

An Exploration of Themes and Genres in English Education Student Creative Writing Projects

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Abstract

Creative writing instruction plays a vital role in developing students' language proficiency, creativity, and emotional awareness. This study aims to describe the trends regarding genres, themes, and issues addressed in the creative writing projects of English Education students at an Indonesian university in 2026. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with content analysis. The data comprised 33 student creative writing project documents, comprising various forms of writing: short stories, memoirs, poetry, drama, and narrative journalism. Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The results indicate that the short story was the most dominant genre (60,61%), followed by memoirs (15,15%), poetry (12,12%), drama (9,09%), and narrative journalism (3,03%). The student's works not only represented personal experiences but also demonstrated sensitivity toward social issues-such as bullying, academic pressure, social inequality, the impact of technology, and matters of power and philanthropy within historical contexts. This study underscores that creative writing instruction contributes to the development of student's creative literacy, reflective capabilities, and social empathy. Consequently, there is a need to develop instructional strategies that provide students with the space to explore personal experiences and social realities through creative writing.

Keywords: *Creative writing; content analysis; literary themes; literary genres; university students*

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1. Introduction

The exploration of themes and genres in the creative writing projects of English Education students is a study aimed at identifying the trends in genres, themes, and issues that emerge in students' creative works as representations of personal experiences and social realities. Writing is a productive language skill characterized by a high level of complexity, as it involves the ability to think, organize ideas, and use language effectively (Azizah et al., 2026). In the context of learning English as a foreign language, creative writing serves as an effective approach for developing students' language proficiency, creativity, and emotional awareness, as it provides opportunities for them to express ideas, experiences, and perspectives through various forms of literary work (Susini & Ndruru, 2020).

Creative writing is generally understood as a form of writing that provides learners with opportunities to explore imagination, personal experience, and individual expression through literary forms such as poetry, short stories, memoirs, and drama. In second- and foreign-language contexts, creative writing can also serve as a meaningful literacy practice because it lets learners use the target language for personal, purposeful expression rather than solely for formal linguistic exercises (Hanauer, 2012; Lim, 2015). Previous research shows that creative writing activities give EFL learners opportunities to experiment with language, develop creativity, and construct their own writer voices (Lee, 2019; Zhao, 2016). Thus, creative writing should not be viewed merely as an alternative writing exercise, but as a pedagogical space in which language learning, creativity, identity, and personal meaning-making intersect.

This study aims to describe the genre distribution in the creative writing projects of English Education students, identify the dominant themes emerging in their work, and analyze the representations of personal experiences and social issues reflected therein. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, utilizing content analysis on 33 student creative writing project documents; the analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, comprising the stages of data

reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The findings reveal that the short story was the most dominant genre, followed by memoirs, poetry, drama, and narrative journalism, while frequently explored themes included loss, personal growth, friendship, love, trauma, mental health, family, self-identity, hope, and various contemporary social issues. The study demonstrates that creative writing activities serve not only as an exercise in writing skills but also as a medium for self-reflection, emotional regulation, and the development of social awareness among students.

This research focuses on exploring literary genres and themes, as well as the representation of personal experiences and social issues within the creative writing produced by English Education students. The analysis reveals that the students' work effectively captures various life phenomena-ranging from mental health, academic pressure, family dynamics, social inequality, and technological advancements to history and gender representation-all of which form part of the reality experienced by the younger generation (Wardani et al., 2025).

A number of previous studies have positioned second-language creative writing as a meaningful approach to language learning, particularly regarding the development of expressive abilities, creativity, and the construction of learner identity. Hanauer (2014, 2015), for instance, highlights the importance of second-language poetry writing as a space for learners to develop personal expression and an authorial voice. Disney (2014) also asserts that creative writing in a second-language context can serve as a pedagogical space linking language learning, literary expression, and learner identity. Furthermore, Tin (2024) emphasizes the role of language learning task design in fostering creative language use, while Zhao (2015, 2016) demonstrates that second-language creative writing offers insights into writer identity, cognitive writing processes, and how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners utilize linguistic and cultural resources to produce creative texts. Although these studies have underscored the significance of creative writing in second-language contexts, research systematically documenting and analyzing collections of creative works produced by EFL university students in Indonesia remains limited. Specifically, there is a need for a corpus of EFL student creative writing that can be used to map the genres, themes, personal experiences, and social issues represented in their work.

Addressing this research gap, this study aims to explore the characteristics of creative writing pieces produced by English Education students at an Indonesian university. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) identify the distribution of genres in the students' creative writing; (2) identify the dominant themes emerging in these works; and (3) analyze how personal experiences and social issues are represented within the students' creative writing. To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by three research questions (RQs): RQ1: What genres are represented in the creative writing projects produced by English Education students? RQ2: What themes emerge as dominant in the students' creative writing projects? RQ3: How are personal experiences and social issues represented in the students' creative writing projects? Thus, this study is expected to provide an empirical overview of the characteristics of creative writing by EFL students in Indonesia, while simultaneously enriching the documentation and understanding of second-language creative writing practices within the Indonesian higher education context.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, as it aims to gain an in-depth understanding and description of the genre trends, themes, and issues present in students' creative writing documents, without applying any intervention to the research subjects (Waruwu, 2024). The research process begins by establishing the study's focus: identifying the distribution of genres, dominant themes, and the representation of personal experiences and social issues within the students' work. Subsequently, the researcher collects all creative writing project documents, categorizes the data based on predefined criteria, analyzes the content of each piece, and synthesizes the findings to draw conclusions regarding the identified patterns (Adinugraha & Nasrudin, 2025).

The subjects of this study were 33 Creative Writing project documents produced by students of the English Language Education Study Program at an Indonesian university during the 2025/2026 academic year. The object of the study was the content of the students' work, comprising various genres: short stories, memoirs, poetry, drama, and narrative journalism. Each document contained information regarding the title, writing genre, main theme, and the progression of the writing process, enabling a comprehensive identification of the characteristics of the students' work. Data collection was carried out using the documentation study technique; the researcher gathered all writing worksheets, outlines, and drafts prepared by the students throughout the Creative Writing course. All documents were then checked for completeness, classified by genre and main theme, and coded to facilitate the processes of identification and data analysis.

Data analysis employed the content analysis technique based on the model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), comprising three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction stage, the researcher selected information relevant to the research objectives and excluded unrelated data. The data display stage involved grouping the works by genre and theme, then presenting them in tables and descriptive narratives to facilitate the understanding of emerging patterns. The final stage-drawing conclusions-involved interpreting the observed trends regarding genres, themes, and issues, and subsequently linking them to existing theories and prior research findings to derive meaning from the study's results.

The coding procedure was carried out systematically in three stages. First, each work was read repeatedly and coded to identify units of meaning related to genre, themes, personal experiences, and social issues. Second, codes sharing similarities were compared, grouped, and refined into categories based on shared meaning and their occurrence across the 33 works. Categorization criteria were established prior to final interpretation: genres were determined based on the form

of the works submitted by students, while themes and issues were identified based on dominant meanings within the texts rather than solely on titles. To ensure trustworthiness, the coding and categorization processes were documented, each category was cross-checked against the original texts, and interpretation results were compared with relevant literature and the research questions (Elo et al., 2014). Ethical considerations were addressed by maintaining the confidentiality of student work, removing personally identifiable information, and using initials or codes when referring to specific works.

The research data were not processed using statistical software, as the study was qualitative in nature. Consequently, the analysis results were interpreted descriptively through an examination of genre distribution, thematic trends, and the representation of personal experiences and social issues within the students' work. Data validity was ensured through theoretical triangulation-comparing the analysis results with concepts of creative writing, literature as a social reflection, and relevant prior research. Furthermore, the analysis was conducted systematically using consistent categorization guidelines to minimize researcher interpretation bias (Miles et al., 2014). In the Creative Writing course, students are guided to produce creative works in English as part of the course's learning and assessment process. These works are developed and submitted as a final project, enabling students to apply creative writing skills through various forms of literary expression. This study utilizes all projects submitted by students during the 2025/2026 academic year; consequently, no sampling was performed on the available body of work. A total of 33 submitted projects met the inclusion criteria, and all were analyzed as the study's entire sample.

3. Finding and Discussion

Findings

This study aims to describe genre distribution, identify dominant themes, and analyze the representation of personal experiences and social issues within the creative writing projects of English Education students. The analysis covered 33 creative writing project documents, comprising short stories, memoirs, poetry, drama scripts, and narrative journalism. The data examined included titles, writing types, main themes, and project development status, thereby providing an overview of the genre and thematic preferences of the students.

Distribution of Creative Writing Genres

The identification results reveal that students demonstrate diverse preferences regarding the forms of creative writing they choose. However, the short story is the genre most frequently selected as a medium for creative expression. The distribution of genres among student works is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Students' Creative Writing Genres

No	Types of Writing	Amount	Percentage
1	Short Story	20	60,61%
2	Memoir	5	15,15%
3	Poetry	4	12,12%
4	Drama/Script	3	9,09%
5	Narrative Journalism	1	3,03%
Total		33	100%

Table 1 Notes. The distribution of genres indicates that more than half of the students chose the short story as the medium to express their ideas and experiences. This genre was selected because it offers flexibility in developing plot, conflict, characters, and setting, thereby accommodating a wide range of themes. Meanwhile, the memoir was the second choice, as it provides students with the space to reflect on their personal life experiences. Poetry, drama/script, and narrative journalism were selected less frequently due to their more specific writing characteristics.

Creative Writing Theme Analysis

Based on the categorization process, the themes emerging from the students' work can be grouped into six main categories: (1) loss, trauma, and the healing process; (2) personal growth and individual resilience; (3) interpersonal relationships, specifically friendship and love; (4) mental health and psychological conflict; (5) social criticism and contemporary phenomena; and (6) history, power, and gender representation.

The theme of loss emerges as the most dominant in the students' works. Loss is represented not only as the death of a loved one but also as the loss of identity, a sense of security, and interpersonal relationships. DNW's memoir, *The Moment That Changed My Life*, depicts the experience of losing a mother, while RS's *She Called It House, I Called It Love* explores the dynamics of a broken home. Similar themes also appear in ARBT's *My Friend* and NRI's *The Last Applause*, both of which portray the process of healing from traumatic experiences.

Themes of personal growth are frequently found in the memoir genre. Works such as *Beyond the Altar: A Dancer's Journey* (OHEB), *Footsteps Through the Rain* (GTF), and *Not Good at English, But Still Trying* (AS) depict processes of character formation, academic struggles, experiences living abroad, and the development of self-confidence.

The theme of interpersonal relationships encompasses friendship and love. Friendship is portrayed through the works *Too Late For Later* (ZSA) and *Cafe in the River* (TDL), while the theme of love appears from various perspectives—such as love linked to spirituality (*In His Time*), loss (*A Train*), destiny (*Symphony of the String*), and time travel (*I See Your Shine*).

Mental health issues are also a concern for students. This theme is evident in poems such as *Silent Struggles* by JFM, which addresses loneliness and overthinking; *Guilty As Sin* by IA, regarding people-pleasing; and *Fragile Frontiers* by REN, which highlights academic pressure and the importance of empathy.

Beyond personal experiences, several works demonstrate a concern for contemporary social phenomena—ranging from bullying, social inequality, and technological advancements to the perils of the digital world. Historical themes also feature in the work *Beyond The Throne: How the First Haseki, Hurrem Sultan, Transformed History with Education in the Ottoman Empire During the 16th Century*, which highlights the contributions of women to education and philanthropy during the Ottoman era.

Overall, the research findings indicate that students' work serves not only as a medium for expressing personal experiences but also reflects various social issues emerging in society. The study demonstrates that creative writing activities can integrate language proficiency with students' creativity, self-reflection, and social awareness.

3.2 Discussion

The dominance of the short story as the most frequently chosen genre indicates that students tend to prefer a writing format that offers flexibility in developing plot, characters, conflict, and setting. This study aligns with the findings of Pramudita et al. (2025), who state that short stories possess a concise narrative structure, thereby enabling writers to convey ideas effectively. Rahmawati et al. (2025) further explain that creative writing affords language learners the opportunity to experiment with language in a personal and meaningful way, while Sumaryanti et al. (2025) emphasize that successful creative writing among EFL students is influenced by the ability to organize narrative structures while simultaneously expressing emotional experiences.

Research regarding the prevalence of themes concerning loss, trauma, and the healing process indicates that university students utilize creative writing as a medium for self-reflection and emotional regulation. This finding supports the concept of expressive writing proposed by Karyani et al. (2026) namely, that writing about emotional experiences can help individuals construct new meaning from traumatic events while simultaneously enhancing psychological well-being. Furthermore, Sumaryanti et al. (2025) explain that creative narratives enable individuals to reconstruct their life experiences, thereby fostering a more positive self-identity.

The theme of personal growth frequently appearing in memoir works indicates that students view life experiences as a process of shaping character, maturity, and identity. These findings support research by Ukat (2026), which states that creative, expressive, and reflective writing helps students construct a narrative identity through reflection on their life experiences. Thus, creative writing activities not only enhance writing skills but also strengthen students' understanding of their own life journeys.

The emergence of mental health as a theme reflects students' growing awareness of various psychological issues affecting the younger generation, such as loneliness, overthinking, academic pressure, and people-pleasing tendencies. This study aligns with research by Fardani (2026), which demonstrates that expressive writing can serve as a means to understand emotions, alleviate psychological distress, and support the process of mental recovery. Jaki et al. (2025) also explain that creativity, emotion, and psychological well-being are interconnected within the context of higher education, suggesting that creative writing instruction can provide a space that fosters students' emotional development.

Furthermore, the emergence of themes such as social criticism, technological advancement, history, and gender representation demonstrates that students do not merely write based on personal experience but also critically respond to various social phenomena. This research aligns with the views of Khoiri et al. (2025), who state that education needs to encourage learners to develop a critical awareness of social realities. Meanwhile, Firmansyah (2025) explains that storytelling projects in higher education can facilitate the formation of personal and academic identities through processes of reflection and the expression of experiences.

Overall, the research findings indicate that creative writing instruction serves a multidimensional function: enhancing language proficiency, fostering creativity, strengthening self-reflection and emotional regulation, and cultivating social empathy and critical awareness among students. Consequently, creative writing is viewed not merely as a writing exercise but as a humanistic learning process that supports the holistic intellectual, emotional, and social development of students.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that creative writing instruction serves not only to enhance students' writing skills but also acts as an effective medium for fostering creativity, reflective capacity, emotional regulation, and social awareness. An analysis of 33 creative writing projects mapped the prevailing genres, themes, and issues present in the students' work, thereby offering insight into how they interpret personal experiences and respond to various social phenomena through literature. The study contributes to an understanding of the characteristics of student creative writing, providing a foundation for designing instruction that is more contextual, humanistic, and centered on the learning experience.

Furthermore, the findings confirm that creative writing activities create a safe space for students to express ideas, develop their identities, and cultivate empathy and critical awareness regarding various social issues.

Based on the research findings, Creative Writing instruction needs to be further developed through experiential learning strategies that foster students' creative exploration, self-reflection, and authentic expression. Furthermore, lecturers can provide students with greater scope to explore diverse genres and themes, thereby optimizing the development of their creative literacy skills. Future research should involve participants from various higher education institutions, utilize a broader data scope, and integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' creative processes and their impact on English language learning.

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