

Investigating Students' Difficulties and Strategies in Writing Descriptive Text

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Abstract

Writing is a crucial skill in English learning that requires students to effectively express their thoughts and ideas. However, many students struggle with writing descriptive texts due to difficulties in organizing ideas, vocabulary limitations, and grammatical errors. This research aims to investigate the difficulties faced by students in writing descriptive texts and the strategies they use to overcome them. Conducted at SMAN 4 Jember, this study focuses on students' challenges in content development, text organization, vocabulary selection, grammar usage, and writing mechanics. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method, using observation, interviews, and document as data collection methods.

The findings indicate that students struggle with expanding their ideas, often providing only basic descriptions without sufficient details. Some include irrelevant or repetitive information to meet length requirements. In terms of organization, many students fail to distinguish between identification and description, leading to unclear paragraph structures. Vocabulary limitations are also evident, with frequent repetition of the same words and difficulty selecting appropriate adjectives. Grammar-related challenges include inconsistent verb tense usage and errors in subject-verb agreement. Additionally, students often make mechanical errors, such as incorrect capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. To address these issues, students use strategies such as referencing online materials, brainstorming, peer feedback, and utilizing AI-based writing tools. These findings provide valuable insights for improving instructional approaches in English writing.

Introduction

In Indonesia, English is one of the languages that is taught to the students. It is important and needed to learn English in the current era of globalization. Besides, in education, English is mandatory learning that is tested. Students must master four basic English skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Apart from these skills, other components in English support these four skills, such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. According to Selvaraj and Aziz (2019), one of the most important skills to master in English is writing.

Writing can be defined as the process of exploring ideas and thoughts and turning them into something that can be seen and done. It is a way to convey ideas, thoughts, and information using the alphabet or script (Sangkala, 2012). Students must have ideas, information, or concepts that they want to express in words to write (Syifa et al., 2022). They must comprehend the objectives and possible actions before they can start writing. Students can discover the inspiration to write or create a coherent work if given a clear topic and notion to portray. Furthermore, writing can be difficult to master, especially in terms of genre or type of text.

In the high school curriculum, descriptive text is one of the various types of texts studied. The descriptive text describes and reveals certain people, places, or objects (Hanafi, 2019). In other words, descriptive text clearly explains a person or object's condition. The aim of descriptive is to provide information about something or someone. In descriptive text, the writer describes people, objects, appearances, views, or phenomena naturally so that readers can imagine and feel what they say. The descriptive text has two generic structures: identification and description.

Although descriptive is a genre or type of text that high school students must master, they face several problems writing descriptive texts. Based on an interview that the researcher did with the teacher at one of the high schools in Jember, the teacher said the students' low ability to write descriptive text, such as a lack of understanding regarding sentence structure, finding main ideas, and expressing these ideas in paragraph form clearly. In addition, students tend to make mistakes in using established tenses, spelling errors, and inappropriate punctuation.

The statement above is consistent with the findings about writing difficulties from previous research conducted by Sarlin (2019), which found that students in senior high school had dominant difficulty writing descriptive texts because they had not surely

mastered grammar and could not construct sentences with good grammar. In addition, they have difficulty with vocabulary, which causes them to have difficulty constructing sentences, and many still need clarification about the form. Therefore, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students generally find it easier to communicate orally than in writing (Harisna et al., 2018).

Furthermore, based on research conducted by Riadil et al. (2023) in analyzing EFL learners at University difficulties in academic writing, it is stated that grammar and syntax are the most difficult components in writing. Symptoms of these errors include using prepositions, adjectives, singular or plural verbs, sentence structure, and idioms. Similar to the research results stated by Syifa et al. (2022), the difficulties faced in writing descriptive texts include grammar that is not understood, lack of mastered vocabulary, and difficulty in constructing sentences because they do not like English lessons both in terms of boring teaching techniques and laziness to learn. Things that become difficulties in themselves. He suggested that future researchers investigate what strategies are effective for students to use in resolving difficulties during writing so that students are more enthusiastic and not bored in learning to write.

From the problems above, the students need the strategy of writing descriptive. With a good strategy, it will be easier for students to compose writing. Therefore, the researcher is interested in investigating the difficulties students, especially high school students, encounter in writing descriptive texts. Apart from that, the researcher also wants to explore the strategies used by students in writing descriptive texts. This research aims to make it easier for students to write descriptive text by knowing the strategy.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach with a qualitative descriptive method to investigate students' difficulties and strategies in writing descriptive texts. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative research allows researchers to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. The descriptive qualitative method, as defined by Yin (2012), enables researchers to examine the phenomenon within its real-life context, focusing on the nuances of students' experiences.

The research subjects were X3-grade students at SMAN 4 Jember who were learning to write descriptive texts. Data collection was conducted at SMAN 4 Jember, located on Jalan Hayam Wuruk No.145, Krajan, Sempusari, Kec. Kaliwates, Kabupaten Jember, on January 3rd and 17th, 2025. The data sources included student interview transcripts, observation results, and analysis of students' descriptive texts to identify difficulties and strategies in writing.

Data collection techniques followed Ary et al. (2014), which included observation, interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted directly in the classroom to examine students' writing processes and strategies. A structured observation sheet (Appendix 1) was used to record findings. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility while maintaining consistency across participants. The interview questions (Appendix 2) were designed to gather information about students' experiences, difficulties, and strategies in writing descriptive texts. Documents used in this research included students' handwritten descriptive texts, which served for analyzing difficulties of writing.

For data analysis, the study applied the framework from Miles et al. (2014), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In data reduction, relevant data from interviews, observations, and document analysis were selected, summarized, and categorized. Data display involved organizing the information into textual descriptions to identify patterns and relationships. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the findings, ensuring validity through verification methods such as triangulation, which involved comparing different data source to enhance reliability. By employing these methods, this research ensures a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by students in writing descriptive texts and the strategies they use to overcome them, providing valuable insights for educators and curriculum developers.

Findings and Discussion

This study was conducted at SMAN 4 Jember on January 3rd and 17th, 2025, using three data collection techniques: observation, interviews, and document analysis. The findings highlight students' difficulties and strategies in writing descriptive texts, categorized into five aspects: content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics.

The observations revealed several key points. None of the 17 students conducted direct observations of their chosen subjects (favorite athletes) due to their inaccessibility. Instead, they relied on internet searches for information. Only five students engaged in a pre-

writing process by brainstorming ideas, while most employed free writing without prior structuring. All students reviewed their texts before submission, primarily focusing on spelling and structure. Additionally, they sought online descriptive text examples to guide their writing and asked peers for feedback on vocabulary, sentence structure, and organization. The use of digital tools, such as Google Translate and AI-based applications, was common among students, with one student utilizing ChatGPT and Gemini. Visual references, including images and videos, also played a role in helping students describe their subjects. However, limited class time restricted students from practicing multiple drafts before submission.

Interviews further highlighted students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts. Some students struggled with selecting relevant information, often writing either too little or including unnecessary details. Many found it challenging to structure their texts coherently, with unclear transitions between sections. Limited vocabulary led to repetitive language and difficulty in selecting appropriate adjectives. Common grammatical errors included incorrect verb tense usage and subject-verb agreement mistakes. Mechanical issues, such as improper capitalization, punctuation errors, and misspellings, were also prevalent.

Document analysis of students' descriptive texts confirmed these findings. Some texts lacked sufficient detail about the chosen subject, while others did not clearly separate the identification and description sections. Vocabulary limitations resulted in repeated words or inappropriate synonyms. Grammatical errors, particularly in tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, and article usage, were frequent. Additionally, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling mistakes were commonly observed.

These findings align with previous studies on second-language writing challenges. Students' struggles with content and organization suggest a need for structured pre-writing activities, such as guided brainstorming and outlining (Hyland, 2015). Vocabulary limitations indicate a lack of lexical variety, a common issue among L2 learners (Pillaga Riofrío, 2024). Grammar difficulties, especially in tense consistency and subject-verb agreement, are consistent with previous research on English learners (Ferris, 2011). Mechanical errors highlight the necessity of proofreading and editing skills (Bouachiba, 2021).

To address these challenges, students employed various strategies. Many relied on Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube to gather background information about their chosen subjects. Some engaged in brainstorming and pre-writing activities, though not all followed structured planning methods. Peer feedback was a common strategy, with students exchanging drafts for revision suggestions. Digital tools, such as Google Translate and online thesauruses, were frequently used to refine vocabulary and check spelling. Additionally, reviewing example descriptive texts helped students understand proper structure and vocabulary use.

These strategies reflect best practices in L2 writing instruction, emphasizing the importance of pre-writing activities, peer collaboration, and technology integration in improving writing skills (Hyland, 2015). However, the limited frequency of writing practice suggests a need for more structured writing exercises to reinforce learning and build confidence in descriptive writing.

Conclusions

This study investigated the difficulties students face in writing descriptive texts and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. The findings, derived from classroom observations, student interviews, and document analysis, highlight significant struggles in five key areas: content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics.

Students encountered challenges in content development, often providing basic descriptions with minimal details. Some included irrelevant or repetitive information to meet word count requirements, demonstrating a lack of coherence in expanding their ideas. Organizational difficulties were also evident, with many students failing to clearly distinguish between identification and description, resulting in disjointed paragraphs. In terms of vocabulary, students frequently repeated the same words and struggled to use synonyms naturally. Grammar issues, particularly in verb tense consistency and subject-verb agreement, were prevalent, reflecting a broader challenge in maintaining grammatical accuracy. Furthermore, mechanical errors such as incorrect capitalization, punctuation, and spelling were common due to insufficient proofreading.

Despite these difficulties, students employed various strategies to improve their writing. They used online references, engaged in brainstorming activities, sought peer feedback, utilized digital tools like Google Translate and AI-based applications, and analyzed example texts. These strategies align with best practices in L2 writing instruction,

emphasizing the importance of pre-writing preparation, structured revision, and technological support.

The findings of this study are significant in understanding the specific areas where students struggle and how they attempt to overcome these challenges. Addressing these issues through targeted instruction can help improve students' writing proficiency. However, this study has certain limitations. The sample size was limited to students from a single school, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused primarily on written data, without extensive exploration of students' cognitive and affective factors influencing their writing performance.

For future research, it is recommended to investigate the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions, such as AI-assisted writing tools and task-based learning, in improving descriptive writing. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into students' writing progress over time. Further research can also explore the impact of motivation and anxiety on writing performance, as well as the influence of students' first language on their writing development. By expanding research in these areas, educators can refine instructional methodologies to better support L2 students in mastering descriptive writing.

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