

Exploring EFL Students' Challenges in Writing Descriptive Texts: A Case Study of Junior High School Learners in Cimahi

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*Muman, Destria Rahayu^{ab} 

¹²IKIP Siliwangi, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: muman@ikipsiliwangi.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Writing is a key component of English language learning. This study aimed to explore the difficulties faced by junior high school students in writing descriptive texts in English and to identify the linguistic aspects that hinder their performance. In this study, the researchers used a qualitative case study design which involved 36 seventh-grade students from SMPN 8 Cimahi as the research subjects. The findings revealed that students performed best in content (26.89%), indicating that they were able to stay on topic and generate relevant ideas. In contrast, the lowest scores were found in grammar (16.61%) and mechanics (17.99%), reflecting frequent errors in tense use, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and capitalization. Interviews further found that limited vocabulary, low writing confidence, and difficulty in idea organization were major obstacles. Despite these challenges, students showed positive attitudes toward learning English and were more motivated when engaging in fun and interactive learning activities, such as games and outdoor tasks. These findings suggest that integrating vocabulary-building activities and communicative grammar practice into writing instruction can help students enhance their descriptive writing skills.

Keywords: *Writing Challenges, Descriptive Text, EFL Students*

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is an essential skill that enables individuals to express their thoughts and opinions through written language. It allows learners to engage meaningfully with ideas and messages they wish to convey (Zirak, 2022). Among the four English language skills, writing is often regarded as the most complex and demanding. According to Fodil-Cherif (2021), writing plays a crucial role in both academic and professional contexts, as it demonstrates one's ability to think critically and communicate effectively. Similarly, Fauziawati (as cited in Silalahi et al., 2021) emphasized that writing is an integral part of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning and remains a core component of English instruction. Harmer (as cited in Nurfidoh & Kareviati, 2021) also stated that writing has consistently been an essential element in English syllabi. In short, writing not only supports idea expression but also enhances learners' overall language competence.

Despite its importance, writing remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners to master. Suvin (2020) argued that writing is often considered the most difficult skill to acquire, as it requires the integration of multiple linguistic components such as vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, organization, and text structure. Likewise, Bulqiyah et al. (2021) stated that writing demands mastery of several interrelated stages that involve planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Observations in the seventh grade of junior high schools in Cimahi revealed that students often encounter difficulties in writing descriptive texts as emphasized in the English for Nusantara textbook, which highlights descriptive text writing as a key element of the curriculum.

In the context of language learning, writing is more than a mechanical activity—it is a process of thinking, discovering, and communicating. Urquhart and McIver (as cited in Putri & Aminatun, 2021) define writing as a means of using language to convey ideas, feelings, and intentions, helping learners retain knowledge and enhance concentration. Murcia (as cited in Fani et al., 2020) described writing as a communicative act involving an exchange of meaning between writer and reader through text organization. Similarly, Silalahi et al. (2021) argued that writing allows learners to express their thoughts in various forms, such as providing information, stating opinions, and sharing experiences. Hence, to write effectively, students must understand and practice different genres of writing. According to Qalam et al. (2021), genres such as narrative, recount, and descriptive texts serve as structured frameworks that help learners organize their ideas logically. This study focuses specifically on students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts, one of the core genres taught in Indonesian junior high schools.

A descriptive text is a genre used to portray a person, place, object, or event based on the writer's observation and imagination. Syifa et al. (2022) defined descriptive text as a type of writing that aims to give readers a clear picture of an object, person, or situation through detailed explanation. Similarly, Erlita (2022) noted that descriptive writing seeks to inform and help readers visualize the described subject. However, research indicates that students often face significant challenges when composing descriptive texts. Ginting et al. (2020) found that EFL learners struggle with limited vocabulary and insufficient understanding of grammar and sentence construction. Likewise, Nurfidoh and Kareviati (2021) observed that many students have difficulty expressing ideas and applying correct tenses. Nuralisaputri and Megawati (2023) further identified lack of vocabulary, poor understanding of text structure, and low motivation as major factors affecting students' performance. Similar findings by Syifa et al. (2022) and Rahmizul (2023) revealed that writing problems are commonly linked to weak grammar mastery, limited vocabulary, and ineffective teaching methods that fail to engage students.

From the statements above, the researcher assumes that writing is a complex and demanding skill that requires not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to organize ideas, understand audience expectations, and express meaning appropriately across different contexts. In second language learning, writing poses particular challenges because learners must think, plan, and compose in a language that is not their own, often navigating differences in grammar, vocabulary, and cultural conventions. Successful writing instruction, therefore, needs to integrate language awareness, writing strategies, and contextual understanding to help learners develop both fluency and accuracy in their written communication. As Hyland (2003) emphasizes, writing involves “composing skills and knowledge about texts, contexts, and readers,” reflecting the intricate relationship between language, cognition, and social purpose in the act of writing.

Besides, Richards and Renandya (2002) point out that writing is widely recognized as one of the most difficult skills for second language learners to master. It requires not only a good command of grammar and vocabulary but also the ability to generate, organize, and express ideas clearly and coherently. Many L2 writers struggle with these demands because writing in a second language involves both cognitive and linguistic challenges. They explain that students often find it hard to express themselves fluently in writing since they must pay attention to multiple aspects of language use simultaneously.

Considering the previous studies and theoretical perspectives, it can be concluded that students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts are mainly influenced by their limited linguistic competence, insufficient understanding of text organization, and low motivation to write. These problems often arise because learners must manage various aspects of language use such as grammar, vocabulary, and idea development while composing in a foreign language. Given these challenges, the present study aims to investigate the specific writing problems faced by junior high school students in producing descriptive texts and to identify the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties. The results of this study are expected

to offer valuable insights for English teachers in developing more engaging, supportive, and effective instructional strategies to improve students' descriptive writing performance.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative case study design to explore the writing challenges experienced by students in producing English descriptive texts. According to Yin (2018), a case study is a research approach used to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. Similarly, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define a case study as an in-depth investigation of a specific issue, individual, or group through rich, contextualized data collected from multiple sources. In this study, the case study design was considered appropriate because it allowed the researcher to comprehensively examine students' writing difficulties in an authentic classroom setting.

Participants

The participants of this study were 36 seventh-grade students from SMPN 8 Cimahi, West Java, Indonesia. They were selected through purposive sampling because they had already been introduced to descriptive text writing as part of their English curriculum.

Instruments

Two instruments were employed for data collection: a descriptive writing test and semi-structured interviews.

Writing Test

The writing test aimed to assess students' ability to compose a descriptive text based on a given topic "My Favorite Food or Drink." According to Fitria (2024), written tests are effective tools for evaluating students' comprehension and writing performance. Students' compositions were analyzed using Brown's analytical scoring rubric (as cited in Purnamasari et al., 2021), which consists of five components: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Each component was rated on a five-point scale, ranging from very poor to excellent.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were designed to gain deeper insights into students' perceptions and difficulties in writing descriptive texts. As noted by Knott et al. (2022), interviews in qualitative research enable participants to express their experiences and opinions in their own words. Six students were selected to represent three performance levels: two with high scores, two with medium scores, and two with low scores. The interviews consisted of five guiding questions focusing on students' attitudes toward English learning, their experiences in writing, and the challenges they faced in descriptive text writing. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian to ensure clarity and comfort, then transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis involved both quantitative descriptive and qualitative thematic procedures. For the writing test, each student's performance was scored according to the five rubric components. The scores were first tabulated and converted into percentages to show the distribution of performance across writing aspects. For instance, the percentage for each component (e.g., content 26.89%) was calculated using the formula:

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{Total score obtained}}{\text{Maximum possible score}} \times 100$$

The mean score for each component was then interpreted to identify which aspects of writing were most challenging for students.

For the interview data, the researchers employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The process involved six systematic steps: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Codes and themes were organized around recurring patterns such as vocabulary limitations, grammatical difficulties, mechanical errors, and organization of ideas. To enhance the

trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was conducted by comparing data from the writing test and interview results. The convergence between the two sources strengthened the interpretation of students' writing challenges.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were carefully observed throughout the research. Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained formal permission from the school administration of SMPN 8 Cimahi and informed consent from all participants. Students were clearly told that their participation was voluntary, their responses would remain confidential, and their real names would not be disclosed in any publication. All data were used solely for research purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented in two main parts: (1) the results of the students' descriptive writing test, and (2) the results of the student interviews. The data from both sources were analyzed and discussed to identify the challenges that students encountered when writing descriptive texts in English.

Writing Test Result

The descriptive writing test was conducted to assess students' ability to write descriptive texts based on the topic "My Favorite Food or Drink." Each writing sample was evaluated according to Brown's scoring rubric, which includes five key components: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics (as cited in Purnamasari et al., 2021).

Table 1. The Result of Students' Assessment in Writing Descriptive Text

No	Aspects	Result
1.	Content	26.89%
2.	Vocabulary	19.48%
3.	Organization	19.03%
4.	Mechanic	17.99%
5.	Grammar	16.61%

The data show that content achieved the highest score percentage (26.89%), suggesting that most students were able to stay on topic and include relevant details. They demonstrated an understanding of what to describe and generally provided appropriate information about the subject. This finding indicates that students had adequate comprehension of the descriptive text's communicative purpose – to describe an object or idea clearly.

The vocabulary and organization aspects followed with scores of 19.48% and 19.03%, respectively. Most students were able to use words that were generally appropriate to the topic; however, lexical variety was limited, as many repeated the same words or relied on basic vocabulary. In terms of organization, students typically followed a simple structure – introduction, description, and closing – but transitions between ideas were often unclear. Some writings lacked coherence, showing that students still struggled to connect sentences logically within paragraphs.

The lowest scores were found in grammar (16.61%) and mechanics (17.99%), revealing significant difficulties in sentence construction, tense usage, and the application of writing conventions. Frequent grammatical errors included incorrect subject-verb agreement, misuse of tenses, and incomplete sentences. Many students failed to consistently apply the simple present tense, which is the key grammatical feature of descriptive texts. In mechanics, errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling were common, which often reduced clarity and readability. These findings are consistent with those of Yuniar (2022), who reported that grammar, vocabulary, and mechanical errors are the most common problems faced by EFL students in writing descriptive texts.

This finding is the same as the research conducted by Merliana Duha (2022). She found that eighth-grade students at SMPN 2 Telukdalam faced several difficulties in writing descriptive texts. These included problems with grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation, and idea organization. The main causes were low motivation, limited language mastery, poor understanding of writing conventions, and lack of engaging learning media. It means that students still struggled to write descriptive texts effectively because they lacked

sufficient grammar and vocabulary mastery. It also shows that their motivation and confidence in learning English were low, which made it difficult for them to organize ideas clearly. In addition, the absence of interesting learning media contributed to their writing problems.

Another also comes from Damanik et al. (2023). The findings showed that students' overall writing ability was very poor, with a mean score of 12.5. The lowest performance was in grammar and mechanics, indicating frequent errors in tenses, punctuation, and capitalization. It means that students struggled to describe objects in detail and lacked mastery of basic grammar, especially the simple present tense, due to limited vocabulary and low writing proficiency. From this statement, it clearly seems that there is a similarity between this research and the previous.

The Result of Interview

The second set of data was obtained from semi-structured interviews with six students representing different proficiency levels. The interview findings provided qualitative insights into students' perceptions of their writing challenges. Most students expressed positive attitudes toward learning English but admitted that writing was difficult. The primary reasons included limited vocabulary, difficulty expressing ideas, and low confidence when writing in English.

For instance, one student stated, "Writing is difficult because I often don't know the meaning of English words," while another mentioned, "I get confused about how to write and use the right words." These statements highlight that vocabulary limitations significantly affected students' writing fluency and accuracy. Other students pointed out that spelling and grammar were confusing, which aligns with the quantitative findings showing low scores in mechanics and grammar. Furthermore, students expressed a preference for interactive and enjoyable learning methods, such as games or outdoor activities, which helped them stay motivated and engaged in learning English.

The combination of test and interview results reveals a consistent pattern in students' writing challenges. While students were able to generate relevant content and ideas, they struggled to convey them accurately due to limited linguistic competence. The dominance of content over other components suggests that students can think of what to write but face barriers in expressing those ideas in grammatically correct and well-organized English. This finding supports Suvin (2020), who stated that writing is a complex skill requiring simultaneous mastery of grammar, vocabulary, organization, and mechanics.

The persistent grammatical and mechanical errors observed in this study are in line with previous research by Norahmi and Asi (2022), who found that many EFL students failed to apply the appropriate generic structure and language features of descriptive texts, particularly in the use of the simple present tense. Similarly, Syifa et al. (2022) and Nuralisaputri and Megawati (2023) noted that students' difficulties often stem from insufficient vocabulary, weak understanding of grammar, and low motivation. The results of this study further confirm that students' lack of confidence and limited exposure to meaningful writing practice hinder their ability to produce accurate and coherent texts.

On a more positive note, students in this study demonstrated awareness of the importance of learning English, particularly for future career prospects and digital communication. Their preference for fun and interactive learning activities indicates that motivation plays a significant role in writing performance. This aligns with the findings of Rahmizul (2023), who suggested that incorporating engaging and student-centered approaches can reduce writing anxiety and improve learners' confidence. Therefore, integrating game-based learning, collaborative writing, and contextual vocabulary practice into writing instruction may help students overcome their challenges and foster greater interest in writing.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings from both the writing test and student interviews, this study concludes that junior high school students face several persistent challenges in writing English descriptive texts. While many students were able to generate relevant content and stay focused on the topic, their writing was often weakened by grammatical inaccuracies, limited vocabulary, and mechanical errors such as inconsistent punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. These weaknesses reduced the clarity, coherence, and overall quality of their compositions. The results further indicate that students limited lexical knowledge and lack of confidence hindered their ability to express ideas effectively. Nevertheless, their positive attitudes toward English learning and recognition of its importance for communication, future employment, and digital participation suggest a strong foundation for improvement. Students' enthusiasm for interactive and enjoyable learning activities such as games, group projects, and outdoor tasks highlights the value of creating engaging and meaningful writing experiences in the classroom. Reflecting on these findings, it is clear that improving students' writing ability requires more than teaching grammar and vocabulary in isolation. Teachers need to design writing instruction that integrates language form, communicative purpose, and creativity, allowing students to connect personal experiences with written expression. The use of game-based and project-based approaches, combined with peer feedback and digital tools, can encourage learners to take ownership of their writing and build confidence over time. Looking ahead, future research could extend this study by involving a wider range of schools or comparing different instructional approaches to determine which strategies best support EFL learners' writing development. Exploring the integration of technology, multimodal materials, and process-oriented writing instruction would also provide valuable insights into how English writing can be taught more effectively in the digital era.

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