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Autobiography Writing as a Reflective and Self-Recovery Medium for Adolescents

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose: This study examines how autobiography writing functions as a medium of self-expression that fosters psychological recovery and reflective awareness among adolescents in Indonesian language learning.

Methods: Using narrative inquiry and Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional narrative space (temporality, sociality, and place), the study analysed the autobiographical texts of five Grade VIII junior high school students, produced through a four-stage scaffolded writing protocol and supported by in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation.

Findings: The texts represented life experiences, inner conflict, and self-meaning within a coherent narrative structure. Writing served as a safe space for self-expression: four of the five students reported that they had never before disclosed the feelings they wrote about. Recovery developed gradually across the four writing stages and followed two trajectories, from fear and withdrawal towards openness and courage, and from negative peer influence towards self-control and responsibility. Fear and anxiety did not disappear but became more manageable, and relational support from counselling teachers, family, and peers was present for all participants.

Implications: Autobiography writing can operate as a humanistic, reflective, and therapeutic pedagogy in language classrooms, provided that it is implemented in a safe classroom climate, with gradual disclosure and support from guidance and counselling teachers.

Originality: The study offers a four-stage autobiography writing protocol that makes it possible to trace how expression, recovery, and reflection develop step by step, rather than measuring outcomes only at the end of an intervention.

KEYWORDS: autobiography writing, narrative inquiry, self-reflection, psychological recovery, language education

INTRODUCTION

Language education is concerned not only with mastering linguistic rules but also with shaping learners' character and emotional well-being, and reflection has an established place in language learning (Dahlan & Wahid, 2022). At junior high school level, learners are in adolescence, a period of dynamic identity formation (Branje et al., 2021) that Erikson's psychosocial theory places at the centre of development (Rusuli, 2022). Adolescents are also vulnerable to psychosocial pressure and to a range of problems in their families and social environments. Many of them carry heavy feelings without a safe space in which to express them. In this situation, autobiography writing in the language classroom occupies a strategic position: it is a means of self-expression that also invites students to reconstruct their life experiences and to reorganise their understanding of themselves (Pum, 2025).

Despite a substantial body of research on expressive writing, little is known about how autobiography writing in an Indonesian-language classroom can serve junior high school students as a space for self-expression and recovery, or about how these processes unfold over time. This study therefore examines how autobiography writing functions as a medium of self-expression that fosters psychological recovery and reflective awareness among junior high school students in Indonesian language learning. Its contribution is threefold. Theoretically, it extends narrative inquiry to first-language learning and links it to the discourse of adolescent psychological recovery. Methodologically, it offers a four-stage scaffolded autobiography writing protocol that allows expression, recovery, and reflection to be traced stage by stage. Practically, the findings provide a basis for Indonesian language teachers and guidance and counselling teachers to develop a humanistic and reflective writing pedagogy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Reflective and Therapeutic Potential of Writing

A number of studies affirm the reflective and therapeutic power of writing. Meta-analytic reviews show that expressive writing interventions improve psychological well-being, reduce symptoms of emotional distress, and improve social adjustment among adolescents (Travagin et al.,

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2015; Guo, 2023). Expressive writing has also been shown to change young people's emotional reactions to stressful events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Mariën et al., 2022). These benefits are explained by two processes: writing about emotional experiences helps individuals organise their emotions (emotional processing) and construct cause-and-effect relationships within their experiences (cognitive processing), which gives rise to new meaning (Harrington et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2019; Okonkwo & Dlamini, 2024). A narrative review of writing techniques across psychotherapies likewise notes that writing enables individuals to reorganise their life experiences and emotional conflicts into a coherent narrative (Ruini & Mortara, 2021).

In the Indonesian context, expressive writing therapy has been shown to support emotion regulation and to reduce psychological distress among adolescents (Maulida & Annatagia, 2019; Nur et al., 2022; Wadjdi & Mariyati, 2026). Theoretically, life narratives are a means of identity formation: the way individuals organise and interpret their experiences determines the coherence of their identity and their psychological adjustment (Booker et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021).

Narrative Inquiry as a Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by the narrative inquiry of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which treats stories as meaningful representations of human experience. Experience is not understood as a set of isolated facts but is traced through the three dimensions of narrative space: temporality (continuity over time), sociality (social and emotional relationships), and place (the location of experience). This framework is relevant for reading adolescents' autobiographies because it connects past, present, and hoped-for future in a single meaningful thread (Foldager et al., 2024; Othman & Lo, 2023).

Research Gap

Nevertheless, three gaps remain. First, most research on expressive writing relies on quantitative, clinical designs and is set among adults, university students, or in foreign-language contexts (Alkhalaf, 2022; Robertson et al., 2019; Valestrand et al., 2024; Wu & Halim, 2024). As a result, the role of autobiography as a medium of self-expression and recovery in Indonesian-language classes at junior high school level has rarely been examined. Second, previous Indonesian studies have tended to view autobiography only from a linguistic perspective or as a learning medium (Akbar, 2024; Hardiyanti, 2022; Nadine, 2022), or have emphasised psychological approaches without situating writing within language learning (Hanantaqiya & Pradana, 2025). Third, methodologically, existing studies mostly measure final outcomes and have not traced how self-expression, psychological recovery, and reflective awareness develop gradually within students. Consequently, autobiography has seldom been positioned as a safe space in which junior high school students can express themselves and recover during a phase of identity development that is vulnerable to emotional conflict.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach in the form of narrative inquiry as formulated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). A qualitative approach was chosen because the study focuses on how adolescents make meaning of their experiences through writing, which requires holistic understanding in a natural context (Rijali, 2019). Narrative inquiry treats students' autobiographical texts as representations of experience that are examined through the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place.

Setting, Participants, and Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted at a junior high school in Makassar, Indonesia, over three months (November 2025 to January 2026). Participants were selected through purposive sampling according to three criteria: on the recommendation of the class teacher and the guidance and counselling teacher, they showed indications of socio-emotional difficulties (e.g., the effects of family conflict, loss, or changes in behaviour); they were willing to participate; and they were able to write about their personal experiences. Five Grade VIII students were selected. Given the participants' vulnerability as minors, the study applied the following ethical principles: guardian consent and student assent, the use of pseudonyms, guaranteed confidentiality, a safe and non-judgemental classroom atmosphere, and support from the guidance and counselling teacher whenever emotional responses arose during writing.

The Four-Stage Autobiography Writing Protocol

The methodological novelty of the study lies in a four-stage scaffolded autobiography writing protocol that served both as a reflective treatment and as an instrument of data collection. Each stage was guided by open-ended questions that led students to write in a coherent, reflective, and meaningful way. Stage 1 explored experiences of childhood, family, school, and environments perceived as safe. Stage 2 guided students to recognise and express their emotions about difficult events (fear, sadness, anger, disappointment, and anxiety). Stage 3 focused on making meaning of these experiences and building resilience, including how students had coped and what support they had received. Stage 4 asked students to formulate hopes, life goals, lessons learned, and small steps towards the future. This scaffolded design made it possible to trace changes in the narratives from stage to stage rather than capturing only a final snapshot.

Data Sources

The primary data consisted of students' autobiographical texts, supplemented by in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. The researcher acted as the main instrument, designing the study and collecting and interpreting the data. Interviews explored students' emotional experiences and their reflection after writing; observation recorded their engagement, emotional expressions, and changes in attitude during the activities; and documentation provided additional evidence of the process.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data were analysed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During reduction, data were selected and coded according to the research focus. Codes were constructed from the participant number, indicator, category, and data number; for example, S1.PH.PP1 denotes Participant 1, life experience (*pengalaman hidup*), positive experience (*pengalaman positif*), datum 1, whereas S1.KB1 denotes inner conflict (*konflik batin*). The data were then displayed in narrative descriptions and analysis tables to map the development of experiences across stages, and were interpreted through the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place. Trustworthiness was ensured through source and method

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triangulation, member checking, thick description, and an audit trail, which respectively support the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Johnson et al., 2020).

RESULTS

The five participants wrote about diverse life experiences but displayed similar narrative patterns. Table 1 summarises the participants' profiles and the dominant themes that emerged in their autobiographies.

Table 1: Participant Profiles and Dominant Themes of the Autobiographies

Code	Core experience	Dominant narrative themes
S1	Parental conflict and quarrels	Fear, loneliness, withdrawal, then recovery
S2	Death of mother and abandonment by father	Sadness, negative escape, search for a substitute figure
S3	Parental divorce	Disappointment, emotional control, family responsibility
S4	Traumatic experience and violence	Trauma, fear, loneliness, courage to open up
S5	Parental divorce and negative peer influence	Confusion, self-awareness, desire to change

Note. Participant codes are pseudonyms used to protect confidentiality.

Autobiography as a Safe Space for Self-Expression

Autobiography writing functioned as a safe space for self-expression. Through writing, students voiced experiences and feelings that were difficult to express orally: S1 expressed fear caused by family conflict, S2 sadness and anger over loss, S3 disappointment with her or his father and the changes in herself or himself caused by the divorce, S4 long-suppressed trauma and loneliness, and S5 confusion together with a desire to change. The recovery observed was not the complete disappearance of hurt but a change in how students dealt with painful experiences: they began to recognise the source of their pain, release suppressed feelings, accept support, and build hope. S1 affirmed this gradual process: *"I believe that wounds and trauma do not disappear right away, but little by little I will surely heal if I keep trying"* (S1.PH.PP8).

The forms of self-expression of the five participants, together with mutually reinforcing excerpts from their autobiographies and interviews, are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Participants' Self-Expression in Autobiographies and Interviews

Code	Form of self-expression	Autobiography excerpt	Interview excerpt
S1	Expressing suppressed fear, sadness, and exhaustion; understanding the source of trauma and changes in self	*"From the experiences I wrote about yesterday, I realised that the source of my fear is my father and mother's quarrels."* (S1.ED.K3.1)	*"All this time I kept my fear and exhaustion to myself. By writing this I can be honest with myself about my feelings."* (S1.ED.W1)
S2	Expressing sadness and anger over the loss of parents; honestly admitting mistakes	*"I did fall in with the wrong crowd, I was naughty, and I disappointed many people. But I also want to change."* (S2.ED.K3.2)	*"Writing my autobiography helps me let those feelings out, because I have never told anyone."* (S2.ED.W1)
S3	Releasing anger and sadness caused by parental divorce; honestly writing about changes in self	*"I used to be diligent and clever and never caused trouble, but when my family fell apart I changed too, became naughty and fell in with the wrong crowd."* (S3.ED.K4.1)	*"By writing, I can let out the anger and sadness I have been holding in."* (S3.ED.W1)
S4	Expressing suppressed trauma, fear, and loneliness; writing slowly as a safe space	*"As I write this, even though I am still afraid, I feel somewhat relieved because I can finally let out what I have been holding in."* (S4.ED.K4.2)	*"All this time I kept my fear, sadness, and loneliness to myself. I have never told my friends about this experience."* (S4.ED.W1)
S5	Expressing confusion and inner burden caused by parental divorce; admitting negative peer influence and a desire to change	*"Maybe I am easily influenced by my surroundings, but I still want to change."* (S5.ED.K3.1)	*"Yes, I keep wondering why my parents separated, but no one wants to tell me. But when I was writing, I felt a little relieved."* (S5.ED.W1)

Note. Codes at the end of each excerpt refer to the research data codes; K = autobiographical text, W = interview. Excerpts were translated from Indonesian (including local Makassar dialect features) into English.

Table 2 reveals two points. First, four of the five participants (S1–S4) stated in the interviews that the feelings they wrote about had been suppressed or never shared with anyone, while S5 reported continually wondering about the parents' divorce because no one had explained it. Writing became an outlet for these feelings. Second, honesty characterised the students' self-expression: S2 to S5 emphasised that they wrote truthfully, including admitting to negative peer influence, misbehaviour, and a desire to change. Disclosure was not always comfortable. S1 admitted feeling nervous and sad when writing about traumatic events, and S4 wrote very slowly and paused for long periods to think. Nevertheless, both S4 and S5 mentioned feeling relieved after writing. The consistency between the autobiographical texts and the interviews strengthens the credibility of these findings.

Gradual Psychological Recovery across the Writing Stages

Psychological recovery developed gradually across the four writing stages. The development for S1, which provides the most detailed picture, is described in Table 3.

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Table 3: Development of S1's Psychological Recovery across the Four Writing Stages

Form of recovery	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Recognising the source of inner hurt	Not yet visible; still immersed in warm childhood memories and unaware of any hurt. (S1.K1.PPs1)	Beginning to emerge; realises that fear, anxiety, and changes in self are related to the parents' quarrels. (S1.K2.PPs1)	Developing; understands that the fear stems from quarrels, loud voices, the mother's crying, and a tense home atmosphere. (S1.K3.PPs1)	Stronger; accepts that the fear comes from family experiences but does not want to keep living in fear. (S1.K4.PPs1)
Releasing suppressed feelings through writing	Not yet present; inner pressure not yet shared and feelings kept to oneself. (S1.K1.PPs2)	Beginning to appear; realises that keeping fear alone is exhausting and stressful. (S1.K2.PPs2)	Developing; begins to release suppressed feelings through writing, so that the mind feels lighter. (S1.K3.PPs2)	More mature; understands that writing and talking reduce the emotional burden and that there is no need to keep pretending to be strong. (S1.K4.PPs2)
Returning to school and positive activities	Has a positive foundation as a diligent, active, sociable child once chosen for a competition. (S1.K1.PPs4)	Not yet stable; late, reluctant to attend school, pretending to be sick, rarely doing assignments. (S1.K2.PPs4)	Beginning to appear; forces herself or himself back to school, joins friends, and takes part in activities despite nervousness. (S1.K3.PPs4)	Stronger; no longer late, takes part in activities again, and dares to try out for a wall-magazine competition. (S1.K4.PPs4)
Managing fear and anxiety	Not yet visible; not yet experiencing strong conflict-related pressure. (S1.K1.PPs5)	Beginning to be needed; easily startled, has difficulty sleeping, cries, and panics on hearing loud voices. (S1.K2.PPs5)	Developing; realises that fear can be overcome little by little by finding the courage to resume activities. (S1.K3.PPs5)	More mature; fear is still present but no longer leads directly to panic; learning to regulate feelings. (S1.K4.PPs5)

Note. Summarised from the analysis table of S1's psychological recovery; the code at the end of each cell refers to the research data codes.

Table 3 shows that S1's recovery did not occur all at once. At Stage 1, recovery was not yet visible because the student was still immersed in warm childhood memories. At Stage 2, the need for recovery emerged as conflict at home gave rise to fear and reduced motivation for school. At Stage 3, recovery developed through writing and through the support of the guidance and counselling teacher, friends, and grandmother, and at Stage 4 it became stronger. Fear did not disappear completely, as S1 was still afraid of loud voices, but no longer panicked immediately.
The picture at the final stage for all five participants is summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Most Developed Psychological Recovery and Self-Reflection at Stage 4

Code	Source of hurt	Strongest recovery (Stage 4)	Most developed reflection (Stage 4)
S1	Parental quarrels; fear, anxiety, withdrawal	Regulates fear; opens up to the guidance and counselling teacher, friends, and grandmother; returns to school and activities; hopes to become braver and more confident	Connects past experiences with changes in self and hopes; realises that family conflict left wounds but need not determine her or his whole life
S2	Loss of mother and departure of father; escape into negative peer groups	Leaves negative peer groups, improves school responsibilities, accepts support from an older sibling and teachers, and aspires to become a soldier	Turns the experience of loss and negative peer influence into motivation for self-improvement
S3	Parental divorce; anger, disappointment, negative peer influence	Channels sadness and disappointment into responsibility and hope; accepts advice from mother and the guidance and counselling teacher; avoids friends who are a bad influence	Uses painful family experiences as a basis for responsibility (as the eldest child and older sibling) and hope for the future
S4	Traumatic experience; fear, anxiety, withdrawal	Dares to open up, wants to trust others again, and hopes for a calmer life	Turns the traumatic experience into awareness of the need to recover; understands that fear should not keep being suppressed
S5	Parental divorce, lack of supervision, negative peer influence	Ends a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend who was a bad influence, avoids negative environments, rebuilds school responsibilities, and plans for the future	Turns awareness into decisions and concrete action

Note. Stage 4 synthesis from each participant's analysis table of psychological recovery and self-reflection.

Table 4 reveals two recovery trajectories. For S1 and S4, whose hurt stemmed from family conflict and traumatic experiences, recovery moved from fear and withdrawal towards openness and courage; fear and anxiety remained in certain situations but became more manageable. For S2, S3, and S5, whose hurt stemmed from loss, divorce, and negative peer influence, recovery was evident in self-control, school responsibility, and

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decisions to stay away from negative influences. The most developed reflection at Stage 4 likewise transformed experience into direction: motivation for self-improvement (S2), responsibility and hope (S3), awareness of the need to recover (S4), and concrete decisions (S5). In both trajectories, relational support was present for all five participants: the guidance and counselling teacher, friends, and grandmother (S1); an older sibling and teachers (S2); the mother and the guidance and counselling teacher (S3); parents and teachers (S4); and the mother and friends (S5).

Progression of Inner Conflict, Reflection, and Recovery

Table 5 shows the progression of the intensity of inner conflict, reflective awareness, and signs of recovery across the four writing stages, synthesised from all five participants.

Table 5: Progression of Inner Conflict, Reflection, and Recovery across the Four Writing Stages

Stage	Writing focus	Intensity of conflict	Reflective awareness	Signs of recovery
1	Exploring experiences	Very strong	Not yet present	Not yet visible
2	Recognising emotions	Very strong	Beginning to emerge	Just beginning
3	Meaning-making and resilience	Beginning to decrease	Developing	Developing
4	Hopes and life goals	Greatly decreased	Mature	Beginning to recover

Note. The progression pattern is a synthesis; decreasing conflict indicates a change in its intensity and in how students dealt with it, not the disappearance of the experience.

DISCUSSION

The progression described above shows that writing helped students transform suppressed experiences into narratives that could be read and given meaning. Theoretically, this process is consistent with the mechanism of emotional processing, the gradual organisation of emotional experience that reduces anxiety (Harrington et al., 2018), and with cognitive processing, the construction of cause-and-effect relationships that produces new understanding (Zheng et al., 2019). Expressive writing has been shown to increase emotional disclosure and self-regulation among adolescents (Travagin et al., 2015; Nur et al., 2022) and to help children in difficult circumstances form a positive self-concept (Septiani & Andriyani, 2025).

The finding that recovery meant a change in how students faced painful experiences, rather than the disappearance of those experiences, is also consistent with the view that people can find meaning even in suffering (Frankl, 2023). The participants did not erase their past; they reinterpreted it as a source of direction, whether as motivation to improve themselves, as a sense of responsibility towards their families, or as a decision to break with negative influences. This is particularly significant for students such as S4, given that adolescents who experience violence may undergo a crisis of identity (Jannah & Satwika, 2021). In this sense, autobiography writing supported not only emotional relief but also the reconstruction of a coherent self-narrative during a phase of identity formation (Branje et al., 2021; Booker et al., 2022).

Within Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) framework, the written text itself functioned as a new place, a safe symbolic space, alongside the school, the counselling room, and relatives' homes, which became spaces of recovery, while the home that had once been safe for S1 had become a space of fear. Along the dimension of sociality, the consistent presence of relational support for all five participants suggests that recovery through writing did not occur in isolation but was embedded in relationships with counselling teachers, family members, and friends. Along the dimension of temporality, the four-stage protocol connected the students' past, present, and future, allowing them to move from recalling experiences to formulating hopes.

Reflective awareness was evident when students distanced themselves from their experiences, re-evaluated their actions and feelings, and developed new perspectives. This is in line with findings that reflective writing links personal experience with identity formation in social contexts (Valestrand et al., 2024; Booker et al., 2022). The contribution of this study lies in showing how expression, recovery, and reflection unfold gradually and can be facilitated through a scaffolded writing design in the language classroom, rather than appearing only as an effect measured at the end of an intervention.

Implications

For Indonesian language teachers and guidance and counselling teachers, the scaffolded writing protocol should be applied with the awareness that not all students have the same emotional readiness. A safe classroom climate, gradual disclosure in line with students' readiness, and support from guidance and counselling teachers are therefore needed so that the protocol's potential for recovery can be realised without placing students under unnecessary emotional pressure.

Limitations and Future Research

These findings should be read in light of the study's limitations. The study was conducted in a single school with five participants, so it offers an in-depth understanding of processes rather than statistical generalisation. Future research should involve participants across school levels and social backgrounds and should examine whether recovery is sustained after the writing activities end.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that autobiography writing serves as a safe medium of self-expression that fosters psychological recovery and reflective awareness among students. First, with regard to self-expression, all five participants expressed feelings that had previously been difficult to convey, namely fear, sadness, anger, disappointment, trauma, and confusion. Four participants (S1–S4) stated that these feelings had been suppressed or never shared, four participants (S2–S5) emphasised that they wrote honestly and truthfully, and S4 and S5 reported feeling relieved after writing. Second, with regard to psychological recovery, recovery proceeded gradually across the four writing stages. For S1, it moved from not yet visible, to needed, to developing, and finally to stronger: from recognising the source of hurt and releasing suppressed feelings to returning to school and managing fear. Recovery did not mean that the hurt disappeared, since fear and anxiety remained for some participants but became more manageable. For S1 and S4, recovery appeared as a shift from fear and withdrawal towards openness and courage, whereas for S2, S3, and S5 it appeared as self-control, school responsibility, and decisions to avoid negative influences. Support from guidance and counselling teachers, family,

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and friends was present for all five participants. Third, with regard to reflective awareness, the most developed reflection at Stage 4 transformed painful experiences into direction: motivation for self-improvement (S2), responsibility and hope (S3), awareness of the need to recover (S4), and concrete decisions and actions (S5). Writing thus functioned as a safe space in which students could express their feelings, recover, and reinterpret their experiences.

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ETHICAL AND COMPLIANCE STATEMENTS

Research ethics and informed consent: Because the participants were minors, written consent was obtained from their guardians and assent from the students themselves. Pseudonyms were used, confidentiality was guaranteed, and a guidance and counselling teacher was available to support students whenever emotional responses arose during writing

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Author contribution: Johar Amir: supervision and conceptualization; Nensilianti: methodology and review; Syntha Esterlita Karyani: data collection, analysis, and writing – original draft.

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