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Elementary School Students' Creative Process in Poetry Writing through Free Association and Inner Reflection Techniques

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Abstract

Poetry writing instruction in elementary schools is often hindered by students' difficulty in finding and developing ideas from their personal experiences. This study aims to describe the creative process of students of SDN 1 Limbangan Barat in writing poetry through the Free Association and Inner Reflection techniques. The study employed a descriptive qualitative method involving students and the classroom teacher engaged in poetry writing instruction. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation in the form of association sheets, reflection notes, initial drafts, and revised poems, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The results show that Free Association provides students with space to generate ideas spontaneously, while Inner Reflection helps them connect these ideas with their personal experiences and feelings. A comparison of initial drafts and revisions reveals a tendency to shift from general diction toward more concrete diction and more specific imagery, although some students still need assistance in arranging lines and selecting words. Both techniques have the potential to support students' creative process and can be used by teachers as an alternative prewriting stage in elementary school poetry writing instruction.

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INTRODUCTION

For elementary school students, writing poetry is a learning activity that involves not only the ability to choose words but also the ability to process feelings, imagination, and personal experiences. Writing is a productive language skill that requires students to express ideas coherently and meaningfully (Tarigan, 2011), while poetry demands linguistic condensation through diction, imagery, and rhythm (Pradopo, 2018; Waluyo, 2020). In practice, many students feel confused when asked to write poetry. They tend to follow common patterns, use the same expressions, and are less able to explore their inner experiences as a source of inspiration. This condition indicates that poetry writing instruction should not merely teach the elements of poetry but should also provide room for developing students' creative process.

This difficulty is related to how poetry is understood in the classroom. Poetry is often treated as a product that must meet formal requirements, such as the number of stanzas, rhyme, and a theme determined by the teacher. In fact, a literary work is a structure of meaning born from the author's experience and processed through distinctive language (Wellek & Warren, 2014; Luxemburg et al., 2019). Stylistic studies of Indonesian poetry, such as the analysis of rhetorical devices in Sapardi Djoko Damono's "Hujan Bulan Juni" and "Aku Ingin" (Rohilah et al., 2026), show that poetic meaning is built through deliberate language choices. Semi (2012) emphasizes that creative writing requires sensitivity to experience and freedom to transform it into writing. When instruction emphasizes only form, students lose the opportunity to use their own experiences as a source of writing.

The creative process does not occur suddenly. Wallas (1926) explains that creativity proceeds through the stages of preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. Guilford (1950) identifies ideational fluency as one characteristic of creative thinking, while Runco and Jaeger (2012) assert that creativity requires both originality and effectiveness. In the context of students, creativity is better understood as mini-c creativity, namely the discovery of new, personally meaningful interpretations in the learning process (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009). From the perspective of writing, Flower and Hayes (1981) view writing as a cognitive process comprising planning, translating ideas, and reviewing, while Graves (1983) emphasizes the importance of giving children room to write from their own experiences.

In this context, Free Association is relevant as a prewriting technique. The concept of free association, rooted in Freud's (2010) ideas, is adapted in instruction as an activity of letting ideas flow without initial judgment, similar to the freewriting practice developed by Elbow (1998). In this study, Free Association is not understood as a psychoanalytic technique but as an instructional technique for generating ideas. However, a flow of ideas alone is not sufficient. Students also need to enter the Inner Reflection stage, a process of contemplating the feelings and experiences closest to themselves.

May (1975) and Rogers (1954) argue that valuable creativity arises from openness to inner experience rather than from imitating the outward form of others' works. Reflection is also regarded as a way for individuals to reframe experience into new understanding (Schön, 1983), and writing about emotional experiences helps individuals process their feelings (Pennebaker, 1997). Thus, Inner Reflection serves as a bridge between the raw ideas produced through association and meaningful poetic lines. The two techniques are complementary: Free Association opens up ideas, while Inner Reflection filters and deepens them.

Several previous studies have examined poetry writing instruction. Rahmawati (2023) applied the free association technique to junior high school students, Sari and Wulandari (2021) implemented poetry writing instruction based on personal experience, Hidayat (2020) positioned self-reflection as part of the creative process of poetry writing in junior high school, while Fadilah (2024) and Putri and Kurniawan (2022) highlighted the development of students'

aesthetic expression and language sensitivity. These studies were generally conducted at the junior high school level, applied a single technique separately, and focused more on assessing the final poem. Studies that combine Free Association and Inner Reflection sequentially and trace elementary school students' creative process by comparing association sheets, reflection notes, initial drafts, and revised poems remain limited. This gap constitutes the novelty of the present study.

Based on this background, this study aims to describe (1) students' creative process at the Free Association stage, (2) students' creative process at the Inner Reflection stage, and (3) changes in ideas and poetic expression from the initial drafts to the revised poems of students of SDN 1 Limbangan Barat. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich research on the creative process in literature learning at the elementary level. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for teachers in designing poetry prewriting stages grounded in students' personal experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method in the form of field research (Moleong, 2019). The study was conducted at SDN 1 Limbangan Barat, Garut Regency. The research subjects were students who participated in poetry writing instruction using the Free Association and Inner Reflection techniques, as well as the classroom teacher responsible for Indonesian language instruction who was directly involved in the learning process. Data sources included learning events, students' and the teacher's utterances, and documents such as lesson plans, association sheets, reflection notes, initial drafts, and revised poems. The unit of analysis was changes in ideas, diction, imagery, and the connection between themes and personal experiences at each writing stage.

The research flow is presented in Figure 1. The study began with a preliminary study and lesson planning with the teacher, followed by poetry writing instruction using the two techniques sequentially, then data collection and analysis, and finally drawing conclusions.

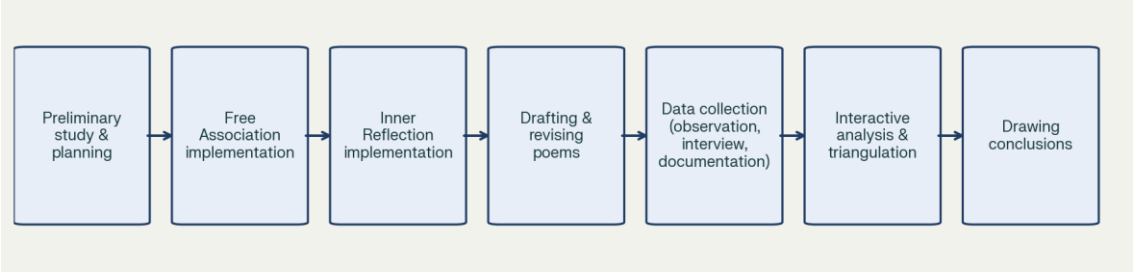


Figure 1. Research Flow

Data were collected using the following techniques.

1. Observation using a student activity observation sheet to record the learning process from the idea-finding stage to the revision of the work.
2. Semi-structured interviews with students and the classroom teacher using an interview guide to explore students' experiences, difficulties, and ways of constructing meaning in their poems.
3. Documentation in the form of association sheets, reflection notes, initial drafts and revised poems, photographs of activities, and teacher notes.

The instrument blueprint for each data collection technique is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Collection Instrument Blueprint

Technique	Instrument	Aspects Observed/Explored	Data Source
Observation	Student activity observation sheet	Enthusiasm, fluency in writing ideas, engagement in reflection, and revision activities	Students during instruction
Interview	Semi-structured interview guide	Writing experience, difficulty in starting, feelings during reflection, reasons for choosing ideas	Students and classroom teacher
Documentation	Document review format	Contents of association sheets, reflection notes, changes from initial drafts to revisions	Students' worksheets and poems, teacher notes

The instructional procedure was carried out in three stages. Free Association was implemented by asking students to write down words, phrases, or images that came to mind spontaneously without first limiting their ideas. Next, at the Inner Reflection stage, students selected the idea closest to their personal experience, identified the accompanying feelings, and developed that experience into poetic lines. In the final stage, students composed an initial draft, received feedback from the teacher, and then revised their poems. Details of teacher activities, student activities, and data produced at each stage are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Procedure for Implementing Free Association and Inner Reflection

Stage	Teacher Activities	Student Activities	Data Produced
Free Association	Providing prompts, emphasizing that there are no wrong answers, and refraining from judging ideas	Writing down words, phrases, or images that arise spontaneously	Association sheets
Inner Reflection	Inviting students to reread their word lists and posing reflective questions (e.g., which word is closest to you? what do you feel?)	Choosing one idea, recalling related events, and writing down the accompanying feelings	Reflection notes
Drafting	Assisting students in turning reflection notes into lines	Composing an initial draft of the poem	Initial drafts
Revision	Providing feedback on diction, imagery, and line arrangement	Improving diction, adding concrete images, and arranging lines	Revised poems

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the condensation stage, observation, interview, and document data were sorted according to the learning stages. In the display stage, data were organized into descriptions and matrices. In the conclusion-drawing stage, patterns of findings were formulated and repeatedly verified against data from other sources. Changes in students' works

were analyzed by comparing initial drafts and revisions based on the indicators in Table 3.

Table 3. Indicators for Analyzing Changes in Poetic Expression

Indicator	Descriptor	Expected Shift
Diction	A shift from general and abstract words toward concrete and personal words	From general feeling words (e.g., "sad") toward words referring to specific objects, places, or events
Imagery	The presence of specific sensory images (visual, auditory, tactile)	Lines present what students see or hear rather than merely naming feelings
Thematic closeness	The connection between the poem's theme and the student's personal experience	The theme shifts from a general assigned theme toward events experienced by the student
Line arrangement	Coherence and sequence of lines within stanzas	Lines are arranged coherently and support one another's meaning

Data trustworthiness was examined through source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing the accounts of students and the teacher, while technique triangulation was conducted by comparing observation, interview, and document data. The triangulation matrix is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Data Triangulation Matrix

Focus of Findings	Observation	Interview	Documentation
Idea fluency at the Free Association stage	Students' activity while writing words and phrases	Students' and teacher's accounts of ease in starting	Contents of association sheets
Deepening of meaning at the Inner Reflection stage	Students' engagement during the quiet pause	Students' expressions of feelings during reflection	Reflection notes
Changes in poetic expression	Revision activities	Teacher's assessment of students' progress	Comparison of initial drafts and revisions

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Creative Process at the Free Association Stage

Students' creative process in writing poetry through Free Association and Inner Reflection took place in interrelated stages. At the Free Association stage, observation showed that most students appeared enthusiastic because they were given room to write down words, phrases, or images that arose spontaneously without judgment or thematic restrictions. This situation helped students overcome the initial obstacle they expressed as "bingung mau mulai dari mana" ("confused about where to start"). This expression indicates that the students' main obstacle was not a lack of experience but the absence of a starting point for accessing that experience.

The words and phrases that appeared on the association sheets were largely related to personal experiences, such as "hujan" (rain), "ibuku" (my mother), "senja" (dusk), "rindu" (longing), and "lapangan sekolah yang sepi" (the quiet schoolyard). When grouped, these ideas cover several domains of experience, as presented in Table 5. This grouping shows that free association did not produce random words but

ideas rooted in the students' immediate environment, namely nature, family, feelings, and school.

Table 5. Domains of Ideas on Students' Association Sheets

Domain of Experience	Examples of Words/Phrases	Significance for the Creative Process
Nature and time	"hujan" (rain), "senja" (dusk)	A source of visual imagery and atmosphere
Family	"ibuku" (my mother)	A source of themes close to students' lives
Feelings	"rindu" (longing)	Emotional content that needs to be concretized through imagery
School environment	"lapangan sekolah yang sepi" (the quiet schoolyard)	Shows ideas already formed as image-bearing phrases

These data show that Free Association did not merely increase the number of ideas but shifted the starting point of students' writing process from searching for external themes to exploring personal experiences. The phrase "lapangan sekolah yang sepi" (the quiet schoolyard), for example, already contains both imagery and atmosphere, indicating that some students began to think poetically from the association stage. The teacher also confirmed that students who usually had difficulty finding ideas appeared more fluent when given the opportunity to write freely without rules beforehand.

Students' Creative Process at the Inner Reflection Stage

The next stage appeared deeper when Inner Reflection was applied. Students reread their word lists, chose the idea closest to themselves, and contemplated the accompanying feelings. This quiet, reflective process helped students turn words into meaning. Single words on the association sheets, such as "hujan" (rain) or "ibuku" (my mother), no longer stood alone but were linked to events and feelings the students had experienced.

Interviews with students showed that the moment of reflection gave them an opportunity to "melihat ke dalam diri" ("look inside themselves"). This expression marks a shift in how students viewed the poetry writing task: poetry was seen not merely as an assignment but also as a space to convey something they genuinely felt. At this stage, the teacher's role shifted from giving instructions to posing reflective questions that helped students discover the personal reasons behind the ideas they chose.

Inner Reflection also functioned as a selection process. From the many words produced at the association stage, students selected the idea most meaningful to them. This selection is important because poetry requires condensation of meaning (Pradopo, 2018). By choosing one core idea, students could focus on developing the feelings and images related to that idea rather than merely juxtaposing unrelated words.

Changes in Ideas and Poetic Expression

A comparison of initial drafts and revisions based on the analytical indicators shows a tendency for most students to begin using more concrete diction, present more specific imagery, and develop themes drawn from personal experience. These changes reflect a shift from directly stating feelings toward presenting feelings through more concrete images. On the other hand, some students still produced general lines and needed assistance in arranging lines and choosing words. A summary of findings at each stage is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of Findings on Students' Creative Process

Stage	Main Findings	Data Evidence	Constraints
Free Association	Students found it easier to start and generated spontaneous ideas rooted in personal experience	Observation of enthusiasm; association sheets; the expression "bingung mau mulai dari mana"; teacher confirmation	Some ideas were still single, unconnected words
Inner Reflection	Students chose personal ideas and connected them with events and feelings	Reflection notes; the expression "melihat ke dalam diri"	Some students needed guiding questions
Drafting and revision	A tendency toward more concrete diction, more specific imagery, and more personal themes	Comparison of initial drafts and revisions	Line arrangement and word choice still required assistance

Discussion

These findings are consistent with Wallas's (1926) stages of creativity. Free Association functions as the preparation stage, the reflective pause provides room for incubation and illumination, and revision serves as the verification stage. The mapping of the two techniques onto these stages of creativity is presented in Figure 2. This mapping shows that the sequence of learning activities was not arbitrary but followed the logic of the creative process proposed in theory.

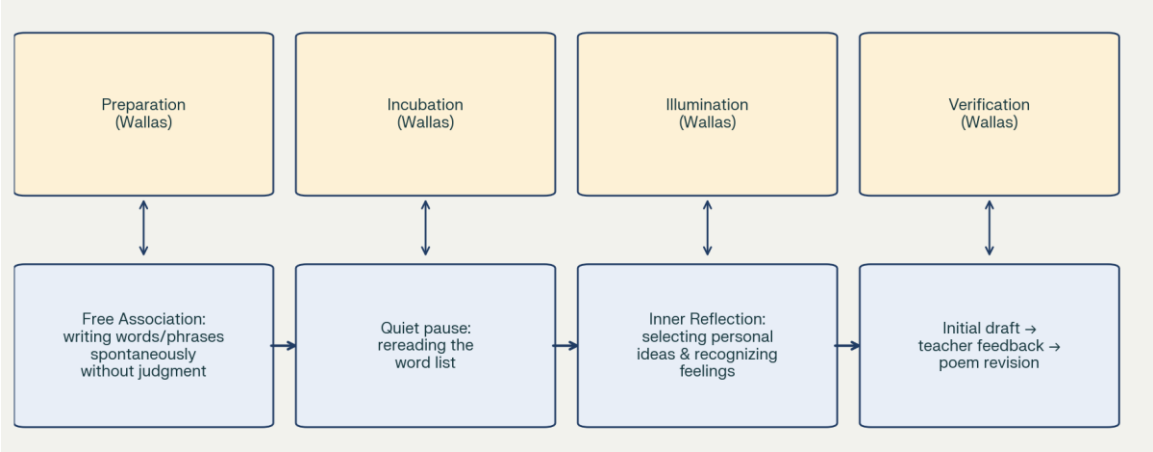


Figure 2. Mapping of Free Association and Inner Reflection onto Wallas's Stages of Creativity

These results reinforce Rahmawati's (2023) finding that free association helps students generate ideas; however, this study shows that spontaneous ideas develop into meaningful lines only after being filtered through reflection. The findings also complement Hidayat (2020) and Sari and Wulandari (2021), who emphasized the role of reflection and personal experience, by showing that the "association then reflection" sequence can be applied to elementary school students. The position of this study relative to previous research is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Position of This Study Relative to Previous Research

Study	Focus	Similarity	Difference from This Study
Rahmawati (2023)	Free association in junior high school students' poetry writing	Uses free association	This study combines association with reflection among elementary students
Hidayat (2020)	Self-reflection in the creative process of poetry writing in junior high school	Emphasizes self-reflection	Reflection is placed after association as an idea-filtering stage
Sari & Wulandari (2021)	Personal experience-based poetry writing among junior high school students	Uses personal experience as a source	Traces the process from association sheets to revisions
Fadilah (2024)	Aesthetic expression based on inner experience	Attends to inner experience	Focuses on the creative process, not only on the final product
Putri & Kurniawan (2022)	Creative approaches for language sensitivity	Uses a creative approach	Operationalizes two techniques sequentially with analytical indicators
Rohilah et al. (2026)	Stylistic analysis of rhetorical devices in Sapardi Djoko Damono's poems	Examines how language choices build poetic meaning	Focuses on students' process of producing poems rather than analyzing published poems

Within the framework of Flower and Hayes (1981), Free Association enriches the planning stage, while Inner Reflection helps students translate ideas into poetic language. Revision supported by teacher feedback corresponds to the reviewing stage in that model. Graves (1983) also emphasizes that children write better when they write about what they know and have experienced. The finding that students' ideas were rooted in rain, mothers, dusk, and the school environment supports this view. Interestingly, rain is also a central image in Sapardi Djoko Damono's "Hujan Bulan Juni", whose rhetorical devices have been examined stylistically by Rohilah et al. (2026); this suggests that published poems built on everyday images can serve as models when students revise their own lines.

The changes experienced by students can also be understood as mini-c creativity (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009), namely the discovery of personal meaning that is valuable to students even if it is not necessarily new to others. This perspective is important so that teachers do not judge elementary students' creativity by the standards of professional poets but by observing the development of how students discover and process their own ideas. This aligns with Runco and Jaeger (2012), who regard effectiveness or meaningfulness as an element of creativity.

The contribution of this study lies in mapping elementary students' creative process step by step through the documentary trail from association sheets to revised poems. This finding supports Ratna's (2015) view that meaningful literature learning opens space for students' inner experiences and internal processes. For teachers, this finding suggests that poetry writing instruction can begin with activities that generate ideas and encourage reflection on experiences before students are asked to attend to the formal elements of poetry.

Nevertheless, the findings are contextual to a single school and therefore cannot be generalized. In addition, some students still

needed assistance with structure and word choice, so teacher feedback remains important at the revision stage. Future research may examine the application of these two techniques at different grade levels or combine them with quantitative measurement of the quality of students' poems.

CONCLUSION

The creative process of students of SDN 1 Limbangan Barat in writing poetry proceeded through two main stages. At the Free Association stage, students generated ideas spontaneously, reducing initial obstacles in finding ideas. At the Inner Reflection stage, students selected ideas close to their experiences, recognized the accompanying feelings, and developed them into poetic lines. The comparison of initial drafts and revisions shows a tendency toward more concrete diction, more specific imagery, and more personal themes, although some students still required assistance with structure and word choice. Therefore, these two techniques can be considered by teachers as an alternative prewriting stage in elementary school poetry writing instruction, and future research may test their application with more diverse subjects and grade levels.

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