

## Does journaling practice affect EFL students' writing ability?

Rusmiati Rusmiati<sup>1\*</sup>, Kin Maharami<sup>2</sup>, Shaumiwaty Shaumiwaty<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UIN Ar-Raniry, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>IAIN Takengon, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author. Email: [rusmiati.rus@ar-raniry.ac.id](mailto:rusmiati.rus@ar-raniry.ac.id)

### Abstract

Finding ideas to write about is a common challenge for many EFL learners in developing their writing skills. This study aimed to investigate whether writing about daily activities (i.e., journaling) improves the writing ability of EFL students at a junior high school in Aceh Tengah. A quantitative, experimental research design was employed. The sample consisted of 46 eighth-grade students, with 22 in the experimental group and 24 in the control group. Pre- and post-tests were used to measure the students' performance before and after the intervention. Results showed that the experimental group's mean score increased significantly from 48 (pre-test) to 82 (post-test). A t-test analysis revealed that  $t(44) = 4.92, p < .05$ , indicating a significant difference between the groups. This result suggests that journaling practice had a statistically significant positive effect on the EFL students' writing ability.

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the significant skills required to be possessed by students to reach success in their academic world. The learners' mastery of knowledge will be assessed among other is in the form of writing (Baresh, 2022; Russilawatie, 2016). Thus, it could be said that the competence in writing can be the way to the learners' achievement in the future. Glazier (1994: 3) contended, "Being able to write in English is essential in college, and it probably will be an asset in your career." (Glazier, 1994).

In a productive skill such as writing, idea is the fundamental component to be possessed by EFL students (Rusmiati, 2019). It is the initial asset to successfully produce a piece of writing. The idea is then expressed by necessarily involving a number of aspects like a rich vocabulary, knowledge of grammar and the mechanics of writing (Bitchener, 2008) to make its message appropriately attained by its readers. Those aspects must be fulfilled in writing to avoid misunderstanding (Rusmiati, 2022) by the readers since the information was only obtained from a series of printed words, without a chance of direct confirmation or paying attention to tone, voice, or expression (Nunan, 1999). The above various aspects which must be met in writing in order to convey the message properly make it as a challenging skill in learning English for most EFL learners (Fhona & Rusmiati, 2015; Sudirman et al., 2021; Yüce, 2020). This is probably the rationale why writing proficiency is usually acknowledged as the final language ability to be learned for both native language speakers and foreign or second language (EFL&ESL) learners (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006).

Writing is a skill which need to be practiced regularly since the more a learner writes the better writing will be produced (Tuan, 2010) as argued by Kelly that writing is like learning to play an instrument; the more one practices, the more proficient one will become (Kelly & Gargagliano,

2001). One of ways to writing better is by journaling (or diary) practice. Plentiful research has been investigated pertaining to the application of diary in learning writing. To begin with, by applying one group pre-test and post-test design of experimental method to tenth-grade students of senior high schools, diary writing was found to be effective in improving the students' skill in writing (Anggraini et al., 2021; Ningrum & Rita, 2013). Another study to tenth-grade learners of a vocational school also displayed that this technique was effective to improve their writing ability (Turrahma, 2018). In addition, a classroom-action-research study revealed that university students showed their writing improvement in the aspects generic structure, content, grammar, mechanic, and vocabulary by points 4.2, 5.6, 10.2, 5.2, 6.8, and 7.1 successively by using diary strategy (Autila & Theresia, 2018). In Vietnam, an experimental study unveiled that journal writing practice was beneficial as an extensive activity to develop students' writing motivation and skill as well as to build a close bonding between teachers and learners (Tuan, 2010).

While several studies of English writing had been conducted in Aceh Tengah context (Batubara et al., 2024; Herwanis et al., 2021; Kardi Wahyuningsih, 2022; Putri (2021); Zakaria et al., 2021), the investigation of journaling practice was scarcely found. Therefore, it was viewed as a need that the present study applied journaling practice considering the benefits that writing journal has brought to English writing classes. The application was to revive the EFL learners' writing habit which was expected to improve their writing ability. The objective of the study; therefore, was to find out whether journaling writing practice improve the EFL learners' writing ability.

## **Writing**

Writing can be defined as an activity that promotes learners to concentrate on using language correctly and stimulates language development as they work through challenges that are mentally generated (Harmer, 2017). While Richards and Renandya argue that writing skills involve complex skills such as spelling, punctuation, word choice, and so on (Richard & Renandya, 2012). In addition, writing is a productive skill aside from speaking; however, they have different focus and emphasis in their form. Speaking involves using vocal characteristics like pitch, stress, and rhythm to communicate concepts. To effectively convey information, gestures and facial expressions are also necessary. While in writing, writers must rely on the words on the page in order to convey their message through writing (Raimes, 2014; Rusmiati, 2022; Soffiany & Purbani, 2020).

Writing is not an instant work, but entails several stages which is called writing process to produce a piece of writing. There are four steps in the writing process: planning, drafting, editing (reflecting and revising), and final version (Harmer, 2017). First, planning is the stage where learners generate some ideas that they are going to write down. By taking notes or organizing all of their planning in their heads, students start to gather knowledge and ideas for their writing. Students should think about three important issues when planning. These are the writing's goal, the readership it is intended for, and the content's organization, which arranges the facts. The concept or contention that they have chosen to present. Then, drafting which is the learners' initial attempt at putting ideas on paper. They jot down rough ideas for the topic they will write about at this point without checking for mistakes.

The next stage is editing (reflecting and revising). In this stage, students review their drafts to determine what worked and what did not after they have finished writing. Maybe the sentence is unclear or the material is presented in an unclear order. Editing can be based on written or spoken feedback from instructors or peers. They will support the learners in editing their writing. Revising is looking back at what has been written; verifying the concepts provided, preserving the writing's consistency and flow, inspiring new ideas, and identifying mistakes are all crucial. Lastly, the final version in which the learners make changes to their work after editing. After going through multiple stages, the final product may not seem exactly like the first draft. As directed by the teacher, students can post text on a bulletin board or publish, share, or read their writing. Since they are all necessary components of creating a well-written document, the aforementioned writing processes cannot be skipped.

## **Journaling**

A journal, sometimes known as a diary (these two terms will be found interchangeably in this current study), is a notebook in which individuals can record anything they prefer, including their emotions, ideas, and experiences (Bazir, 2016). Other than these two terms, log is also used to represent the idea of journaling practice (Alterman, 1965; Hiemstra, 2001). There are various advantages of journaling practice in English language teaching to develop EFL learners' English mastery. To begin with, it can improve learners' ability in writing (Dincel & Savur, 2018; El-Koumy, 2013; Marefat, 2002; Putri et al., 2015). The implementation of writing journal also can establish student-teacher rapport which may motivate learners to learn more about communication (Peyton J. K., 1988; Porter et al., 1990). In addition, the learners were given the chance to freely and privately express themselves without feeling ashamed of the nature of their issues or the limitations of their language (El-Koumy, 2013). They also become better thinkers through the elaboration of their own thoughts which can in turn enhance their speaking skill (El-Koumy, 2013).

Furthermore, journal writing expands communication beyond the typical boundaries of the classroom and fosters more opportunities for interaction between students and teachers (Peyton & Reed, 1990; Rodliyah, 2019). Additionally, keeping a journal helps personalize language instruction, which helps lower-ability pupils become more proficient communicators (El-Koumy, 2013). In addition, the practice of journaling also has a positive effect on students' grammar knowledge and vocabulary, enhances their confidence in writing, and reduces anxiety (Al Kayed et al., 2020; Liao & Wong, n.d.; Rasouli & Shoari, 2015; Rokni & Seifi, 2013).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed experimental research method in which the researcher administers treatment to participant groups and then assesses the impact of each group's treatment (Lodico et al., 2006). In addition, quasi experimental design was appropriately applied in the current study in which the subjects could not be randomly assigned to either experimental or control group (Gopalan et al., 2020). However, the absence of randomization in participant selection might indicate that the findings reflect class-specific characteristics.

### **Participants**

The participants involved in this study were 46 eighth-grade students (19 males and 27 females) coming from class VIIIA classified as experimental group (22 students: 8 males and 14 females) and VIIIB classified as control group (24 students: 11 males and 13 females). In selecting the participants, total sampling was used since all the population became the sample in the present study. They were at the tenth-grade in the 2021/2022 academic year in a junior high school in Aceh Tengah at the time of the study. Since the present study implemented total sampling in which the entire population (46 students) was included, this small sample size may limit the generalization of the research finding to broader context which means it might only be applied to this school.

### **Data Collection**

The data required in the current study were obtained from test. It was given twice: one at the beginning of the study to identify the initial learners' writing ability (pre-test), while the other at the end of the study after the intervention of the journaling practice (post-test). The students' worksheets from the two tests were then scored using the five aspects: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics (Brown, 2015). The time allocated for the test was 45 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

The scores of the students from both tests were then analysed by using descriptive statistics to give a description of how was the performance of each group before and after the intervention, whether or not there was improvement and how was the improvement of both groups, whether one group outperformed the other one. Afterwards, the data were also analysed using t formula to test the previously proposed hypothesis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### Result of Writing Test in Control Group

##### Pre-Test

Pre-test was carried out at the beginning of the study to find out the students' initial learning ability in writing before the intervention (Figure 1).

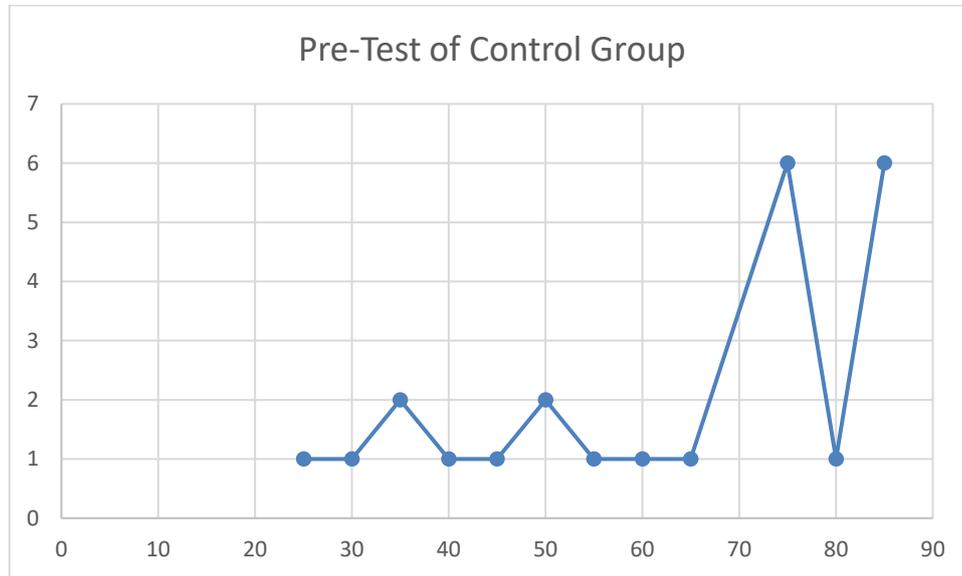


Figure 1. Control Group Pre-Test Results

The graph displayed that the learners' scores was regarded as low, with the average ewas 63. The whole scores obtained from the pre-test were 25 and 30 (each 1 student), 35 (2 students), 40 and 45 (each 1 student), 50 (2 students), 55, 60, and 65 (each 1 student), 75 (6 students), 80 (1 student), and 85 (6 students). The maximum was 85 and the minimum was 25.

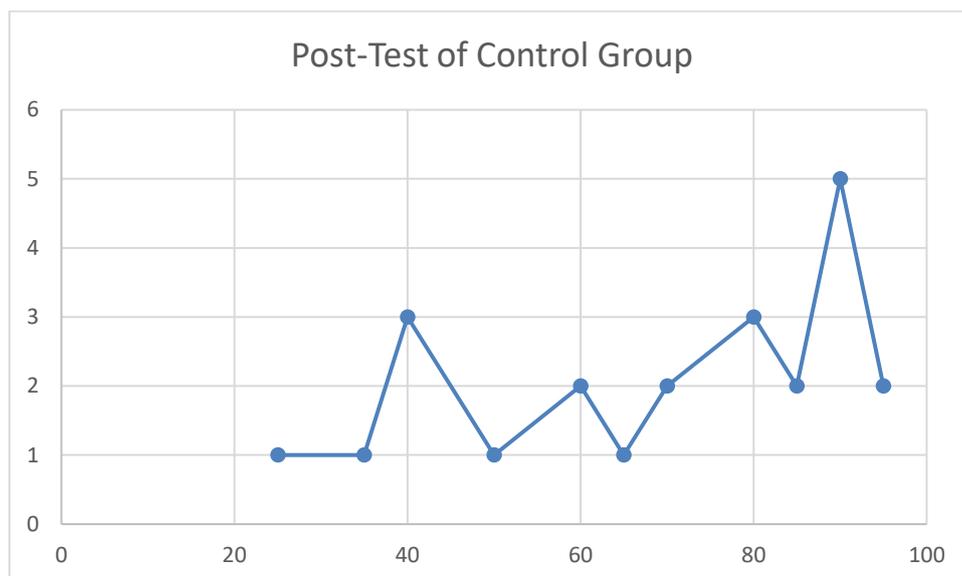


Figure 2. Control Group Post-Test Results

### Post-Test

Post-test was performed to obtain the students' performance after the intervention was implemented, as shown in Figure 2. The figure depicted that there was a little improvement from the previous test result. The average obtained from the test was 70. The scores found from this test were: 25 and 35 (each 1 student), 40 (3 students), 50 (1 student), 60 (2 students), 65 (1 student), 70(2 students), 75 (1 student), 80 (3 students), 85 (2 students), 90 (5 students), and 95 (2 students). The highest score in this test was 95, and the lowest one was 25.

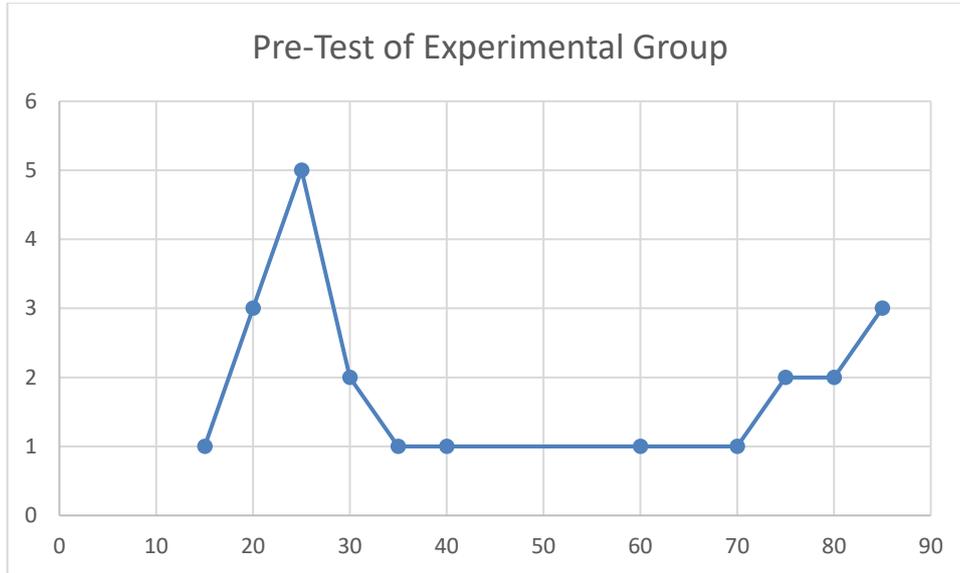


Figure 3. Experimental Group Pre-Test Results

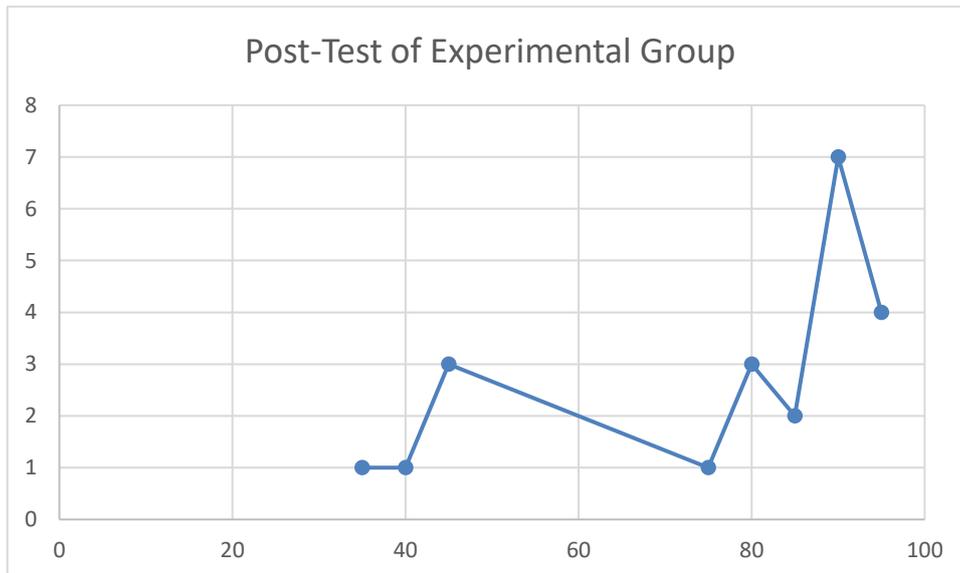


Figure 4. Experimental Group Post-Test Results

### **Result of Writing Test in Experimental Group**

#### **Pre-Test**

Pre-test in the experimental group was implemented to get a description of the learners' writing ability prior to the implementation of journaling practice. It was carried out on Monday, May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2023. The result was illustrated in Figure 3.

The figure showed that the learners' score in writing was low in the pre-test, with the mean value was 48. The scores obtained from this test were 15 (1 student), 20 (3 students), 25 (5 students), 30 (2 students), 35, 40, 60 and 70 (each 1 student), 75 (2 students), 80 (2 students), and 85 (3 students). The maximum score was 85 and the minimum was 15.

#### **Post-Test**

Post-test was administered to the students in the experimental group to obtain the information of their writing skill subsequent to the practice of writing journal, as illustrated in Figure 4. The figure showed a notable improvement made by the students in the experimental group after the intervention of journal writing practice. It could be seen that the average score was 82. The result gotten from this test as follows: 35 and 40 (each 1 student), 45 (3 students), 75 (1 student), 80 (3 students), 85 (2 students), 90 (7 students), and 95 (4 students), with 95 was the highest score and 35 was the lowest one.

From the description above, it could be noticed that both control and experimental groups made improvements from pre-test to post-test after the treatment with or without journal writing practice. Nonetheless, the learners of EG proved to make a significant rise. Their writing ability increased by 34 points (from 48 to 82), while the learners of CG increase their score by 7 points (from 63 to 70). The significant increase could have been led by the application of journal writing practice.

Furthermore, the data were also analyzed by applying t formula regarding hypothesis testing. The result displayed that t-test was 4.92 and t-table was 2.3 at the significance level 0.05. The decision making was based on the criteria that  $H_0$  was rejected and  $H_a$  was accepted when t-test score  $>$  t-table and conversely, when t-test score  $<$  t-table then  $H_0$  was accepted and  $H_a$  was rejected. Based on the result, it was obvious that t-test was greater than t-table indicating that  $H_0$  was rejected and  $H_a$  was accepted. Therefore, journal writing practice increased the learners' writing ability.

### **Discussion**

The present study was aimed at finding whether the practice of writing journal could increase the students' ability in writing. The finding revealed that there was a positive causal link between journaling and the students' writing ability. The applied strategy successfully improved the learners' performance in writing. This finding supported the preceding studies (Anggraini et al., 2021; Autila & Theresia, 2018; Ningrum & Rita, 2013; Tuan, 2010; Turrahma, 2018) which found journaling or diary to be effective in enhancing the students' writing ability.

In addition, an earlier study also found that writing journal improved writing skill, built writing habit, boosted confidence, means for self-expression, and promote student-teacher interaction (Rodliyah, 2019). Similarly, a study in 2020 also showed that the learners who experienced writing journal were able to improve their writing significantly in terms of vocabulary, organization, and grammar. They developed positive attitudes towards writing better than the students who were exposed only to conventional teaching methods of writing (Al Kayed et al., 2020). In addition, the latest research also found the positive effect of journal writing, i.e. the treatment made improvement of the learners who passed the passing grade, from 42% to 86% after they practiced writing journal (Mudakir et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the pre-test and post-test results provided a more thorough examination of the influence journaling had on the students' writing abilities in the current study. One group's results were significantly different from the other's. It showed that the EFL students' writing skills differed significantly from one another. It was demonstrated by this study that students who included journal writing in their writing practice performed better than those who did not.

In addition, the deeper analysis of the impact that the journaling brought to the students' writing skill in the present study could be seen from the pre-test and post-test result. One group showed a very contrastive result to the other. It indicated that there was a significant gap of the EFL students in their writing ability. This study showed that the presence of the journal writing practice could make the students who implemented it outperform those who did not apply it in their writing practice.

The technique has emphasized the significant influence on the writing proficiency of Indonesian EFL students. They were able to write better by writing the ideas recommended in the diary practice, such as daily activities or expressing thoughts in writing. It worked as a remedy for the learners' difficulty in coming up with ideas for writing when they were learning how to write.

The intervention applied to the experimental group led the learners upgrade their writing score from pre-test to post-test by 34 points. Therefore, it can be said that the improvement was aided by the intervention. The students' writing values showed a substantial divergence, indicating that the journaling practice implementation had a profound impact on the students' writing.

Although journaling has been shown to improve writing skills, it is important to compare the results to other approaches to enhancing EFL writing abilities. For instance, prior research has demonstrated the impact of peer review, in which students are able to improve their writing by providing feedback to one another (Fatimah & Madya, 2020; Min, 2006; Tsui & Ng, 2000). Furthermore, blogging and collaborative online tools are examples of digital writing platforms that have been shown to enhance writing by encouraging originality, offering immediate feedback, and reaching a broader audience (Sun, 2010; Warschauer, 2010). Incorporating such comparisons highlights how journaling stands relative to other strategies and adds depth to the discussion on improving EFL writing.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examined the influence of journaling practice to the learners' writing ability. It was applied in the context of the learners' problem in finding the ideas to write. The study has proved that the journal practice successfully increased the students' score in their writing subsequent to the intervention. In other words, the quality of the learners' writing improved due to the presence of journal writing practice. It was displayed in the learners' notable enhancement in their last performance which signified very contrastive result prior to the application of journal writing. Accordingly, the implementation of journaling has helped the students overcome their writing difficulties by showing the improvement of their score in writing.

Nonetheless, this research has limitations in terms of the data gathering through test and the research participant which was limited to the EFL junior high school. Therefore, it is suggested to improve the research in the future by conducting a similar study to different level of students such as elementary and tertiary level (university students) which were still scarcely investigated and applying various data collection techniques.

For the EFL educators of any level in ELT, it is recommended to apply the journal writing practice as one of their students' assignments or additional activities either in or out of classroom in an effort to improve the learners' English skill, particularly writing. This practice is essential to fostering a better learning environment and encouraging students to express their ideas more freely and effectively. To conclude, the findings of this study highlight the significance of journal writing in improving writing skills.

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