.

Several studies indicate that junior high school students in Indonesia still experience difficulties in producing narrative texts. Yulianti et al. (2024) found that 60% of the junior high school students they studied did not achieve the minimum standard in narrative writing, with the greatest difficulties in content development, vocabulary, organization, and language use, and Sianturi et al. (2025) reported difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, content development, and text organization even though students' narrative writing ability was categorized as moderate. Studies of fiction and short story writing point in a similar direction: Pratiwi (2019) found difficulties in plot development, characterization, grammar, sentence structure, and word choice; Dewi and Siregar (2022) in determining topics, developing ideas, constructing plots, writing dialogues, and developing characters; Komalasari et al. (2024) in determining titles, developing themes, and expressing ideas; Bakar (2025) in developing the climax, falling action, and resolution; and Labira (2023) in grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, content, and organization. Difficulties in narrative and fiction writing thus involve both language-related aspects and the development and organization of ideas.

A preliminary observation by the researcher during the teaching practice internship program (*Program Pengenalan Lapangan*/PPL) at SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar is in line with these findings. Some students encountered difficulties when completing writing tasks in English, as indicated by their questions about how to express their ideas in English and how to develop them into written texts. Although some students already had ideas, they found it difficult to transfer them into English texts, resulting in products that were not yet clearly and coherently organized. A more systematic investigation of Grade IX students' difficulties in writing English short stories is therefore needed.

In this research, students' difficulties are examined through five aspects: vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction, idea development, and organization. Writing requires students to apply linguistic knowledge while developing and organizing their ideas (Muharmah & Fauzan, 2024), and difficulties in these areas may affect their ability to express ideas clearly and coherently

(Bulqiyah et al., 2021); vocabulary and grammar correspond to the microskills, and idea development and organization to the macroskills, described by Brown and Priyanvada (2019). To understand why such difficulties occur, the research also draws on Hamdani et al. (2025), who explain that students' writing difficulties may be related to motivation, self-confidence, writing anxiety, linguistic knowledge, cognitive difficulties, teaching strategies, writing practice, learning materials, and the classroom environment. These factors served as a framework for interpreting the interview data and were not assumed to be experienced by all students.

The previous studies were conducted with different participants and in different contexts, including primary school, university, and senior high school students, and they did not specifically examine Grade IX students in writing English short stories at SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar. The present research also explores the contributing factors through semi-structured interviews. It was guided by two research questions: (1) What difficulties do Grade IX students of SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar experience in writing English short stories? (2) What factors contribute to Grade IX students' difficulties in writing English short stories at SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar? Accordingly, its objectives were to identify the difficulties experienced by the students and to identify and analyze the factors contributing to them.

Theoretically, the findings are expected to contribute to the understanding of students' difficulties in English writing, particularly in short story writing, and to serve as a reference for future researchers. Practically, they are expected to give English teachers insights into the difficulties students encounter and the factors contributing to them, to support appropriate learning activities and instructional support.

B. Research Method

1. Research Design

This research employed a descriptive qualitative design. Descriptive research describes a phenomenon as it naturally occurs without manipulating the phenomenon or its setting (Sugiyono, 2022), and qualitative research explores the

meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem and presents its findings in words and descriptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The design suited the aims of the research: to describe the difficulties of Grade IX students in writing English short stories, identified from their texts in five aspects, and to explore the contributing factors through semi-structured interviews.

2. Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar (Jl. Kartini No. 4, Banjar, Siantar Barat District, Pematangsiantar City, North Sumatra), a junior high school with three grade levels, each consisting of nine classes of 32 students. Grade IX-1 was chosen because its students had experience in English learning activities and in writing English texts. All 32 students of Grade IX-1 participated in the writing task. After their texts had been analyzed, five students were selected through purposive sampling for semi-structured interviews, on the basis of the difficulties identified in their texts, so as to represent different types of writing difficulties.

3. Instruments and Data Collection

The researcher served as the main instrument because, in qualitative research, the researcher is directly involved in collecting, interpreting, and analyzing the data (Sugiyono, 2022). Supporting instruments were a writing task, a semi-structured interview, and documentation. In the writing task, the students individually wrote an English short story on a topic determined by the researcher; they were allowed to use dictionaries and were instructed to work independently. The written texts were the primary data source for the first research question.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five selected students after their texts had been analyzed. This technique yields rich and detailed information while allowing follow-up questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The interview guide, developed from the second research question and the internal and external factors discussed in the literature, consisted of eight questions on the students' experiences, feelings, and challenges in writing English short stories, their writing practice, and the help they received. The written texts thus provided information about the

difficulties, and the interviews provided information about the factors that may contribute to them.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014): data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The written texts were analyzed for difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction, idea development, and organization, while the interview data were transcribed, coded, and categorized according to the factors that emerged from the responses. The reduced data were displayed in tables and descriptive explanations, and the conclusions were verified by comparing the students' written texts and the interview results.

5. Trustworthiness of the Data

Of the four criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, this research focused primarily on credibility, which was established through triangulation, that is, comparing information from different sources or methods. Methodological triangulation was applied using three data collection techniques: writing tasks, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, the last of which supported and complemented the information from the other two.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discusses them in relation to the theories and previous studies reviewed above. The data consisted of the short stories written by 32 Grade IX students and the interviews with five selected students. Student codes (S1–S32) are used instead of names.

1. Students' Difficulties in Writing English Short Stories

The analysis of the students' short stories showed difficulties in four of the five aspects examined. Grammar was the most evident difficulty, followed by sentence construction, idea development, and vocabulary, whereas organization did not emerge as a strong difficulty. Table 1 summarizes the difficulties with their data numbers and student codes, and Table 2 presents selected examples.

Table 1 Students' Writing Difficulties Identified in the Short Stories

Aspect	Difficulty reflected in the written texts	Data	Students
Vocabulary	Spelling problems; inappropriate use of words according to the context	1–2	S19, S5
Grammar	Errors in grammatical forms and structures (inappropriate tense use, omission of auxiliary verbs, incorrect verb forms, omission of articles, subject–verb agreement, and others)	3–41	S1–S27, S31, S32
Sentence construction	Inability to construct complete and meaningful sentences (omission of the linking verb)	42–46	S3, S9, S13, S21, S26
Idea development	Initial ideas introduced but not elaborated into more complete story content	47–54	S5, S10, S13, S16, S6, S12, S14, S15
Organization	No data were classified as organization difficulties	–	–

Table 2 Selected Examples of Difficulties in the Students' Short Stories

Aspect	Student	Excerpt (as written)	Form of difficulty
Vocabulary	S19	"The mouse accidently stepped on lion."	Spelling problem ("accidently" for "accidentally")
Grammar	S1	"One day, a rabbit live in the forest."	Inappropriate tense use ("live" for "lived")
Grammar	S1	"He looking for food because he was very hungry."	Omission of the auxiliary verb "was"
Grammar	S2	"The tiger was hungry and wanted eat rabbit."	Omission of "to"; inappropriate verb construction
Sentence construction	S3	"Rabbit see tiger and very afraid."	Incomplete sentence construction (linking verb "was" omitted)
Sentence construction	S26	"The net finally broken."	Incomplete sentence construction (linking verb "was" omitted)
Idea development	S5	"I am not the best food. There is a bigger rabbit near the river."	Idea introduced but not developed further
Idea development	S10	"Rabbit think about something."	Idea expressed very generally, without elaboration

Vocabulary

Vocabulary difficulties were found in only a small number of data (Data 1–2): a spelling problem, as in S19's "accidently" for "accidentally," and an inappropriate use of a word according to the context, as in S5's "I am not the best food," said by a rabbit trying to convince a tiger not to eat him, where the intended meaning was that the rabbit was not good or suitable food. These findings are consistent with Isma and Rasmin (2023), who reported spelling problems and inappropriate contextual use of words among students' vocabulary

difficulties, and with Irzawati et al. (2017), who found that students may use inappropriate vocabulary because of inappropriate contextual use. Because they appeared in few data, they should not be overstated; they nevertheless show that some students found it difficult to select appropriate English words to convey their meanings, and limited vocabulary can hinder students' ability to express and develop ideas in written texts (Lin, 2023).

Grammar

Grammar was the most evident difficulty (Data 3–41). The errors included inappropriate use of past-tense forms, omission of auxiliary verbs, incorrect verb forms, omission of articles, and other grammatical problems. Because the stories were narrated in the past, many errors involved base-form verbs where past-tense forms were required, as in "One day, a rabbit live in the forest" (S1). Several students omitted the auxiliary verb "was," as in "He looking for food because he was very hungry" (S1); S2 omitted "to" in "wanted eat rabbit," S7 omitted the article in "There was rabbit in the forest," S4 and S11 used "don't" instead of "didn't," and S16 showed a lack of subject–verb agreement in "The story teach us that we must use our brain when we have a problem."

These examples suggest that some students had difficulty applying grammatical rules consistently when expressing events in their stories. This is consistent with Andleeb et al. (2025), who explain that grammar is important for producing clear and meaningful sentences because grammatical rules determine how words and sentence elements are arranged, with Kampookaew (2020), who found students' grammatical difficulties to include errors in the use of verbs and articles, and with Fitrawati and Dian (2021), who identified subject–verb agreement, tense, and articles among common errors. Difficulties in applying grammatical rules thus appear to have affected the accuracy of the students' stories.

Sentence Construction

Difficulties in sentence construction (Data 42–46) were reflected in the students' inability to construct complete and meaningful sentences, typically through the omission of the linking verb "was," as in "Rabbit see tiger and very afraid" (S3) and "The net finally broken" (S26). Some of these sentences were

also classified under grammar (for example, those of S3 and S13), because the omission of a linking verb is both a grammatical omission and an incomplete sentence structure. This is in line with Sermsook et al. (2017), who found that students made errors in sentence structure because of difficulties in organizing sentence elements and applying the rules of the target language. The omission of necessary elements affected the clarity of the students' intended meanings.

Idea Development

Difficulties in idea development (Data 47–54) were reflected in the students' limited ability to develop an initial idea into more complete story content. Several students mentioned that the rabbit had an idea, a plan, or a trick for escaping the tiger without explaining how it developed and then moved directly to the next event, as in "Rabbit think about something" (S10), "Rabbit then have an idea" (S15), and "He think of a trick" (S12). In S5's text, the idea of a bigger rabbit near the river was introduced to persuade the tiger to stop chasing the rabbit but was not elaborated. This is consistent with Bulqiyah et al. (2021), who found that students had difficulties in generating ideas, transferring them into English, and developing them into written content. The students could introduce an initial idea but had difficulty elaborating it, suggesting that a short story requires not only an initial idea but also its expansion into meaningful story content.

Organization

Organization did not appear as a specific difficulty, and no data were classified as organization difficulties. The students were generally able to arrange the main events of their stories in a recognizable sequence, from the beginning through the development of events to the ending. Although some students produced short texts and had weaknesses in connecting ideas and events, these weaknesses were not sufficient to classify organization as a specific writing difficulty. This differs from Do (2023), who found that students had difficulties in organizing ideas and linking sentences in their writing. The difference may be related to the nature of the writing task and to the students' ability to follow the basic sequence of events when writing short stories.

2. Factors Contributing to Students' Writing Difficulties

The semi-structured interviews with the five selected students revealed several factors that may contribute to the students' difficulties. In line with the theoretical distinction used in this research (Hamdani et al., 2025), they were grouped as internal factors, which relate to the students' individual conditions, abilities, and psychological characteristics, and external factors, which relate to the learning environment and instructional conditions. Five internal factors were identified (low motivation, low self-confidence, writing anxiety, limited linguistic knowledge, and cognitive demands) and one external factor (limited writing practice). Table 3 presents them with representative responses, which were given in Indonesian and are presented here in English translation.

Table 3 Factors Contributing to the Students' Writing Difficulties

Type	Factor	Representative response (English translation)	Students (Data)
Internal	Low motivation	"I actually like writing stories, Miss, but when I have to write in English, I become a little unmotivated because it is more difficult." (S2)	S2 (55)
Internal	Low self-confidence	"I am not very confident, Miss, especially when I have to make sentences on my own. I am afraid that my grammar will be wrong." (S5)	S2, S5 (56–57)
Internal	Writing anxiety	"I usually feel nervous, Miss, especially when there is only a little time. I am afraid that I will not finish." (S2)	S1, S2, S5 (58–60)
Internal	Limited linguistic knowledge	"I have the most difficulty with vocabulary, Miss. Sometimes I know the Indonesian word, but I do not know the English word." (S1)	S1, S2, S4, S5 (61–64)
Internal	Cognitive demands	"Thinking about the story is not too difficult, Miss. What is difficult is changing my ideas into English." (S1)	S1, S2, S3 (65–67)
External	Limited writing practice	"Not very often, Miss. Usually only when there is an English assignment." (S1)	S1, S3, S5 (68–70)
External	Teaching strategies; learning materials and resources; classroom environment	No sufficient evidence in the interview data to identify these as contributing factors	–

Internal Factors

Low motivation was expressed by S2, who liked writing stories but became less motivated when she had to write in English because it was more difficult. This suggests that the

perceived difficulty of English may reduce students' willingness to engage in writing, in line with Amrullah (2018), who identified motivation as a factor related to students' writing difficulties. Because only one of the five interviewed students expressed this factor, it should be interpreted with caution.

Low self-confidence was expressed by S2 and S5, who were not confident when writing independently and were afraid of making mistakes, particularly in grammar; S2 sometimes deleted what she had written for this reason. Such fear may make students hesitant to express their ideas in English, which is consistent with Zabihi (2018), who identified self-confidence as a factor associated with students' writing difficulties.

Writing anxiety was reported by S1, S2, and S5 as fear of making many mistakes and of producing a story that was not good (S1), nervousness under time pressure (S2), and panic about not knowing where to start (S5). Quvanch (2018) identifies writing anxiety as a factor associated with writing difficulties, and Ulya et al. (2025) likewise highlight anxiety as a factor that may affect students' writing performance. These responses suggest that anxiety may interfere with students' confidence and engagement while composing.

Limited linguistic knowledge was reported by S1, S2, S4, and S5, who had difficulty finding the English equivalents of Indonesian words, used the same words repeatedly, or had difficulty using correct verb forms and constructing sentences. Amrullah (2018) likewise identified limited linguistic knowledge as a factor related to writing difficulties. These reports correspond to the vocabulary, grammar, and sentence construction difficulties identified in the written texts, suggesting that insufficient knowledge of English linguistic features may affect students' ability to express ideas accurately in written form.

Cognitive demands were reported by S1, S2, and S3, who had difficulty changing their ideas into English, continuing a story after a few sentences, and developing a single idea into a complete story. This suggests that writing a short story requires managing several processes at once: thinking about the story, expressing ideas in English, and developing them into written content. It

is in line with Nurlatifah and Yusuf (2022), who explain that writing involves cognitive demands because learners must generate, organize, and express ideas while producing a text, and with the idea development difficulties identified in the texts.

External Factor

Limited writing practice was reported by S1, S3, and S5, who rarely wrote in English and usually did so only when the teacher gave an assignment; S3 also wrote more often in Indonesian. This is consistent with Luan et al. (2024), who identified writing practice as a factor related to writing difficulties. Limited practice may reduce students' opportunities to apply vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction, and idea development in actual writing.

Although the literature identifies teaching strategies, learning materials and resources, and the classroom environment as possible external factors (Hamdani et al., 2025), the interview data did not provide sufficient evidence that teaching strategies and learning materials and resources contributed directly to the students' difficulties, and no clear evidence indicated that the classroom environment did so. They are therefore not presented as findings of this research.

Taken together, the interviews indicate that the students' difficulties may be related to both internal and external factors, and that these factors are interconnected: limited linguistic knowledge made it difficult to express ideas in English, low self-confidence and writing anxiety made some students hesitant and concerned about making mistakes, and limited writing practice reduced their opportunities to develop their writing skills. The difficulties thus need to be understood in relation to the individual and learning conditions reflected in the interviews.

D. Conclusion

This research examined the difficulties experienced by Grade IX students of SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar in writing English short stories and the factors contributing to them. In answer to the first research question, the analysis of the written texts of 32 students showed difficulties in four of the five aspects examined: vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction, and idea development. Grammar was the most evident difficulty. The students

had difficulties in applying grammatical forms and structures, using appropriate vocabulary, constructing complete and meaningful sentences, and developing initial ideas into more complete stories. Organization was not identified as a specific difficulty because the students were generally able to arrange the main events of their stories in a recognizable sequence.

In answer to the second research question, the semi-structured interviews with five selected students indicated that the difficulties may be related to internal factors (low motivation, low self-confidence, writing anxiety, limited linguistic knowledge, and cognitive demands) and to one external factor (limited writing practice). The difficulties may thus be related not only to the students' writing abilities but also to their individual conditions and their opportunities to practice writing in English.

English teachers are encouraged to give more attention to the aspects identified as difficulties, particularly grammar, sentence construction, vocabulary, and idea development, and to give students more opportunities to practice writing English short stories, with appropriate guidance and feedback. Other researchers may conduct similar studies with different participants, settings, or contexts and explore other aspects related to students' writing difficulties and their contributing factors.

This research has several limitations. It was limited to 32 students of Grade IX-1 at SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar, the interview findings were drawn from five selected students, and only five aspects of writing were examined, so the findings may not represent other students, classes, or schools, and other relevant aspects may not have been covered.

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