Development of a Narrative Writing Skills Assessment Rubric through Differentiated Instruction for Junior Secondary School

Husnul Khotimah, Ninuk Lustyantie , Fathiaty Murtadho

Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia
*Corresponding author, e-mail: husnul.khotimah1@mhs.unj.ac.id

Abstract
The development of a narrative writing assessment rubric based on differentiated instruction serves as a solution to the need for an evaluation instrument that is responsive to the diversity of junior high school students. Using the Research and Development (R&D) approach by Borg & Gall, the rubric was designed with five assessment dimensions and validated by experts. Reliability testing was conducted using Cohen's Kappa, and its effectiveness was examined through a paired t-test. The results showed a significant improvement in the quality of students' writing, particularly in text structure and grammar. Questionnaire and interview data further confirmed that the rubric provided clarity in assessment and increased student motivation and participation. Teachers found the rubric helpful for conducting objective and consistent evaluations. This rubric supports the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes an inclusive and differentiated instructional approach.

Keywords: Assessment Rubric, Narrative Writing, Differentiated Instruction, Kurikulum Merdeka, Junior Secondary School

Introduction

Writing is one of the fundamental language skills that students must master, particularly within the context of English language learning at the junior secondary school level. Writing is not merely a matter of copying or recording information, but rather a complex cognitive process that reflects how individuals organize, structure, and develop ideas in a logical and communicative manner. Through writing activities, students are trained not only to express their thoughts in written form but also to appropriately apply grammatical structures, vocabulary, and linguistic conventions. (Hyland, 2003) argues that strong writing skills form a critical foundation for effective academic communication, especially in second language instruction.

One of the key writing skills emphasized in English learning at the junior high school level is narrative writing. Narrative texts possess a specific structure involving sequences of events, characters, and settings, usually organized into orientation, complication, and resolution stages (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Through narrative writing, students are expected to construct coherent storylines and effectively communicate their ideas to readers. (Harmer, 2007)emphasizes that narrative writing is not merely about telling stories; it also requires language management, structural control, and creativity. Therefore, narrative writing serves as a vital medium to train both linguistic and critical thinking skills.

Nevertheless, many junior secondary students still encounter considerable challenges in producing quality English narrative texts. These difficulties stem not only from limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge but also from a lack of ability to systematically organize ideas, build logical plots, and understand proper narrative structures (Ferris, 2003) (Nation, 2009). These variations in writing ability are often influenced by factors such as learning styles, socioeconomic background, and individual motivation. Consequently, student writing output tends to be highly varied—even within the same classroom.

To accommodate such diversity, teachers need instructional approaches that are responsive to individual student needs. One effective approach for addressing these challenges is differentiated instruction. (Tomlinson, 2014) defines differentiated instruction as the process of modifying teaching strategies based on students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. This approach involves adjusting content, processes, and learning products to ensure all students can access and engage with learning according to their unique characteristics. It also aligns with the principles of inclusive education, which stress the importance of embracing diversity within the learning process.

In the context of narrative writing, implementing differentiated instruction requires assessment tools that can fairly and accurately capture variations in student performance. Rubrics are among the most effective evaluation instruments for this purpose. Rubrics offer explicit and systematic criteria for assessing student writing and enable teachers to provide specific and constructive feedback (Andrade, 2005) &(Brown, 2007). A well-designed rubric outlines the key dimensions to be assessed—such as content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics—along with descriptions of performance levels for each.

However, many writing rubrics used in English classrooms remain generic, "one-size-fits-all" tools that fail to address classroom diversity. According to (Popham, 2017b) and (Brookhart, 2013), decontextualized rubrics can undermine the validity and reliability of assessments and risk creating a disconnect between student abilities and teacher expectations. When students feel unable to meet generalized assessment standards, they may lose motivation, experience frustration, and fail to progress effectively.

This has created an urgent need to develop writing assessment rubrics that are not only valid and reliable but also integrated with the principles of differentiated instruction. Such rubrics are expected to support teachers in assessing students' narrative writing more fairly, accurately, and in alignment with inclusive learning objectives. McMillan (2013) and (Nitko & Brookhart, 2014) note that rubrics grounded in differentiation principles encourage more active and reflective student learning, as students feel more recognized and valued as unique individuals.

These previous studies reveal a critical gap: rubrics are rarely aligned with differentiated instruction principles. Addressing this shortfall, the current study aims to develop an English narrative writing assessment rubric specifically grounded in the differentiated instruction framework.

Methodologically, the study adopts a Research and Development (R&D) approach based on the (Borg & Gall, 2003)model. Key stages include preliminary field studies to identify problems and needs, rubric design, expert validation, limited field testing, and product revision based on empirical data. The study involves English teachers and eighth-grade students as test subjects, with data collected through observation, questionnaires, interviews, and documentation.

The study hypothesizes: "A differentiated instruction-based English narrative writing assessment rubric improves the effectiveness of student learning evaluations compared to conventional rubrics." The independent variable is the differentiated rubric, while the dependent variables include assessment quality and student writing outcomes. Rubric effectiveness is measured by content validity, usability, and its impact on student motivation and narrative writing ability.

There is an urgent need to develop differentiation-based rubrics. This urgency stems from both the gaps in the literature and the real-world challenges faced by English teachers in diverse classrooms. The findings of this research may also serve as a key reference for educators, curriculum developers, and educational researchers aiming to design assessment models aligned with contemporary educational needs.

In the framework of 21st-century learning, literacy skills are a crucial indicator of youth readiness to face global challenges. One key aspect of literacy is language literacy, which includes writing as a productive skill essential to thinking, reasoning, and idea communication. Thus, the development of writing skills is not merely a curricular demand but a strategic necessity in human capital development. This aligns with the Kurikulum Merdeka's goal to emphasize personalized learning and the strengthening of students' essential competencies, including critical thinking and communication.

In this context, differentiated instruction is highly relevant, given that current educational paradigms prioritize meaningful learning processes over uniform achievement outcomes. (Tomlinson, 2014) & Imbeau (2010) assert that in a responsive learning environment, differences are not obstacles but sources of strength for building inclusive classroom dynamics. Thus, instruction that values readiness, learning styles, and student interests is key to establishing an equitable and high-quality education system.

However, the success of differentiated instruction is heavily reliant on teachers' ability to design and utilize assessment tools that genuinely reflect student learning progress. Assessment should no longer be

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viewed merely as a measurement of learning outcomes but as an integral component of the learning process itself. In this regard, rubrics are essential—they not only communicate results but also illuminate how learning unfolds and identify areas for improvement. Rubric-based assessments also enable teachers to deliver formative feedback systematically and transparently, which is vital for fostering continuous learning growth (Brookhart, 2013) &(Andrade, 2005).

Unfortunately, a gap remains between the principles of differentiated instruction and actual assessment practices. Many teachers struggle to design rubrics that truly reflect student diversity. Some still rely on one-dimensional, inflexible assessment formats, leading to bias and limiting student potential (Popham, 2017a). Moreover, overly generic rubrics often overlook key indicators relevant to narrative writing competencies—such as character and conflict development, plot coherence, and inter-paragraph consistency.

To strengthen its foundation, this study adopts the concept of constructive alignment by(Biggs & Tang, 2007). This principle stresses the importance of aligning assessments with learning objectives and instructional practices. Accordingly, the rubric designed in this study will be structured to reflect the core elements of differentiated instruction, ensuring coherence between what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is assessed.

Operational definitions of the study's key terms are provided to clarify its scope. First, an assessment rubric is defined as a systematically arranged set of evaluation criteria for judging the quality of a product or performance, typically presented in a table format with defined achievement levels (Andrade, 2005). Second, narrative writing skill refers to the ability to craft a text that recounts an event or experience using clear narrative structure—orientation, complication, resolution—supported by appropriate vocabulary and grammar (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Third, differentiated instruction refers to an educational approach that tailors the content, process, and product of learning based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014).

In the literature review, several studies have highlighted the value of rubrics in improving students' writing skills. For example, (Zhang, 2011) found that systematic rubric use significantly enhanced writing quality by clarifying teacher expectations. However, this study did not connect rubric use with differentiation principles. Meanwhile, Hall, Strangman, & Meyer (2003) found that differentiated writing instruction increased student motivation and achievement but did not develop aligned assessment tools.

Therefore, this study addresses both practical classroom needs for adaptive assessment rubrics and theoretical advancement in differentiation-based evaluation models. It also aims to produce a valid, reliable, and usable tool for junior secondary English teachers as part of a more inclusive writing instruction strategy.

This study seeks to answer the following key questions: (1) What are the characteristics of an English narrative writing rubric aligned with differentiated instruction? (2) How can the rubric be developed and validated to meet standards of validity and reliability? and (3) To what extent does the rubric improve the quality of narrative writing instruction in junior secondary schools? These questions are critical to bridging the gap between theory and practice and to driving innovation in language learning assessment.

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the development of inclusive, fair, and contextual assessment practices. The results will not only enrich the field of English language education but also offer concrete solutions for teachers implementing responsive and differentiated writing instruction. Furthermore, it may serve as a model for rubric development in other skill areas requiring differentiation-based approaches.

Method

This study adopted a Research and Development (R&D) approach, drawing upon the model proposed by(Borg & Gall, 2003), to develop and validate an English narrative writing assessment rubric based on differentiated instruction for junior secondary school students. The objective was to construct an assessment tool that is valid, reliable, and applicable in inclusive learning environments responsive to student diversity.

The research involved two English teachers and 60 eighth-grade students from SMP IT Nurul Qolbi, selected via purposive sampling based on three criteria: implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, experience in teaching narrative writing, and commitment to participating in the rubric trial. The main instrument was a rubric aligned with differentiated instruction principles, using a four-point Likert scale (excellent, good, fair, poor) and evaluating five key dimensions: narrative structure, character and conflict development, coherence, grammar and vocabulary, and writing mechanics. Expert validation was conducted by three professionals specializing in English education, assessment, and differentiated pedagogy.

Supporting instruments included teacher observation sheets, student questionnaires, interviews, and student work documentation. The research took place over two months (April–May 2025) and comprised five stages: (1) needs analysis, (2) rubric design, (3) expert validation, (4) limited classroom testing, and (5) rubric revision. Classroom implementation allowed for real-time data collection and rubric application.

Data analysis combined qualitative and quantitative methods. (Aiken, 1985)Content validity was measured using Aiken's V, while inter-rater reliability was tested using Cohen's Kappa. Student perception data from questionnaires were analyzed descriptively, and teacher interviews were examined thematically. The study assumes that writing performance is influenced by students' motivation, readiness, and learning styles, reinforcing the need for differentiated assessment.

To assess rubric effectiveness, a paired sample t-test compared pre- and post-implementation writing scores, with significance set at $p < 0.05$. Additionally, content analysis evaluated qualitative improvements in student writing based on rubric criteria.

The methodology section is intentionally integrated rather than segmented to maintain coherence. This transparent exposition of the R&D process enhances replicability and contributes to empirical knowledge in differentiated assessment design for English instruction at the junior secondary level.

Results and Discussion

This study aimed to develop a narrative writing assessment rubric based on differentiated instruction and to examine its effectiveness in enhancing the narrative writing skills of eighth-grade junior high school students. Findings from a sample of 60 students revealed significant improvements across five dimensions of narrative writing: narrative text structure, character and conflict development, story coherence, grammar and vocabulary, and writing mechanics. A paired sample t-test showed that all dimensions demonstrated statistically significant score increases ($p < 0.05$) between pretest and posttest, suggesting that the rubric had a measurable impact on student performance.
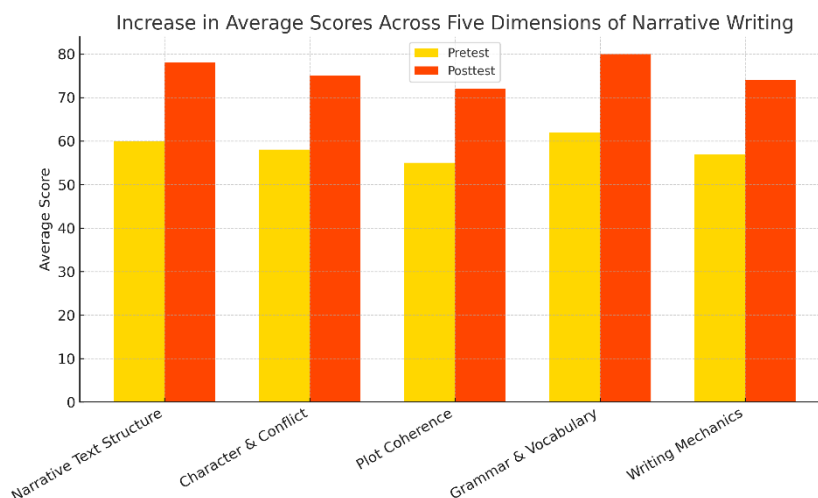

Figure 1. Increase in Average Scores Across Five Dimensions of Narrative Writing

The most notable improvement was observed in the grammar and vocabulary dimension, where the average score increased from 62 to 80. This indicates that the presence of specific assessment indicators successfully guided students in using appropriate sentence structures and vocabulary. Significant gains were also evident in the dimensions of narrative text structure and the development of characters and conflict. This suggests that students gained a better understanding of basic narrative structures and were able to create more complex and relevant characters and conflicts.

The most substantial improvement occurred in the grammar and vocabulary dimension, where average scores rose from 62 to 80. This suggests that the rubric's explicit indicators guided students in using more appropriate sentence structures and vocabulary choices. Improvements were also notable in narrative structure and character/conflict development, which may indicate students' growing understanding of story elements and narrative coherence. According to (Harmer, 2007), transparent assessment criteria can help

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students focus more effectively on learning goals, which potentially contributes to higher performance outcomes.

Instead of simply acting as a grading tool, the rubric likely functioned as a formative learning scaffold. (Brookhart, 2013)emphasizes that well-designed rubrics can promote self-regulated learning by making success criteria visible, thus encouraging reflection, goal setting, and iterative revision. In line with this, student questionnaire responses showed that the majority of learners found the rubric helpful in understanding both what and how to write. They reported improved confidence in outlining, selecting vocabulary, and self-editing drafts, which aligns with Zimmerman's (2002) model of self-regulated learning that highlights metacognitive planning and self-monitoring as essential to writing development.

Teacher interview data further corroborated the utility of the rubric. Educators noted that the structured criteria facilitated more objective, consistent assessments, especially in subjective dimensions such as coherence and conflict resolution. Several teachers observed a positive shift in student independence and motivation, which could be explained through the lens of Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000), where clarity of expectations and autonomy-supportive environments are linked to increased intrinsic motivation.

Nonetheless, limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the small sample and limited geographic scope (two junior high schools in Bekasi Regency) constrain the generalizability of the findings. Second, the short intervention period (two months) limits insights into the long-term impact of rubric usage on students' writing habits and outcomes. Third, while the rubric was designed following principles of differentiated instruction, the study did not directly measure individual differences such as learning styles, prior ability, or motivational orientation that might influence rubric effectiveness.

Future studies should consider longitudinal designs involving diverse school contexts to explore whether rubric use fosters sustained improvements in student writing quality. Additionally, future research could integrate instruments that assess the relationship between rubric usage, metacognitive development, and student motivation. For instance, using tools such as the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) or metacognitive awareness inventories may yield deeper insights into how assessment tools shape learner engagement and self-regulation in writing (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990).

In conclusion, this study provides empirically grounded insights into the use of differentiated instruction-based rubrics in narrative writing assessment. While causality cannot be definitively established, the findings indicate that the rubric contributed to improvements in writing performance and pedagogical practice. The rubric demonstrated reliability, validity, and pedagogical relevance in supporting student-centered assessment practices consistent with the Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes flexibility, differentiation, and inclusivity in learning. Further research is warranted to refine these tools and evaluate their impact across varied instructional settings.

Conclusion

The narrative writing assessment rubric developed through a differentiated instruction approach offers a significant contribution to enhancing the quality of evaluation in heterogeneous classrooms. By presenting assessment indicators that are more inclusive and adaptive to students' individual characteristics, the rubric not only facilitates teachers in conducting more objective and transparent evaluations but also encourages students to better understand learning expectations and independently develop their writing potential. The findings of this study reinforce the urgency of aligning assessment with the principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes student-centered learning and values diversity. More than just an evaluation tool, this differentiated rubric broadens the horizons of pedagogical practice and contributes to the language education literature by offering a contextual, practical, and student-focused approach to assessment that supports each learner's academic growth.

To ensure its broader implementation, education stakeholders are encouraged to integrate this rubric into teacher training programs and curriculum workshops, enabling educators to confidently apply differentiated assessment practices in real classroom settings.

Acknowledgment

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