



Elementary students' writing difficulties in Makassar: Patterns, challenges, and learning implications

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Abstract

This study investigates elementary students' writing difficulties in Makassar, Indonesia, using a convergent mixed-methods design. It responds to the need for contextually grounded evidence that not only maps students' writing performance across analytic dimensions but also explains the classroom conditions shaping those patterns. Quantitative data were collected from 170 upper-elementary students through a classroom-based writing test assessed with an analytic rubric covering content development, organization, vocabulary use, sentence construction, and mechanics. Qualitative data were obtained through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers. The findings revealed that students' overall writing performance was moderate, with a total mean score of 66.00 (SD = 9.84). Most students were in the moderate category (60.0%), followed by the low category (22.9%) and the high category (17.1%). Dimensionally, students performed better in mechanics/spelling (M = 14.63, SD = 2.87) and vocabulary use (M = 14.11, SD = 2.94), while content development (M = 12.48, SD = 3.21) and sentence construction (M = 11.76, SD = 3.35) remained the most fragile areas. Writing performance also showed gradual improvement across grade levels. Qualitative findings identified four interrelated challenges: limited idea development, weak sentence construction and grammatical control, restricted opportunities for meaningful writing practice, and product-oriented assessment with limited feedback scaffolding. These findings indicate that students' writing difficulties are shaped by both learner-level limitations and classroom instructional conditions. The study suggests the need for process-based writing pedagogy that strengthens idea elaboration, sentence-level support, sustained writing practice, and revision-oriented feedback.

Introduction

Writing is a foundational component of literacy development in elementary education because it enables students to generate ideas, organize meaning, and communicate understanding through written language. In contemporary scholarship, writing is no longer viewed as a simple act of transcription, but as a multidimensional competence shaped by linguistic knowledge, cognitive regulation, motivation, and instructional experience. Recent studies show that primary students' writing performance is associated with the interaction of transcription skills, executive functions, self-efficacy, and attitudes toward writing (Rocha

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et al., 2024; Hamsiah et al., 2026). This perspective is reinforced by evidence that oral language abilities in the early years of schooling are closely related to the quality of children's written production (Sumner et al., 2026). At the same time, children themselves experience writing not merely as an academic task, but as a personal and social practice that shapes confidence, identity, and classroom participation (Young et al., 2026; Malik, 2025). These findings indicate that weaknesses in elementary students' writing should not be reduced to surface-level textual errors alone, but need to be interpreted within a broader learning ecology in which language, cognition, affect, and instruction intersect.

From a pedagogical perspective, the quality of writing instruction remains one of the strongest determinants of students' writing achievement in the primary years. A meta-analysis of writing interventions found that instruction improves students' written composition, although the magnitude of improvement varies according to instructional focus and learner characteristics (Kim et al., 2021). Survey-based evidence also shows substantial variation in how teachers teach writing in the early grades, including differences in time allocation, task design, and perceived preparedness to teach writing (Graham et al., 2021). Observational studies further demonstrate that the amount and type of writing instruction shape the opportunities students have to develop writing proficiency (Guo et al., 2023). More recent evidence suggests that writing is still not fully integrated into broader literacy teaching, even though it can strongly support reading development in elementary classrooms (Hebert et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies suggest that students' writing performance cannot be meaningfully understood apart from the instructional conditions in which writing is taught and practiced.

Writing development is also influenced by motivational and socio-emotional factors. A systematic review of K–5 students' self-reports found that writing motivation is best understood through students' own perceptions of confidence, task value, support, and classroom experience (Alves-Wold et al., 2023). A subsequent review similarly showed that students' motivation to write emerges from interconnected academic, behavioral, and contextual influences rather than from a single psychological trait. This is consistent with recent findings that children understand writing competence through academic, personal, and social dimensions, with encouragement, reader awareness, and collaboration strengthening their sense of capability. Family support also contributes to writing development, although its effects are often constrained by limited time, uncertainty about effective support, and uneven communication between school and home (Algorri-Diez et al., 2025). Therefore, any serious analysis of elementary students' writing difficulties should treat writing as a cognitive, affective, and social practice simultaneously.

Recent scholarship also highlights the growing importance of multidimensional assessment and instructional scaffolding in elementary writing. Studies of early writing assessment suggest that children's writing is best interpreted through multiple dimensions rather than a single overall score, because different writing tasks reveal different component skills (Zhang et al., 2025). Research on writing assessment further shows that raters may judge linguistic and structural features differently, and that surface-level features can influence ratings of broader text quality (Trüb et al., 2025; Trüb et al., 2026). At the classroom level, sustained opportunities to write meaningfully, explicit modelling, guided practice, and feedback are increasingly recognized as crucial supports for writing development (Skar et al., 2024; Goldman et al., 2024). These insights are important because they suggest that writing difficulties may reflect not only weaknesses in student ability, but also limits in the ways writing is assessed, scaffolded, and practiced in school.

The expansion of digital learning has introduced new possibilities for writing instruction in primary education, but it has also raised new pedagogical demands. Experimental evidence indicates that tablet-based writing instruction can improve primary students' writing performance and writing knowledge when compared with conventional paper-based approaches (Yamaç et al., 2020). Recent reviews likewise conclude that digital technologies can support writing instruction when they are embedded in purposeful pedagogy rather than used as mere technological add-ons (Oakley, 2026). In the Indonesian context, studies on digital storytelling, serial-image media, and other instructional tools generally report improvement in

students' writing outcomes, especially in helping learners generate ideas and sustain engagement (Nuroh & Adiyawati, 2023; Izah & Cahyaningtyas, 2025). However, technological innovation does not automatically resolve deeper writing difficulties. Students may still struggle with idea development, text organization, vocabulary use, and sentence construction when instruction does not explicitly scaffold the writing process. Thus, the central issue is no longer simply whether innovation is available, but whether it meaningfully addresses the actual patterns and sources of students' writing difficulties.

Within Indonesian elementary education, research on writing has expanded, yet much of it remains focused on intervention effects, isolated genres, or limited classroom cases. Existing studies have largely examined whether specific media or techniques improve narrative writing performance, or how particular student texts reflect genre features and linguistic development (Nuroh & Adiyawati, 2023; Izah & Cahyaningtyas, 2025; Alfia et al., 2025). Other studies have proposed broader instructional models for primary-school writing, indicating growing recognition that writing development requires more systematic support (Yarmi, 2025). Although these studies are valuable, they still leave an important gap. The field lacks a contextually grounded account that maps elementary students' writing performance across analytic dimensions while also explaining the classroom challenges that shape those patterns in a specific urban context such as Makassar. As a result, there remains limited evidence on how students' writing difficulties appear in practice, which dimensions are most fragile, and how instructional conditions contribute to those difficulties in everyday classroom settings.

This gap is both empirical and methodological. Empirically, research has not yet provided a sufficiently detailed profile of elementary students' writing difficulties in Makassar as an under-discussed urban context in eastern Indonesia. Methodologically, much of the available work either reports outcomes of specific interventions or describes classroom cases without integrating measurable patterns of student performance with qualitative explanations of why those patterns occur. Quantitative evidence is useful for identifying which dimensions of writing are stronger or weaker, but scores alone cannot adequately explain why students struggle with idea development, sentence construction, or text organization. For that reason, qualitative evidence is needed to illuminate the instructional, procedural, and assessment-related conditions that underlie the observed performance patterns. A convergent mixed-methods design is therefore particularly appropriate because it allows writing difficulties to be understood not only as score patterns, but also as pedagogically situated phenomena shaped by classroom practice.

Responding to this gap, the present study investigates the writing difficulties of elementary students in Makassar through a convergent mixed-methods design. The study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it maps students' writing performance across five analytic dimensions content development, organization, vocabulary, sentence construction, and mechanics rather than treating writing as a single overall score. Second, it explains these performance patterns through classroom observations and teacher interviews, thereby linking student texts to the instructional conditions in which they are produced. Third, it extends current scholarship by bringing evidence from an underrepresented urban context in eastern Indonesia, offering a more locally grounded and pedagogically meaningful understanding of elementary writing development.

Based on these considerations, the problem addressed in this study is the limited evidence on how elementary students' writing difficulties are patterned across analytic dimensions and how classroom conditions in Makassar help explain those difficulties. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What patterns characterize the writing skills of elementary students in Makassar?

RQ2. What challenges shape these writing patterns, and what pedagogical implications emerge for elementary writing instruction in Makassar?

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to investigate elementary students' writing difficulties in Makassar. The design was selected because the research objectives required both measurement and explanation. Quantitative data were needed to identify the overall patterns of students' writing performance across analytic dimensions, but numerical scores alone could not adequately explain why certain dimensions were stronger or weaker than others. To address this limitation, qualitative data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured teacher interviews to illuminate the instructional, procedural, and assessment-related conditions underlying the quantitative patterns. In line with the logic of convergent mixed methods, both strands were conducted within the same general period, analyzed separately, and then integrated during interpretation in order to generate a more comprehensive understanding of students' writing development and its pedagogical implications. This justification directly addresses the concern raised by the reviewer about why quantitative evidence alone was insufficient and why it needed to be combined with qualitative inquiry.

Participants

The quantitative strand involved 170 upper-elementary students drawn from public and private elementary schools in Makassar. Students in Grades IV, V, and VI were included because these levels were considered developmentally ready to complete structured writing tasks requiring idea development, organization, and sentence construction (See Table 1). The sample represented variation in gender, grade level, and school type, thereby allowing the study to generate a broader profile of writing performance in upper elementary classrooms. The distribution of the sample consisted of 82 male students and 88 female students; 56 students from Grade IV, 58 from Grade V, and 56 from Grade VI; and 110 students from public schools and 60 from private schools. These characteristics indicate that the quantitative strand was designed to provide a balanced descriptive account rather than a narrowly homogeneous sample. The qualitative strand involved 15 teachers who were purposively selected because they were directly involved in writing instruction at the upper-elementary level and had relevant classroom experience (See Table 2). The teachers represented both public and private schools and taught across Grades IV, V, and VI, enabling the study to capture variation in instructional practice across different classroom settings. Their teaching experience ranged from 4 to 15 years, which strengthened the depth of qualitative insight into recurring writing difficulties and classroom responses. To ensure confidentiality, each teacher was assigned a code from T-1 to T-15. This purposive selection was appropriate because the qualitative strand sought explanatory depth rather than statistical representativeness.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Student Participants (N = 170)

Category	Subcategory	n	%
Gender	Male	82	48.2
	Female	88	51.8
Grade Level	Grade IV	56	32.9
	Grade V	58	34.1
	Grade VI	56	32.9
School Type	Public School	110	64.7
	Private School	60	35.3

Table 2. Interview Respondents

Code	Role	School Type	Grade Taught	Teaching Experience
T-1	Teacher	Public	Grade IV	5 years
T-2	Teacher	Public	Grade V	7 years
T-3	Teacher	Public	Grade VI	10 years
T-4	Teacher	Private	Grade IV	6 years
T-5	Teacher	Private	Grade V	8 years
T-6	Teacher	Public	Grade VI	12 years
T-7	Teacher	Public	Grade IV	9 years
T-8	Teacher	Private	Grade V	4 years
T-9	Teacher	Public	Grade VI	11 years
T-10	Teacher	Public	Grade IV	13 years
T-11	Teacher	Private	Grade V	6 years
T-12	Teacher	Public	Grade VI	15 years
T-13	Teacher	Public	Grade IV	7 years
T-14	Teacher	Private	Grade V	9 years
T-15	Teacher	Public	Grade VI	14 years

Instruments

This study employed four instruments: a writing test, an analytic scoring rubric, a classroom observation checklist, and a semi-structured interview guide. The writing test was used to generate quantitative data on students' writing performance, while the rubric was used to assess the quality of each text across multiple dimensions of writing. The decision to use an analytic rather than a holistic rubric was grounded in the view that elementary writing should be examined as a multidimensional construct, including productivity, organization, and text quality rather than as a single overall score (Martin & Dockrell, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). In addition, recent work on primary writing assessment shows that raters may judge linguistic and structural features differently, making clearly specified criteria essential for fairer interpretation of students' written performance (Trüb et al., 2025). Accordingly, the rubric in this study assessed five dimensions: content development, text organization, vocabulary use, sentence construction/grammar, and mechanics/spelling.

The qualitative strand used a classroom observation checklist and a semi-structured interview guide. The observation checklist was designed to document writing instruction as it occurred in class, including the amount of writing time, teacher modeling, feedback practices, and opportunities for students to engage in meaningful writing tasks. These indicators were informed by observational and survey studies showing that writing instruction in primary classrooms varies in both amount and type, and that such variation is associated with differences in students' writing development (Graham et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2025). The semi-structured interview guide was administered to 15 teacher respondents coded T-1 to T-15. It focused on teachers' perceptions of students' writing difficulties, instructional strategies, assessment practices, and classroom adaptations for struggling writers. This design was informed by recent research indicating that teachers' instructional adaptations and classroom decisions are central to understanding why some students continue to struggle with writing in the primary grades (Malpique et al., 2024).

Table 3. Instruments Used in the Study

Instrument	Purpose	Main Indicators / Dimensions	Source Basis
Writing test	To measure students' writing performance	Content development, organization, vocabulary, sentence construction/grammar, mechanics/spelling	Adapted from analytic approaches to elementary writing assessment (Martin & Dockrell, 2024; Trüb et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025)
Analytic scoring rubric	To score students' written products systematically	Five analytic dimensions with scaled performance levels	Informed by multidimensional writing assessment literature (Martin & Dockrell, 2024; Trüb et al., 2025)
Classroom observation checklist	To document actual writing instruction in classrooms	Writing time, modeling, guided practice, feedback, meaningful writing opportunities	Based on classroom writing instruction studies (Graham et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2025)
Semi-structured interview guide	To explore teachers' perspectives on students' writing challenges and instruction	Perceived difficulties, teaching strategies, assessment, classroom adaptations	Informed by studies on teacher practice and adaptations for struggling writers (Graham et al., 2021; Malpique et al., 2024)

Data Collection

Data collection followed the convergent mixed-methods design and was conducted in two complementary strands. In the quantitative strand, students completed a classroom-based writing test during regular school hours. Each student was asked to produce a short composition based on a prompt appropriate to his or her grade level. The completed texts were then scored using the analytic rubric covering content development, organization, vocabulary use, sentence construction, and mechanics. This procedure enabled the researchers to generate dimension-based writing scores and identify the dominant performance patterns across the sample.

In the qualitative strand, classroom observations were conducted to document how writing instruction was implemented in actual classroom practice. The observations focused on instructional routines such as teacher explanation, modelling, writing practice, feedback, and the extent to which students were given opportunities to write meaningfully rather than merely complete brief controlled tasks. After the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 teachers. These interviews explored recurring student difficulties in writing, instructional approaches used by teachers, assessment routines, and the classroom constraints that shaped students' writing development. Collecting both strands during the same general period enabled the study to compare measured writing performance with contextual evidence from classroom practice and teacher experience. This also responds to the reviewer's request that the mixed-methods integration be made more explicit.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the writing test were analyzed descriptively using mean scores, standard deviations, percentages, and score distributions across the five writing dimensions. Additional descriptive comparisons were made across grade levels, gender, and school type in order to provide a more detailed profile of students' writing performance. These descriptive procedures were appropriate because the first research question aimed to identify the patterns characterizing students' writing skills rather than to test causal relationships. The results showed that students' writing performance was generally moderate, with

stronger scores in mechanics and vocabulary and weaker scores in content development and sentence construction.

Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed thematically. The researchers first read the observation notes and interview data repeatedly to gain familiarity with the material. The data were then coded to identify recurring patterns related to students' writing difficulties and classroom instruction. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into broader categories, which were then interpreted as themes explaining the quantitative profile. This process resulted in four major challenges: limited idea development, weak sentence construction and grammatical control, restricted opportunities for meaningful writing practice, and product-oriented assessment with limited feedback scaffolding. These themes provided explanatory depth for the uneven writing profile identified in the quantitative strand.

After both strands had been analyzed independently, the findings were integrated during interpretation using a convergent procedure. The quantitative results identified which dimensions of writing were most fragile, while the qualitative findings helped explain why those dimensions remained weak in classroom practice. In particular, the relatively low scores in content development and sentence construction converged with the qualitative themes showing limited idea elaboration, insufficient sentence-level support, restricted writing opportunities, and narrow feedback practices. In this way, the integration stage did not simply place quantitative and qualitative findings side by side, but demonstrated how qualitative evidence clarified the meaning of the quantitative results. This integrated reading strengthens the methodological coherence of the study and directly responds to the reviewer's request for clearer mixed-methods integration.

Results

The Emerging Patterns of Elementary Students' Writing Skills in Makassar

The quantitative findings showed that the writing skills of elementary students in Makassar were distributed at a moderate overall level, with a total mean score of 66.00 (SD = 9.84) out of 100. This overall pattern suggests that most students had acquired basic writing competence, but their texts still reflected uneven control across dimensions of writing. As presented in Table 4, the majority of students were clustered in the moderate performance category (n = 102; 60.0%), followed by the low category (n = 39; 22.9%) and the high category (n = 29; 17.1%). This distribution indicates that while a substantial proportion of students were able to produce understandable written texts, relatively few had reached a level of writing that could be categorized as strong or well-developed. Thus, the overall pattern was not one of uniform deficiency, but of partial mastery with notable limitations in higher-order composing skills.

Table 4. Distribution of Students' Writing Performance (N = 170)

Performance Category	Score Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
High	80–100	29	17.1
Moderate	60–79	102	60.0
Low	0–59	39	22.9
Total		170	100.0

A dimension-level analysis revealed a differentiated profile of students' writing ability. As shown in Table 5, mechanics/spelling emerged as the strongest aspect (M = 14.63, SD = 2.87), followed by vocabulary use (M = 14.11, SD = 2.94) and organization (M = 13.02, SD = 3.08). By contrast, the lowest mean score was found in sentence construction (M = 11.76, SD = 3.35), followed by content development (M = 12.48, SD = 3.21). This pattern suggests that students were

generally more capable of handling surface-level or familiar features of writing, such as spelling and basic word choice, than more complex aspects requiring idea elaboration, syntactic control, and sustained textual development. In other words, many students could produce short written responses with recognizable structure, yet struggled to expand ideas clearly and construct grammatically stable sentences.

Table 5. Mean Scores Across Writing Dimensions

Writing Dimension	Maximum Score	Mean	SD	Rank	Interpretation
Content Development	20	12.48	3.21	4	Moderate
Organization	20	13.02	3.08	3	Moderate
Vocabulary Use	20	14.11	2.94	2	Moderate to Good
Sentence Construction	20	11.76	3.35	5	Moderate
Mechanics/Spelling	20	14.63	2.87	1	Good
Total Score	100	66.00	9.84		Moderate

The findings also showed a gradual pattern of writing improvement across grade levels. As displayed in Table 6, Grade IV students obtained the lowest mean score ($M = 62.84$, $SD = 8.91$), followed by Grade V ($M = 66.23$, $SD = 9.37$) and Grade VI ($M = 69.02$, $SD = 9.81$). The category distribution further confirmed this developmental trend. In Grade IV, 30.4% of students were still in the low category, whereas the proportion declined to 20.7% in Grade V and 17.9% in Grade VI. Conversely, the percentage of students in the high category increased from 10.7% in Grade IV to 17.2% in Grade V and 23.2% in Grade VI. This pattern indicates that writing skills tended to improve as students progressed through upper elementary grades, although even at Grade VI the majority of students remained in the moderate category. Therefore, writing development appeared incremental rather than dramatic, with progress visible but not sufficient to eliminate recurring weaknesses in composition.

Table 6. Writing Performance by Grade Level

Grade Level	n	Mean	SD	High n (%)	Moderate n (%)	Low n (%)
Grade IV	56	62.84	8.91	6 (10.7)	33 (58.9)	17 (30.4)
Grade V	58	66.23	9.37	10 (17.2)	36 (62.1)	12 (20.7)
Grade VI	56	69.02	9.81	13 (23.2)	33 (58.9)	10 (17.9)
Total	170	66.00	9.84	29 (17.1)	102 (60.0)	39 (22.9)

Descriptive comparisons by gender and school type also revealed modest variations in performance. Female students obtained a slightly higher mean score ($M = 67.21$, $SD = 9.76$) than male students ($M = 64.71$, $SD = 9.77$). Similarly, students from public schools recorded a somewhat higher mean ($M = 66.82$, $SD = 9.61$) than those from private schools ($M = 64.50$, $SD = 10.11$), as shown in Table 7. At the dimensional level, Grade VI students consistently outperformed lower grades in all five aspects, particularly in content development and organization, suggesting that compositional maturity increased with school level. Taken together, these findings show that the writing skills of elementary students in Makassar were characterized by moderate overall performance, stronger control of mechanics and vocabulary, weaker control of content development and sentence construction, and gradual improvement across grade levels. The results therefore point to an uneven writing profile in which basic written production was more developed than higher-order composing ability.

Table 7. Mean Scores by Gender and School Type

Category	Subcategory	n	Mean	SD
Gender	Male	82	64.71	9.77
	Female	88	67.21	9.76
School Type	Public	110	66.82	9.61
	Private	60	64.50	10.11

Table 8. Mean Scores Across Writing Dimensions by Grade Level

Writing Dimension	Grade IV	Grade V	Grade VI
Content Development	11.79	12.43	13.23
Organization	12.36	13.05	13.67
Vocabulary Use	13.41	14.15	14.79
Sentence Construction	11.08	11.85	12.34
Mechanics/Spelling	14.20	14.75	14.99
Total Mean Score	62.84	66.23	69.02

The findings indicate that elementary students in Makassar demonstrated a moderate level of writing performance overall, with clear variation across dimensions and participant groups. Students performed better in mechanics and vocabulary than in content development and sentence construction, suggesting stronger control of surface-level writing features than higher-order composing skills. Descriptively, writing performance improved across grade levels, with Grade VI students outperforming Grades IV and V in all dimensions. Female students and public-school students also showed slightly higher mean scores than their counterparts. Overall, the results portray an uneven writing profile in which foundational writing ability had emerged, but more complex textual development remained limited.

Challenges Shaping Elementary Students' Writing Patterns and Their Pedagogical Implications in Makassar

The qualitative findings revealed that the writing patterns identified in RQ1 were shaped by four interrelated challenges: limited idea development, weak sentence construction and grammatical control, restricted opportunities for meaningful writing practice, and product-oriented assessment with limited feedback scaffolding. These themes were not presented as separate issues unrelated to the quantitative results; rather, they help explain the specific profile identified in RQ1. In particular, the weak scores in content development and sentence construction correspond closely to the difficulties teachers observed in students' inability to elaborate ideas and form stable written sentences. At the same time, students' relatively stronger performance in mechanics and vocabulary appears to be associated with classroom practices that more often emphasize visible correctness, task completion, and short written responses than extended composing processes. Thus, the qualitative strand clarifies why students' writing appeared readable at the surface level while remaining underdeveloped in elaboration, coherence, and syntactic stability.

Limited Idea Development

The most prominent theme concerned students' difficulty in generating and expanding ideas. Teachers consistently reported that many students were able to begin a writing task but could not sustain or elaborate their ideas into fuller paragraphs. This finding corresponds closely with the quantitative result showing that content development was one of the weakest dimensions of writing performance. In many cases, students produced very short texts with repetitive information, minimal detail, and abrupt closure. Teachers explained that students often relied on a single idea and had trouble extending it into supporting sentences. As one teacher stated, *"Most students can write the first sentence, but after that they stop because*

they do not know how to continue their ideas” (T-3). A similar concern was raised by another respondent, who noted, “They understand the topic orally, but when they have to write, the ideas become very limited and repetitive” (T-8).

Classroom observations supported this view. During writing sessions, several students paused for long periods before writing additional sentences, and some repeatedly asked the teacher what they should write next. This suggests that the problem was not simply unwillingness to write, but limited support in transforming ideas into extended written content. One teacher explicitly connected this issue to students’ dependence on models: *“If I give an example, they can imitate it, but when they must write from their own thinking, many of them struggle” (T-11).* Another respondent emphasized that idea development was especially difficult when students were asked to write beyond familiar daily topics: *“When the topic is close to their everyday life, they can write more, but with less familiar topics, their writing becomes very short” (T-5).* These accounts indicate that weak content development was shaped by both limited ideational fluency and insufficient scaffolding for elaboration.

Weak Sentence Construction and Grammatical Control

A second major theme concerned students’ difficulty in constructing grammatically stable and coherent sentences. This theme helps explain why sentence construction emerged as the lowest-scoring dimension in RQ1. Teachers described students’ writing as often consisting of fragmented sentences, unclear word order, incomplete clauses, and unstable connections between ideas. In other words, many students could produce words and short phrases, but struggled to shape them into full, well-connected sentences. One respondent explained, *“The students usually have the words in mind, but they cannot arrange them into correct and complete sentences” (T-1).* Another teacher similarly observed, *“Their writing often jumps from one point to another because they do not yet control sentence connection well” (T-6).*

Several teachers also noted that students tended to transfer oral expression directly into writing without adapting it to written form. As a result, their compositions frequently contained spoken-like structures, missing connectors, and loosely organized sentence sequences. According to T-10, *“What they say orally is often written exactly the same way, so the writing sounds incomplete and less organized”.* Likewise, T-14 stated, *“Many of them know the meaning they want to express, but they are confused about how to write it in proper sentence form”.* This pattern suggests that sentence-level difficulty was not only grammatical, but also compositional, involving the challenge of converting oral language into written discourse. Therefore, students’ weak performance in sentence construction appears to reflect a broader problem in written language control rather than isolated grammar errors alone.

Restricted Opportunities for Meaningful Writing Practice

A third theme was the limited amount of sustained writing practice available to students in daily classroom learning. Teachers reported that writing activities were often short, highly controlled, and subordinate to other literacy tasks such as reading comprehension or answering textbook questions. This finding helps explain why students showed only moderate overall writing performance despite demonstrating emerging foundational abilities. If writing is practiced only occasionally or in highly constrained formats, students have fewer opportunities to develop fluency, elaboration, and compositional endurance. As one teacher explained, *“Writing is taught, but not every day, and usually only in short exercises, not full compositions” (T-2).* Another respondent echoed this concern: *“Students are more often asked to answer questions than to develop their own writing in paragraphs” (T-9).*

Observational data showed that classroom writing tasks were frequently limited to sentence completion, copying, or brief responses rather than extended writing. Teachers themselves acknowledged that time constraints and curriculum demands affected the amount of writing practice students received. T-7 noted, *“We want students to write more, but classroom time is limited, so sometimes writing becomes only a small part of the lesson”.* Similarly, T-13 remarked, *“Because of the lesson target, writing practice*

is often shortened, and students do not have enough time to revise or expand their ideas". These findings suggest that students' writing profile in Makassar was shaped not only by their ability level, but also by the restricted instructional space given to writing as a process. The result is a pattern in which students can produce basic written responses, but remain less prepared for extended and more cognitively demanding composition.

Product-Oriented Assessment and Limited Feedback Scaffolding

The fourth theme concerned the dominance of product-oriented assessment and limited process-based feedback. Teachers reported that writing was often evaluated in terms of neatness, spelling, punctuation, and task completion, while less attention was given to planning, revising, or reorganizing ideas. This theme helps explain why students performed relatively better in mechanics/spelling than in higher-order dimensions such as content development and sentence construction. In many classrooms, students appeared to receive stronger correction on visible surface features than on the deeper structure of their ideas. One teacher stated, *"Usually I first check spelling, punctuation, and whether the task is completed, because those are the easiest things to see quickly"* (T-4). Another teacher admitted, *"We rarely have enough time to guide students through revision step by step, so the focus is mostly on the final product"* (T-12).

This pattern was also reflected in teachers' descriptions of feedback practices. Rather than providing dialogic guidance on how to elaborate ideas or improve sentence connection, feedback was often brief and correction-oriented. T-15 explained, *"If the class is large, it is difficult to give detailed feedback to each student, so correction tends to be general"*. In a similar vein, T-5 commented, *"Students are told what is wrong, but not always shown how to improve the text in the next draft"*. These findings suggest that students' uneven writing profile was reinforced by an assessment culture that privileged accuracy and completion over revision and meaning-making. As a result, students became relatively more familiar with correcting mechanics than with developing ideas or restructuring sentences. This helps clarify why surface-level dimensions appeared stronger than higher-order composition in the quantitative findings.

When the two strands were read together, a coherent pattern emerged. The quantitative findings identified an uneven writing profile marked by moderate overall performance, relative strength in mechanics and vocabulary, and persistent weakness in content development and sentence construction. The qualitative findings explained this profile by showing that students often lacked support for idea expansion, sentence-level construction, sustained writing practice, and revision-oriented feedback. In this sense, the qualitative data did not merely accompany the quantitative results, but clarified why students' writing appeared more developed in visible and rule-governed aspects than in elaborative and compositional ones. Overall, the integrated findings suggest that elementary students' writing difficulties in Makassar were shaped by both learner-related and instruction-related factors.

Table 9. Themes Emerging from Interview Respondents

Theme	Description	Respondents
Limited idea development	Students struggled to expand topics into coherent and detailed written content	T-3, T-5, T-8, T-11
Weak sentence construction and grammatical control	Students experienced difficulty forming complete, stable, and connected sentences	T-1, T-6, T-10, T-14
Restricted opportunities for meaningful writing practice	Writing was infrequent and often limited to short, controlled tasks	T-2, T-7, T-9, T-13
Product-oriented assessment and limited feedback	Teachers tended to focus on final products, spelling, and neatness rather than process-based revision	T-4, T-5, T-12, T-15

To preserve the distinction between results and interpretation, the pedagogical implications of these integrated findings are discussed in the following section rather than being elaborated extensively in the Results section.

Discussion

The first major finding of this study is that elementary students in Makassar demonstrated a moderate but uneven writing profile, with stronger performance in mechanics and vocabulary than in content development and sentence construction. This pattern is significant because it suggests that many students had acquired partial control over visible and rule-governed features of writing, yet had not developed the same level of competence in higher-order composing processes. Rather than reading this profile as evidence of a simple writing deficit, the findings are better understood as evidence of asymmetrical writing development. This interpretation is consistent with current scholarship that treats elementary writing as a multidimensional construct rather than a single global ability, in which different components of writing develop at different rates and under different instructional conditions (Martin & Dockrell, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). It also aligns with recent research showing that variation in writing quality among primary-school students is shaped not only by individual linguistic skill, but also by classroom-level factors and uneven revision development (Arias-Gundín et al., 2025; Lillich et al., 2025; Malpique et al., 2025). From this perspective, the Makassar findings reinforce the importance of assessing writing dimension by dimension, because overall scores alone would conceal the specific areas in which students remain most fragile.

A second important point concerns the persistent weakness of content development. In this study, students often produced short, repetitive, and weakly elaborated texts, and teachers repeatedly described their difficulty in sustaining ideas beyond an opening sentence or a single familiar point. This pattern is not trivial, because idea development is central to writing as meaning-making rather than mere transcription. The finding resonates with recent work on dialogic writing and revision, which shows that upper-primary students do not automatically engage in elaboration, audience awareness, or meaningful revision unless these are explicitly scaffolded in instruction (Bouwer & van der Veen, 2024; Bouwer et al., 2024). It can also be interpreted through research on how primary students and teachers define “good writing.” González-Díaz, Parr, and Nourie (2025a) found that children often understand good writing primarily in terms of correctness, while teachers themselves may position writing between technical accuracy and communicative quality. In a related study, González-Díaz, Parr, and Nourie (2025b) showed that when schools deliberately broaden students’ conception of quality writing, students are better able to develop voice and rhetorical control. Viewed in this light, the weak idea development found in Makassar may not simply reflect students’ inability to think of ideas, but also a school writing culture in which correctness is more visible, more frequently evaluated, and therefore more strongly internalized than elaboration, detail, and rhetorical development.

The third major finding concerns the persistent weakness of sentence construction and grammatical control. This dimension received the lowest quantitative score and was repeatedly identified by teachers as a major source of difficulty. Importantly, this problem should not be interpreted merely as isolated grammar error. Rather, it appears to reflect a broader challenge in helping students move from oral language patterns to coherent written expression. This interpretation is consistent with evidence showing that oral language abilities are closely related to the quality of children’s written production (Sumner et al., 2026). It is also supported by intervention research showing that sentence-level instruction matters when it is embedded within composing rather than treated only as decontextualized correction. Tavsanlı et al. (2023) demonstrated that sentence-combining instruction can improve sentence fluency, text length, and overall writing quality in primary-grade learners. Read against this literature, the Makassar findings suggest that

students' sentence problems are not simply proof that they "do not know grammar," but evidence that sentence construction has not yet been systematically supported as a bridge between language knowledge and text production. This makes sentence-level scaffolding a central pedagogical priority rather than a minor remedial issue.

A fourth discussion point concerns the limited opportunities students had for meaningful and sustained writing practice. The qualitative findings showed that writing was often brief, tightly controlled, and positioned as a secondary or task-completion activity rather than a recursive process involving planning, composing, revising, and extending ideas. This helps explain why students' overall writing profile was moderate and why improvement across grade levels remained gradual rather than substantial. These findings are strongly supported by earlier studies showing that the amount and type of writing instruction shape children's opportunities to develop proficiency (Graham et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2023). They also align with evidence that increasing meaningful writing opportunities across the primary grades can positively influence development over time (Skar et al., 2024). In this sense, the limited writing opportunities observed in this study should not be read as a minor scheduling issue, but as a structural instructional constraint. When students are rarely asked to draft longer texts, revisit ideas, or write for purposes beyond short controlled responses, they may become able to produce text, but not necessarily to develop it. The present study therefore supports the view that writing growth depends not only on student readiness, but also on whether classrooms make room for writing as sustained practice.

The fifth major finding is that classroom assessment and feedback practices appeared to privilege product over process. Teachers often described giving priority to spelling, punctuation, neatness, and task completion because these were the most visible and manageable aspects of student writing, especially in large classes. This helps explain why mechanics emerged as the strongest writing dimension while idea development and sentence construction remained weak. The finding is consistent with recent research arguing that feedback in primary writing becomes educationally powerful when it supports self-regulation, revision, and meaning-making rather than surface correction alone (Fiskerstrand & Gamlem, 2023). Their subsequent study also shows that oral feedback interactions in young pupils' writing are consequential, but often uneven in quality and focus (Fiskerstrand & Gamlem, 2024). Similarly, Hornstein et al. (2025) found in a meta-analysis that peer feedback becomes substantially more effective when students are explicitly taught how to give and use it. The Makassar data can also be read through Arias-Gundín et al. (2025), who identified distinct revision profiles among upper-primary students and showed a clear relationship between stronger revision profiles and higher text quality. Taken together, these studies suggest that the problem in the present study was not merely that feedback was limited, but that the available feedback was often too narrow to cultivate revision as a developmental process. Students thus became more familiar with fixing visible errors than with strengthening ideas, reorganizing text, or refining sentence relationships.

A sixth point concerns the broader theoretical interpretation of the integrated findings. When the quantitative and qualitative strands are read together, the study shows that elementary writing difficulties are best understood as the outcome of interactions among learner-level capacities, classroom opportunity, and assessment culture. This interpretation is closely aligned with recent scholarship that treats writing achievement as a product of cognitive, motivational, pedagogical, and contextual influences operating simultaneously (Rocha et al., 2024; Alves-Wold et al., 2024;). It is also consistent with the broader literacy ecology perspective suggesting that writing development is shaped by reading history, instructional exposure, and teacher adaptation rather than by isolated skill deficits alone (Levlin et al., 2025; Malpique et al., 2024). In this sense, the present study extends the literature by showing that students' writing weaknesses in Makassar are neither purely individual nor purely instructional. Instead, they reflect a developmental gap between text production and text development: students can often produce writing, but they have not yet been sufficiently supported to elaborate, connect, revise, and strengthen meaning through writing. This is the central conceptual contribution of the study.

The study also carries practical implications, but these implications should be read critically rather than as simple technical recommendations. First, writing instruction in elementary classrooms needs to provide more explicit support for idea generation and idea expansion through strategies such as oral rehearsal, brainstorming prompts, guiding questions, paragraph frames, and teacher modelling of how ideas are developed across sentences. Second, sentence-level instruction should be embedded within authentic writing activity so that students learn how linguistic choices function within complete texts rather than as isolated grammar exercises. Third, schools need to create more frequent opportunities for meaningful and sustained writing practice, including drafting, revising, and redrafting. Fourth, assessment routines should move beyond correctness-first evaluation toward process-based feedback that helps students improve not only visible accuracy but also text quality across multiple dimensions. These implications are supported by recent work showing that elementary writing instruction becomes more effective when it is strategy-supported, dialogic, and scaffolded across the composing process (Goldman et al., 2024; Skar et al., 2024).

At the same time, the present findings suggest a more nuanced position on instructional innovation. Earlier studies in Indonesia have shown that digital storytelling, serial-image media, and other instructional tools can increase engagement and improve writing outcomes in elementary classrooms (Nuroh & Adiyawati, 2023; Izah & Cahyaningtyas, 2025). International evidence similarly indicates that digital environments may support writing when technology is used within purposeful pedagogy rather than as a mere add-on (Yamaç et al., 2020; Oakley, 2026). However, the Makassar findings caution against assuming that innovation alone will resolve deeper writing difficulties. Technology may help students begin writing or become more motivated, but it will not automatically solve weak idea elaboration, unstable sentence construction, or limited revision habits unless teachers are also supported to teach writing strategically and explicitly. In this respect, the study offers a more diagnostic contribution than intervention-based studies: it shows where students struggle most and why those difficulties persist even when basic writing activity is present.

This study contributes to current scholarship on elementary writing in three main ways. First, it provides a multidimensional profile of students' writing in an under-discussed urban context in eastern Indonesia, showing that writing weakness is unevenly distributed across dimensions rather than globally uniform. Second, by integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, it demonstrates that the observed performance profile is closely linked to classroom practices, writing opportunities, and feedback routines. Third, it sharpens the conceptual distinction between writing as text production and writing as text development, thereby offering a more pedagogically useful interpretation of what "moderate performance" actually means in elementary literacy. These contributions matter because they move the discussion beyond whether students can write toward a more substantive question: what kinds of classroom support are needed for students to develop ideas, sustain coherence, and revise writing as a meaningful literacy practice. Nevertheless, these interpretations should be read in light of the study's local urban scope and its focus on a specific set of schools and teacher-reported classroom conditions, which means that the findings are best understood as contextually grounded rather than universally generalizable.

Conclusion

This study concludes that elementary students in Makassar demonstrate a moderate but uneven profile of writing development. While students show relatively stronger performance in mechanics and vocabulary, content development and sentence construction remain the most fragile dimensions, indicating that surface-level control has developed more fully than higher-order composing ability. The findings further show that these difficulties are shaped not only by learner-level limitations, but also by instructional conditions, including limited opportunities for sustained writing, insufficient scaffolding for idea elaboration and sentence construction, and assessment practices that prioritize product over process. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, this study offers a more comprehensive account of

elementary writing difficulties than studies relying on a single strand of data, since it identifies both the observable performance patterns and the classroom conditions that help explain them. The study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides a multidimensional profile of elementary students' writing difficulties in an under-discussed urban context in eastern Indonesia. Second, it demonstrates that writing difficulties in primary education are better understood as an uneven developmental pattern rather than a uniform deficit. Third, it shows that the gap between text production and text development is closely related to instructional opportunity, scaffolding, and feedback practices. Practically, the findings suggest that improving elementary students' writing requires a shift from correctness-focused instruction toward process-based pedagogy that supports idea generation, sentence construction, meaningful writing practice, and revision. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. This study was conducted within a local urban context in Makassar, and its conclusions therefore reflect the characteristics of the participating schools rather than all elementary classrooms in Indonesia. In addition, the study was designed to describe patterns and explain them contextually, not to test causal relationships or intervention effects. Future research may extend this work by involving broader regional samples, incorporating student perspectives more directly, and examining how specific instructional interventions can address the dimension-specific difficulties identified in this study.

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