

REPRESENTING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN EFL STUDENTS' NARRATIVE WRITING: LANGUAGE CHOICE AND PLOT STRUCTURAL PATTERNS

Junaid¹, Anin Asnidar²
Muhammadiyah University of Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia

junaid@unismuh.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine patterns of personal experience representation in undergraduate students' narrative writing, focusing on (1) language choice, including diction, register, and personalization, and (2) story plot structure, encompassing chronological plots, flashbacks, and narrative turning points. The study employs a descriptive quantitative design using quantitative content analysis of students' narrative texts. Each text was analyzed using a structured coding scheme that classified linguistic features. The study has several limitations, including a relatively small sample size and a context limited to a single institution. The sample consisted of 30 undergraduate students from the English Language Education program at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar (N = 30). Data were drawn from one study program and one institution only, and the analysis focused on narrative text products without in-depth exploration of students' cognitive writing processes, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Data were collected through quantitative content analysis of 30 narrative writing tasks, supplemented by a short reflective questionnaire. The results reveal two dominant patterns. First, the use of highly interpersonal language, characterized by frequent first-person pronouns and emotional expressions, is positively correlated with retrospective plots or flashbacks. Second, the use of formal-descriptive language tends to be associated with linear chronological plots. The novelty of this research lies in its systematic and measurable identification of the relationship between language choice and plot structure as patterns of students' personal experience representation, rather than treating linguistic features or narrative structures as isolated characteristics, as commonly found in previous studies. Practically, these findings imply the need for narrative writing instruction in higher education that explicitly links language choice with plot development through reflective writing tasks, practice with varied narrative structures, and rubric-based feedback to enhance the quality, coherence, and depth of students' narratives.

Keywords: Language Choice, Narrative Writing, Personal Experience, Story Plot

INTRODUCTION

Writing personal narratives is an important practice in higher education because, beyond developing language skills, it allows students to represent their identities, life experiences, and self-meaning through the prose structures they construct. From the perspective of narrative psychology, personal narratives are understood as a primary means through which individuals build continuity of identity (narrative identity) and reflectively reconstruct significant life events (McAdams, 2018). Through narrative writing, authors do not merely report events, but also negotiate meaning, express emotions, and position themselves as agents within the stories they tell.

A number of studies show that the quality of personal narratives is influenced by key dimensions such as narrative coherence, authorial agency, and the management of emotion and self-evaluation. Briesmaster and Etchegaray (2017) confirm that the ability to integrate personal experiences into a coherent plot is closely related to the use of evaluative linguistic strategies and a personal point of view. Other research in developmental psychology and education indicates that narratives with a high level of personalization tend to display more complex plot structures, such as retrospection (flashbacks), future projection, and narrative turning points, compared to narratives that are primarily descriptive and factual in nature (McEnery & Hardy, 2019).

In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), personal narrative writing is viewed as a strategic genre because it provides relatively free space for expression while simultaneously challenging students' linguistic, discursive, and reflective abilities. EFL research confirms that lexical choices—such as the use of first-person pronouns, mental verbs, affective adjectives, and evaluative markers—play an important role in constructing the writer's voice and fostering interpersonal closeness with the reader (Lee, J., 2020). In addition, narrative plot structure serves as an indicator of students' writing maturity, particularly in their ability to manage time, events, and personal reflection in an integrated manner.

Methodologically, research on narrative in education and applied linguistics can be broadly differentiated into two main approaches. Qualitative narrative approaches focus on interpreting meaning, identity construction, and writers' subjective experiences through discourse analysis, thematic analysis, or in-depth case studies (Adler, et al., 2016). This approach is effective in uncovering the depth of individual meaning and contextual nuances, but it tends to be limited in terms of generalizability and cross-text pattern mapping.

In contrast, quantitative narrative approaches treat narrative texts as linguistic and structural data that can be systematically mapped through measurements of frequency, distribution, and pattern trends. This approach enables researchers to identify regularities in the use of language features and plot structures across larger text corpora, resulting in more empirically grounded, stable, and replicable descriptions (McNamara, Crossley, McCarthy., 2015).

Although study narrative qualitative has given contribution significant in understand experience and identity author, dominance approach the leaving limitations in answer question about pattern general and tendencies rhetorical student in a way collective. Without mapping quantitative, relationship between

choice language and plot structure of the story often treated in a way assumptive or illustrative, not based on measurable empirical data.

Mapping quantitative required to (1) identify distribution and dominance feature linguistics certain in narrative personal students, (2) test relatedness between intensity personalization Language with story plot types (chronological and non-chronological) (3) provide base empirical for development rubric assessment and intervention more pedagogical objective and transparent.

Studies on narrative writing in higher education show global trends toward the integration of reflective approaches, corpus linguistics, and digital technology. Research on digital storytelling and reflective narratives indicates that experience-based narratives enhance learning engagement, metacognitive awareness, and students' linguistic complexity (Yang & Wu, 2012). More recent studies also highlight the use of corpus analysis and quantitative approaches to map evaluative, affective, and structural features in EFL narrative writing (Ajabshir, 2024). However, many large-scale studies still treat linguistic analysis and narrative structure analysis separately or focus primarily on general linguistic variables such as syntactic complexity and text length. Consequently, studies that simultaneously connect language choice and story plot structure within a descriptive-quantitative framework remain relatively limited.

Study write narrative in education tall show global trends towards integration approach reflective, corpus linguistics, and digital technology. The study of digital storytelling and narrative reflective show that narrative based experience authentic increase involvement learning, awareness metacognitive, as well as complexity Language student (Yang, Y.-T. C., & Wu, W.-C. I. (2016)., t.t.). Research The latest also highlights use analysis corpus and approach quantitative For map feature evaluative, affective, and structural in narrative writing EFL (Ajabshir, Z. F., & Reksten, 2024). However thus, some big study the Still separate analysis linguistics and analysis structure narrative, or focus on variables linguistics general like complexity syntax and length text. Therefore that, the study which is simultaneous connect choice language and plot structure of the story in framework descriptive-quantitative Still relatively limited.

Based on the research gap identified, this study aims to address the following questions: (1) how students' personal experiences are represented in narrative writing when viewed from language choice and story plot structure patterns; (2) how language choices used by students are related to the types of narrative plot structures they construct; and (3) how the quantitative distribution of linguistic features and plot structures appears within the corpus of students' personal narrative texts.

The main contribution of this study lies in providing an empirical, quantitative data-based mapping that integrates linguistic and narrative dimensions as a unified pattern of personal experience representation. Theoretically, this research enriches studies of personal narratives in the EFL context by employing a descriptive quantitative approach, which has been relatively underused. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as an empirical foundation for the development of narrative writing instruction in higher education, particularly in the design of writing tasks,

assessment rubrics, and feedback practices that balance awareness of language choice and plot management in a reflective manner.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive quantitative design using a quantitative content analysis approach, which allows for the systematic mapping of linguistic features and narrative structures in students' texts through the calculation of frequencies and distributional patterns (Krippendorff, 2022). This approach is appropriate for revealing trends in the representation of personal experience within a corpus of students' narrative texts in an empirical, objective, and measurable manner, particularly when the focus is on general patterns rather than individual interpretations interpretation (Biber, et al., 2021).

The participants consisted of 30 students from the English Language Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar who were enrolled in a narrative writing course. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in academic narrative writing practice, as recommended in genre- and context-based EFL learning research. A sample size of 30 texts is considered adequate for small-scale corpus-based descriptive quantitative studies aimed at mapping linguistic and structural trends rather than making broad population generalizations. Applied linguistics research indicates that small corpora (20–50 texts) remain valid for identifying distributional patterns of linguistic features when the unit of analysis is clearly defined and systematically analyzed (McEnery, & Hardie, 2019). In addition, this sample size meets the minimum requirements for exploratory correlational analysis in student writing research (Field, 2020). The participants were aged between 19 and 24 years, comprising 25 female students and 5 male students.

The research instrument consisted of two main components. First, the corpus of personal narrative texts was collected through a single writing task completed by each student, resulting in a total of 30 texts. Second, a content analysis coding sheet was developed based on studies in narrative linguistics and advanced EFL writing research (Ajabshir, Z. F., & Reksten., 2024). The indicators for language choice included the frequency of first-person pronoun use, the number of evaluative or affective words per 100 words, the use of direct and indirect sentences, and the narrative type (personal reflective versus descriptive-factual). The indicators for narrative structure comprised chronological plot development, the use of flashbacks, and the presence of an explicit narrative turning point (McAdams, D. P., & Guo, J., 2022). For quantitative interpretation, the frequency of linguistic features was categorized into three levels—low, moderate, and high—using a percentile-based distribution approach, with low defined as below the 33rd percentile, moderate as the 33rd to 66th percentiles, and high as above the 66th percentile.

This approach was chosen because it is more adaptive to variations in text length and linguistic data distribution than absolute cut-off limits, and it is commonly used in small-scale educational corpus studies (Egbert & Baker, 2019). The research procedure began with the collection of texts through a written assignment distributed

online. All texts were preprocessed through letter normalization and tokenization to ensure consistency in linguistic analysis. The identification of linguistic features and the assessment of plot structure were conducted manually by two trained assessors, as recommended in EFL corpus studies that emphasize accurate semantic and narrative categorization (Enayat, 2025). Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen’s kappa, with values of ≥ 0.75 interpreted as indicating high reliability (Krippendorff, 2022).

In addition to inter-rater reliability, the validity of the study was ensured through several strategies: (1) construct validity, by aligning coding indicators with narrative theory and current EFL research; (2) content validity, through expert review of the instruments by two specialists in writing instruction and applied linguistics; and (3) procedural stability, by using written coding guidelines and conducting pilot coding on a subset of the data prior to full-scale coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, proportions, means, and standard deviations. Pearson correlation analysis was then employed to examine the relationship between linguistic features and types of story plot structure. The selection of Pearson correlation was based on three main considerations: the use of ratio or interval-scale data, an approximately normal data distribution based on preliminary inspection, and the aim of identifying linear relationships between variables rather than making causal predictions (Field, 2020). The significance level was set at $\alpha = 0.05$, in accordance with common practice in quantitative EFL writing research (Refnaldi & Fitrawati, 2023).

This study was conducted with due consideration of ethical principles in educational research. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection after receiving a clear explanation that participation was voluntary and would not influence their academic evaluation. Students’ identities were anonymized, and all data were used solely for academic and research purposes. These procedures are consistent with ethical standards in social and educational research, which emphasize respect for participants, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. As (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N., 2018) state, *“ethical issues in qualitative research include informed consent, protection of participants’ identities, and minimizing any potential harm to participants”*.

RESULT

The analysis of 30 students’ narrative texts shows a moderate variation in text length. Overall, the distribution of word counts indicates that most students are able to develop personal narratives with an adequate level of elaboration to represent their personal experiences comprehensively.

Table 1. Statistics descriptive length of narrative text student

Statistics	Mark
Amount participants	30
Amount text	30

Average number of words	498
Standard deviation	102
Minimum	350
Maximum	720

The distribution of text length frequency (Figure 1) shows that most texts fall within the range of 400–600 words, with the highest concentration in the 450–550 words interval. This indicates a tendency for students to write personal narratives of relatively balanced length, without a dominance of texts that are either too short or excessively long.

Connection Choice of Language and Story Plot

To examine patterns of personal experience representation, a correlation analysis was conducted between interpersonal language features (the frequency of first-person pronouns, evaluative expressions, and affective adjectives) and story plot types (chronological versus non-chronological/flashback). The results reveal a moderate positive correlation between the use of interpersonal language and the tendency to employ non-chronological plots, such as flashbacks and narrative turning points, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.46$ ($p = 0.011$). This finding indicates that the higher the level of personalized language used by students, the greater the likelihood that their texts are structured with a retrospective plot.

On the other hand, the use of formal-descriptive language shows a significant positive correlation with linear chronological plots ($r = 0.52$, $p = 0.004$), suggesting that texts with minimal affective expression and a more informational focus tend to be organized according to a temporal sequence of events without complex shifts in time.

Table 2. Coefficients correlation between choice of language and story plot

Variables Linguistics	Chronological Plot	Non- Chronological Plot
Interpersonal language	$r = -0.41^*$	$r = 0.46^*$
descriptive language	$r = 0.52^{**}$	$r = -0.38^*$

*Note: $*p < 0.05$; $* p < 0.01$

From a statistical perspective, these findings indicate that the representation of personal experience in students' narrative texts is not random, but instead follows consistent patterns between language choice and plot structure. Personal and evaluative language functions as a marker of retrospective reflection, whereas formal-descriptive language more strongly supports the construction of narratives based on chronological event sequences. This pattern reinforces the argument that linguistic and narrative aspects are closely intertwined in shaping how students represent their personal experiences in written form.

General Description of Narrative Text Data

The analysis results show that the length of students' narrative texts ranges from 350 to 720 words. The average text length is 498 words, with a standard deviation of 102 words. These findings indicate that students are capable of developing narrative texts with a relatively good level of elaboration to represent their personal experiences.

Language Choice Patterns in Narrative Texts

The analysis of language choice focused on three main indicators, namely the use of first-person pronouns, evaluative or emotional words, and language registers. The use of first-person pronouns (such as I, me, and we) was analyzed as an indicator of the author's personal involvement in the text.

Table 3. Frequency use first personal pronouns

Category Frequency	Text Amount	Percentage
High (>10 per 100 words)	12	40%
Moderate (5–10 per 100 words)	13	43.3%
Low (<5 per 100 words)	5	16.7%
Total	30	100%

As much as 83.3% of the text is in the category currently until high. This is show that majority student display corner view personal in a way explicit in narrate experience.

The Use of Evaluative and Emotional Words

Evaluative words include expressions that convey the writer's attitudes, emotions, and judgments toward the experiences described (for example, *happy*, *disappointed*, *proud*, and *scared*).

Table 4. Frequency of evaluative words per 100 words

Category Frequency	Text Amount	Percentage
High (>4 words)	11	36.7%
Medium (2–4 words)	14	46.6%
Low (<2 words)	5	16.7%
Total	30	100%

As many as 83.3% of the texts show the use of evaluative words at moderate to high levels. These findings indicate that students not only convey events but also include subjective evaluations of their personal experiences.

The language register in narrative texts

The language register in narrative texts was classified into personal–interpersonal registers and formal–descriptive registers.

Table 5. Language registers in narrative texts

Language Register	Text Amount	Percentage
Personal-interpersonal	18	60%
Formal- descriptive	12	40%
Total	30	100%
<i>Total</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>100%</i>

The dominance of personal-interpersonal registers indicates a tendency for students to use reflective and communicative language in representing their personal experiences.

Story Plot Patterns in Narrative Texts

The story plot structure was analyzed by classifying the texts into linear chronological plots and non-chronological plots (flashback or retrospective).

Table 6. Types of story plots

Plot Type	Text Amount	Percentage
Linear chronology	17	56.7%
Non- chronological (flashback)	13	43.3%
<i>Total</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>100%</i>

This result shows that although chronological plots remain dominant, the use of non-chronological plots is sufficiently significant in expressing the meaning of personal experiences.

Connection between Choice of Language and Story Plot

To examine the relationship between language choice and story plot, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 7. Correlation analysis results

Correlated Variables	r	Sig. (p)
First person pronoun × non- chronological plot	0.46	0.010
Evaluative words × non- chronological plot	0.33	0.035
Formal language × chronological plot	0.38	0.028

The analysis results show a moderate and significant positive correlation between the use of first-person pronouns and non-chronological plots. This indicates that texts with a high level of personal involvement tend to employ retrospective plot structures.

Representation Pattern Experience Personal Student

Based on the combined analysis results, two main patterns of personal

experience representation were identified. The Reflective–Personal Pattern, found in 14 texts (46.7%), is characterized by a high frequency of first-person pronouns, a dominance of evaluative language, a non-chronological plot structure, and a strong emphasis on reflection and the meaning of personal experiences. In contrast, the Descriptive–Chronological Pattern, which appeared in 16 texts (53.3%), is marked by more formal language use, limited emotional evaluation, a linear chronological plot, and a focus on the sequential presentation of events.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that students' representations of personal experience tend to form two dominant patterns, namely the reflective–personal pattern and the descriptive–chronological pattern. These patterns do not emerge by coincidence, but are closely related to students' cognitive orientation, communicative goals, and the level of identity involvement in the writing process.

Students who intensively use first-person pronouns and evaluative language tend to choose non-chronological plots, such as flashbacks or retrospective structures. This can be explained from a cognitive–narrative perspective, in which reflection on personal experience does not always follow a linear timeline, but often begins from emotionally salient moments or meaningful turning points that are then revisited and reinterpreted. In this sense, interpersonal language functions as a tool for meaning construction rather than merely a means of reporting events.

In contrast, students who more frequently employ formal–descriptive registers tend to construct narratives with linear chronological plots. This pattern suggests that some students position the narrative writing task as an academic–informational activity rather than as a space for personal reflection. In the EFL context, this tendency can also be understood as a safe strategy, in which students rely on chronological and descriptive writing to minimize the risk of linguistic errors.

These findings are in line with studies on personal narratives in EFL and L2 writing (De Fina, A., 2015), which suggest that personal narratives rich in emotional evaluation tend to employ non-linear structures as a reflection of the self's meaning-making process. The positive correlation between evaluative language and retrospective plot structures in this study further strengthens these findings.

Likewise, Hyland, K. (2021) research on stance and engagement in student writing shows that the use of first-person pronouns is correlated with a higher level of epistemic involvement. However, in contrast to several Western studies that report the dominance of reflective narratives, this study found that chronological plot structures were still slightly more dominant (56.7%). This difference may be influenced by several factors, including local academic culture that emphasizes order and chronology, a product-oriented tradition of writing instruction, and students' limited experience in producing critical reflective writing in English or in an academic language context.

Thus, institutional and pedagogical contexts play an important role in shaping students' narrative choices. These findings support narrative identity theory, which views writing as a means of self-construction. The reflective–personal pattern shows

that students' identities are represented not only through what they experienced, but also through how those experiences are evaluated and narratively constructed.

The results of this study challenge the view of the narrative genre as a homogeneous structure. EFL students' personal narratives appear to be hybrid, positioned between academic and expressive genres. The variation in language registers and plot structures demonstrates that the narrative genre is flexible and negotiated by writers according to their communicative goals.

Furthermore, the correlation between language choice and plot structure emphasizes that mastery of EFL writing involves not only linguistic competence but also narrative and rhetorical awareness. Writing reflective narratives requires the ability to integrate language, emotion, and story structure simultaneously.

Implications Pedagogical

The results of this study have several important implications for teaching narrative writing in higher education. First, writing instruction should emphasize reflection, not merely the chronological ordering of events; lecturers can use prompts that encourage students to revisit significant experiences or turning points. Second, the teaching of the narrative genre should be explicit, including discussions of plot variations (chronological versus retrospective) and their respective functions. Third, writing feedback should not focus solely on linguistic accuracy, but also on the depth of evaluation and interpretation of personal experiences. Finally, integrating metacognitive approaches, such as reflection on the writing process, can help students become more aware of their own choices of language and narrative structure.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the representation of personal experience in students' narrative texts follows relatively consistent patterns between language choice and plot structure. Students who use a high level of interpersonal language, characterized by frequent first-person pronouns and affective expressions, tend to construct narratives with non-chronological plots, such as flashbacks and narrative turning points. In contrast, the use of more formal and descriptive language is more often associated with linear chronological plots. These findings confirm that linguistic features and narrative structure are interrelated in shaping how students represent personal experiences in written form.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to a single study program and institution, so the generalizability of the findings should be approached with caution. Second, the analysis focused solely on narrative text products without exploring students' cognitive and metacognitive processes during writing. Third, the descriptive-quantitative approach employed does not allow for causal conclusions.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to involve larger and cross-institutional samples, to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches in examining the writing process, and to explore the role of pedagogical interventions—such as reflection-based learning or directed feedback—in shaping patterns of

personal experience representation in students' narrative writing.

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