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Students' Perceptions of the Backwash Effect of Authentic Assessment in Recount Text Writing

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate three research problems: (1) students' perceptions of authentic assessment in personal experience recount text writing tasks, (2) the benefits of authentic assessment in recount text writing, and (3) the difficulties students encounter and the backwash effect of authentic assessment on their writing learning. Data were sourced from ten seventh-grade students at MTs Cerdas Murni Deli Serdang who had participated in authentic writing assessment activities. A descriptive qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 closed-ended items across three categories: students' perceptions, benefits of authentic assessment, and students' difficulties. Responses were analyzed using percentage-based descriptive statistics and interpreted qualitatively. Findings reveal that the majority of students hold positive perceptions of authentic assessment, with 90–100% expressing comfort, fairness, and clarity in the assessment process. All students (100%) agreed that writing about personal experiences aided idea expression and improved understanding of recount text structure. However, persistent difficulties were identified in vocabulary use (70%), past tense application (80%), organizing events (60%), and time management (100%). The study's implications suggest that authentic assessment not only serves as an evaluative instrument but also generates a positive backwash effect by fostering active participation, raising students' metacognitive awareness, and motivating continued writing practice. Teachers should integrate scaffolded writing support alongside authentic assessment to maximize its effectiveness in English language learning.

Kata Kunci

Authentic Assessment, Backwash Effect, EFL Writing, Recount Text, Students' Perceptions

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment constitutes a foundational pillar of the teaching and learning process in any educational context. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, assessment serves the dual purpose of measuring students' language development and informing instructional decisions. While traditional written tests have long dominated classroom evaluation practices, their limitations in

capturing students' authentic communicative competence have prompted increasing interest in alternative assessment approaches. One such approach that has garnered considerable scholarly attention is authentic assessment, which tasks students with meaningful, real-world activities rather than isolated grammar or vocabulary exercises.

Recount text writing is one of the genres prescribed in the Indonesian national curriculum for seventh-grade junior high school students. As a genre that requires students to retell past personal experiences in chronological sequence, recount text writing demands the simultaneous deployment of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy—particularly past tense forms—and organizational skills. These demands make it a particularly suitable context for applying authentic assessment, as the tasks are inherently personal and meaningful to students.

Despite the growing adoption of authentic assessment in EFL classrooms, relatively little research has examined how junior high school students specifically perceive this form of assessment in the context of recount text writing, what concrete benefits they experience, and what learning difficulties persist. More critically, the backwash effect—the influence that assessment exerts on students' learning behaviors and motivational orientations—remains underexplored in this context.

Accordingly, this study explicitly investigates three research problems:

1. How do seventh-grade students at MTs Cerdas Murni Deli Serdang perceive authentic assessment in personal experience recount text writing tasks?
2. What are the perceived benefits of authentic assessment in recount text writing among these students?

What difficulties do students face when writing recount texts, and what is the backwash effect of authentic assessment on their writing learning?

RESEARCH METHODE

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate students' perceptions, the benefits, the difficulties, and the backwash effect of authentic assessment in personal experience recount text writing. A descriptive qualitative approach is appropriate when the researcher seeks to describe and interpret phenomena based on data collected directly from participants, without manipulating variables or testing causal hypotheses (Creswell, 2014). This approach allowed the researcher to capture the richness and detail of students' subjective experiences with authentic assessment in their natural classroom context.

Data and Sources

The data for this study consisted of students' written responses to a structured questionnaire. The primary data source was ten seventh-grade students at MTs Cerdas Murni Deli Serdang who had directly participated in authentic assessment activities for recount text writing during regular English language instruction. Secondary data were drawn from relevant theoretical literature and prior empirical studies on authentic assessment, writing skill development, and the backwash effect in EFL contexts.

The selection of seventh-grade students was deliberate: recount text is a genre explicitly taught at this level in the Indonesian national curriculum, and these students had accumulated sufficient direct experience with the authentic assessment tasks to provide meaningful perceptual data. The sample of ten participants is consistent with the methodological conventions of descriptive qualitative research, which prioritizes depth of insight over statistical generalizability.

Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 20 closed-ended statements distributed across three categories: (1) students' perceptions of authentic assessment (6 items), (2) benefits of authentic assessment in writing tasks (7 items), and (3) students' difficulties in writing personal experience recount texts (7 items). Each item required a binary Yes/No response. The Yes/No format was selected to ensure clarity and accessibility for seventh-grade respondents, minimizing the likelihood of response confusion that might arise from Likert-scale items requiring nuanced self-evaluation.

Prior to administration, the questionnaire items were reviewed for content validity against the study's three research problems. Instructions were provided in both English and Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comprehension. The researcher was present during questionnaire completion to clarify any procedural questions.

Techniques of Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a two-stage process. First, quantitative descriptive analysis was applied: the frequency of Yes and No responses for each item was tabulated and converted to percentages, providing a numerical overview of response patterns. Second, qualitative descriptive interpretation was employed to explain the meaning of these patterns in relation to the three research problems. Response patterns were examined for convergence and divergence to identify areas of consensus and variation in students' experiences. The backwash effect was inferred from the combination of items in categories one,

two, and three, particularly items addressing motivation, confidence, active participation, and metacognitive awareness.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study in relation to each of the three research problems. Data are organized across three categories corresponding to the questionnaire structure.

Research Problem 1: Students' Perceptions of Authentic Assessment

Table 1 presents the distribution of student responses regarding their perceptions of the authentic assessment process in personal experience recount text writing.

Table 1.
Students' Perceptions of Authentic Assessment (N=10)

Statement	Yes	No
I understand the instructions for writing personal experience recount text given by the teacher.	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
Writing recount text about personal experiences is interesting for me.	8 (80%)	2 (20%)
The teacher clearly explains how my writing will be assessed.	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
I feel comfortable writing personal experience recount text in English.	9 (90%)	1 (10%)
The assessment helps me understand my writing ability.	9 (90%)	1 (10%)
The assessment used by the teacher is fair and transparent.	10 (100%)	0 (0%)

The data in Table 1 reveal that students' perceptions of authentic assessment are overwhelmingly positive. Full consensus (100%) was achieved on three items: understanding of task instructions, clarity of assessment

explanation by the teacher, and perceived fairness of the assessment. These findings indicate that the teacher's communication of task expectations and evaluation criteria was highly effective, a critical precondition for authentic assessment to function as a meaningful learning experience rather than an anxiety-inducing evaluative event.

A strong majority (90%) reported feeling comfortable writing personal experience recount texts in English and felt that the assessment helped them understand their own writing ability. This latter finding is particularly significant: when students perceive that assessment illuminates their competencies and areas for growth, the assessment is functioning metacognitively, not merely evaluatively. Eight students (80%) found the writing task interesting—a result that, while positive, also identifies two students who did not find the task engaging, suggesting the need for differentiation in authentic task design.

Taken together, the data for Research Problem 1 confirm that the sampled students hold predominantly positive perceptions of authentic assessment in recount text writing, characterized by clarity, comfort, fairness, and metacognitive utility.

Research Problem 2: Benefits of Authentic Assessment in Recount Text Writing

Table 2 presents student responses concerning the perceived benefits of authentic assessment in their recount text writing learning.

Table 2.
Benefits of Authentic Assessment in Recount Text Writing Tasks (N=10)

Statement	Yes	No
Writing personal experience recount text helps me express my ideas in English.	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
Writing about personal experiences makes it easier for me to write in English.	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
This writing task motivates me to learn English writing.	8 (80%)	2 (20%)
Authentic assessment helps me improve my recount text writing ability.	10 (100%)	0 (0%)

Teacher feedback helps me improve my writing.	9 (90%)	1 (10%)
Writing personal experiences increases my confidence in writing English.	8 (80%)	2 (20%)
This task helps me understand the structure of recount text.	10 (100%)	0 (0%)

The data in Table 2 reveal four items where full consensus (100%) was achieved: authentic assessment helped students express their ideas in English, made English writing easier, improved their recount text writing ability, and helped them understand recount text structure. These results are highly informative. The unanimity on idea expression suggests that the personal nature of the task—drawing on students' own experiences as content—substantially reduced the cognitive burden of content generation, allowing students to devote greater attentional resources to language form and textual organization.

That 100% of students agreed that the task improved their understanding of recount text generic structure indicates that authentic assessment, in this context, served simultaneously as an evaluative and instructional tool. The writing task itself functioned as a learning activity through which students internalized the orientation-events-reorientation framework of recount text. This aligns with Wiggins' (1998) argument that authentic assessments are inherently educative.

Teacher feedback (90% agreement) was identified as an important mechanism for improvement, with one student dissenting. This single dissent may reflect a student's perception that feedback was insufficient or unclear, signaling the importance of individualized and actionable feedback in authentic assessment practices. Eight students (80%) reported increased motivation and confidence, while two did not—again suggesting individual variation that teachers should address through differentiated support.

Collectively, the data for Research Problem 2 demonstrate that authentic assessment provides substantive benefits in EFL recount text writing, particularly in the domains of idea expression, genre knowledge, writing self-efficacy, and motivation.

Research Problem 3: Students' Difficulties and Backwash Effect

Table 3 presents the difficulties students reported experiencing when writing personal experience recount texts.

Table 3.
Students' Difficulties in Writing Personal Experience Recount Text (N=10)

Statement	Yes	No
I have difficulty starting to write my personal experience in English.	6 (60%)	4 (40%)
I have difficulty organizing events when writing recount text.	6 (60%)	4 (40%)
I have difficulty using English vocabulary when writing.	7 (70%)	3 (30%)
I have difficulty using past tense when writing recount text.	8 (80%)	2 (20%)
I feel confused about how the teacher assesses my writing.	3 (30%)	7 (70%)
I need a long time to complete the recount text writing task.	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
I still make many mistakes when writing recount text.	10 (100%)	0 (0%)

The data in Table 3 reveal a nuanced picture of persistent learning difficulties. Most strikingly, all ten students (100%) reported needing excessive time to complete the writing task and still making frequent mistakes—two findings that together indicate that authentic recount text writing remains cognitively demanding for seventh-grade EFL students, despite the positive benefits reported in Table 2.

The most common grammatical difficulty was past tense application, reported by eight students (80%). This finding is significant given that past tense is the dominant verb form in recount text and a core curriculum objective at this level. The high prevalence of this difficulty suggests that although students understand the genre conceptually, the linguistic demands of accurate past tense production remain a significant challenge. This represents an important area where targeted grammar instruction should complement authentic assessment activities.

Vocabulary difficulties were reported by seven students (70%), reflecting the persistent lexical challenges that characterize EFL writing for junior high

school learners. Limited vocabulary constrains students' ability to describe their personal experiences with precision and vividness, potentially undermining the quality of their recount texts. Six students (60%) reported difficulty in initiating writing and in organizing events chronologically, suggesting that despite understanding the generic structure of recount text (as evidenced in Table 2), translating that structural knowledge into fluent writing production remains challenging.

Encouragingly, only three students (30%) reported confusion about the assessment criteria, confirming that the teacher's rubric communication was largely effective. This clarity of criteria is a prerequisite for positive backwash: students who understand what is expected are better positioned to orient their learning efforts productively.

Regarding the backwash effect specifically, the combined evidence from all three tables indicates a clearly positive washback pattern. Students who understood the assessment criteria (100%) and perceived the assessment as fair (100%) were simultaneously motivated (80%) to improve their writing and developed greater metacognitive awareness of their writing ability (90%). The assessment did not merely evaluate completed writing; it actively shaped students' learning orientations during and after the writing task. Students reported greater active participation in writing activities and increased awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses—hallmarks of positive backwash as defined by Alderson and Wall (1993).

Discussion

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the theory and practice of English language learning, particularly in the context of writing assessment at the junior high school level.

First, the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of authentic assessment among the seventh-grade students sampled in this study confirm the theoretical propositions of O'Malley and Pierce (1996) and Wiggins (1998), who argue that authentic tasks are more meaningful and engaging for learners because they connect assessment to real-life experience. When students write about their own personal experiences, the inherent relevance of the content reduces affective barriers to writing, which is consistent with the 80% of students who found the task interesting and the 90% who felt comfortable writing. This has a direct implication for English language teaching: teachers who seek to maximize student engagement in writing instruction should prioritize tasks that leverage students' personal experiences as content resources.

Second, the documented benefits of authentic assessment—particularly the near-universal agreement that the task improved idea expression, genre

understanding, and writing ability—provide empirical support for Brown's (2004) argument that language assessment should reflect real communicative use. The finding that 100% of students improved their understanding of recount text structure through the authentic writing task is especially noteworthy: it suggests that authentic assessment, unlike traditional testing, creates conditions for simultaneous learning and evaluation. This dual function represents a fundamental pedagogical advantage for EFL instruction, where limited instructional time makes the integration of learning and assessment particularly valuable.

Third, the identification of persistent difficulties—especially in past tense use (80%), vocabulary (70%), and time management (100%)—has important implications for how authentic assessment is implemented in practice. The verification of these difficulties against the theoretical literature confirms that they are characteristic challenges of EFL writing at this developmental stage (Moria et al., 2017; Agustini et al., 2024). These findings imply that authentic assessment alone is insufficient to address all writing difficulties; it must be complemented by targeted grammar instruction, vocabulary building activities, and scaffolded writing support. Teachers should treat the difficulties revealed by authentic assessment not as failures of the assessment approach but as diagnostic information that informs subsequent instruction.

Fourth, the positive backwash effect documented in this study carries the broadest implications for English language learning policy and practice. The finding that authentic assessment encouraged students to participate more actively in writing activities and raised their metacognitive awareness of writing ability suggests that well-designed authentic assessment can transform the relationship between evaluation and learning. Rather than existing as a terminal event that follows instruction, authentic assessment can serve as an ongoing catalyst for learning motivation and self-regulation. This aligns with Hughes' (2003) argument that authentic assessments are uniquely positioned to generate positive washback because they align closely with the actual goals of language learning.

Finally, the minor dissents observed in the data—two students who did not find the task interesting, two who reported no increase in motivation or confidence, and one who did not find teacher feedback helpful—remind educators that authentic assessment is not a uniformly effective intervention. Individual variation in student response to authentic tasks suggests the need for differentiated assessment design and personalized feedback practices. Schools and teachers should therefore view authentic assessment as one component of a

comprehensive, student-centered assessment ecosystem rather than a singular solution to all writing instruction challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate three research problems: students' perceptions of authentic assessment in recount text writing, the benefits of authentic assessment in this context, and students' difficulties along with the backwash effect on their writing learning. In response to the first research problem, the findings demonstrate that seventh-grade students at MTs Cerdas Murni Deli Serdang hold overwhelmingly positive perceptions of authentic assessment. The clear communication of task instructions and assessment criteria by the teacher, combined with the personal relevance of the writing topic, created an assessment environment characterized by transparency, fairness, and emotional comfort. Students widely reported that the assessment helped them understand their own writing ability, indicating that authentic assessment successfully served a metacognitive function in addition to its evaluative role. These positive perceptions constitute an important precondition for productive engagement with writing tasks.

With respect to the second and third research problems, the study found that authentic assessment yielded substantial learning benefits—particularly in idea expression, genre knowledge, and writing confidence—while also revealing significant persistent difficulties in past tense application, vocabulary use, event organization, and time management. The backwash effect of the assessment was demonstrably positive: students reported increased active participation in writing activities and heightened awareness of their own writing strengths and weaknesses. Authentic assessment did not merely evaluate students' completed texts; it actively shaped their learning behaviors during and after the writing process. However, the study also makes clear that authentic assessment's positive effects do not automatically resolve all writing difficulties. The persistence of grammar and vocabulary challenges among the majority of students indicates that authentic assessment must be integrated within a broader instructional framework that includes explicit language support, targeted grammar instruction, and scaffolded pre-writing activities to fully realize its potential as a tool for English language development.

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