



AN ANALYSIS OF THE WRITING ABILITY OF GRADE 11 STUDENTS AT SMAN 3 ACEH BARAT DAYA

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the English descriptive text writing ability of grade XI students at SMAN 3 Aceh Barat Daya and identify the factors that cause their low scores. Using a descriptive quantitative approach and supported by qualitative data through interviews, this study evaluated five aspects of writing according to Heaton's theory, namely: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Data were collected through descriptive text writing tests and interviews with ten students who had the lowest scores. The results showed that most students had not mastered the structure and linguistic elements in descriptive text. The main problems found include grammatical errors, lack of relevant vocabulary, and irregularity in the organization of ideas. In addition, interviews revealed five main causes of low writing ability: limited mastery of grammar and vocabulary, lack of writing practice, low motivation and confidence, unsupportive learning methods, and lack of access to writing assistive technology. This study recommends the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning, the use of assistive technology, and the provision of formative feedback to improve students' writing skills. In addition, continuous writing practice programs and collaboration through peer review are also considered effective for building writing skills.

Keywords: Writing, Descriptive Text, Vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Writing as a second, or foreign, language is a fundamental component of learning English. Of all the different kinds of writing, descriptive texts highlight the importance of learning to communicate ideas succinctly and effectively. Students can accurately describe persons, places, or objects by utilizing descriptive text with the right terminology and linguistic structures (Hyland, 2003). Unfortunately, many students struggle with this ability due to a variety of linguistic and cognitive limitations. According to Brown (2001), students' inability to write descriptions is frequently caused by a lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, and disorganized writing. High levels of cognitive skills are required of writers for tasks like planning, drafting, revising, and editing. According to Harmer (2004), the most common issue that students have when writing is coherence and cohesion, which hinder their ability to explain their descriptive text. Besides this, research by Richards and Renandya (2002) shows that many students are unable to use sensory details effectively, which is a crucial component of deskriptif writing.

There are several factors that have been investigated that affect students' ability to write descriptive texts. Dornyei (2005) asserts that motivation is essential for student productivity. Students that are really motivated are always willing to work more to develop their ideas and write their own words. Additionally, Graham and Perin (2007) state that students' learning is greatly impacted by their attitudes

toward effective writing models and instructional techniques. Without proper motivation and bimbingan, students can develop negative attitudes toward writing, which ultimately hinders their progress.

Students' writing skills are significantly affected by the use of educational methodology. As explained by Nasrullah and Rosalina (2019), CTL supports student-centered activities and, via collaborative involvement, motivates students to be proactive, imaginative, and effective problem-solvers. They stress that by connecting assignments to actual situations, CTL gives learning greater purpose and enhances students' descriptive writing skills. Every category of students' writing skills from the five indicators of English descriptive text is also analyzed. The researcher divided the text into five indicators: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics in order to have a better understanding of the students' writing abilities. Then she examined each category's problems. Annisa and Sukma (2025) conduct research on the effectiveness of CTL in descriptive writing instruction and conclude that this helps students understand descriptive writing structure more effectively. This method allows students to relate their learning to real-world situations, which makes the writing more interesting and meaningful. Another study by Adinda and Sari (2025) showed that mastery of grammar is essential for descriptive writing. Their study found a strong relationship between students' understanding of grammar and their ability to create well-structured descriptive texts.

Many students have difficulty creating sentences, which results in incomplete or unclear descriptions. To solve this problem, teachers should prioritize teaching grammar and writing practice so that students can better convey their ideas. Technology plays an important role in improving students' writing ability. Susanti and Azizan (2025) examined how the use of ChatGPT and other AI tools can improve students' descriptive writing skills. Their research showed that AI can help students in developing ideas, improving sentence structure, and improving text. However, AI can be a useful tool for students to practice and improve their own writing.

Instructional approaches, use of technology, and collaboration with peers affect students' writing ability. Nation (2009) conducted a study that showed that students' participation in peer review activities enhanced their learning and allowed them to receive feedback from their classmates. This collaborative learning approach encourages students to critically examine their own writing and identify areas that need attention. Assessment and feedback are important components in the writing process. According to Xie and Lei (2019), student writers must be given the opportunity to react to feedback and take appropriate action by changing and rewriting their work before it can be considered formative and effective. To assist students in overcoming the shortcomings of their descriptive writing, teachers should offer helpful critiques and clear directions. Students can evaluate their work before it is graded thanks to formative feedback, which has a huge impact on the overall quality of writing.

As a result of several challenges in writing descriptive texts, research has shown that effective teaching strategies, motivation, and technology integration can significantly improve students' writing skills. Educators can help their students in writing descriptive texts by using interesting teaching methods, using technology, and creating a supportive learning environment. Therefore, I would

like to investigate the ability of grade 11 students of SMAN 3 Aceh Barat Daya in writing descriptive texts. The purpose of this study is to find out the level of students' ability in writing descriptive texts and the reasons why their scores are low. The research questions are: (1) What is the level of students' ability in writing descriptive text in grade 11 of SMAN 3 Aceh Barat Daya? (2) What are the factors that contribute to the students' low score in writing descriptive text?

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a descriptive quantitative method to examine the writing ability of class XI students of SMAN 3 Aceh Barat Daya in producing descriptive texts, with a qualitative method to identify the factors contributing to students' low writing scores through interviews. This approach was chosen because it is able to describe students' abilities based on numerical data, and also allows the exploration of causal factors through qualitative data collection techniques. This study focused on five main aspects of writing assessment based on Heaton's theory (1988, as cited in Al-Ghrafy, 2018), namely: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics.

The participants in this study were all grade XI students at SMAN 3 Aceh Barat Daya. By using purposive sampling, 50 students were selected as the research sample. The sample consisted of 20 male and 30 female students who were considered representative of the student population in the school and willing to participate in the test and interview process. This study mainly used the descriptive text writing assessment in English as its main instrument. The participants were asked to write a descriptive piece of writing related to a predetermined theme. The writing assessment involved analyzing five aspects with the help of a standardized and objective rating scale.

The assessment process was conducted by two independent raters to ensure reliability. The level of inter-rater agreement was tested using Cohen's Kappa, and the results showed a value of $\kappa = 0.82$, which is categorized as an excellent level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). This indicates that the scoring process was consistent and reliable. To identify the factors causing students' low writing scores, a semi-structured interview method was used as a supporting instrument. Interviews were conducted with 10 students with the lowest scores in the writing test to dig deeper into the difficulties they faced in the writing process. The interview process was recorded and analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis techniques to identify common patterns and main factors that influence low writing results. This analysis was conducted to complement the quantitative data from the test results, as well as to enrich the interpretation of the research results with in-depth contextual information. By combining the quantitative approach and qualitative interviews, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of students' writing ability and the causes of their weaknesses in writing descriptive English texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study show how Heaton's theoretical evaluation was used to analyze descriptive writing written in English. According to Heaton (1988, as cited in Al-Ghrafy, 2018), writing evaluation should not only concentrate on spelling and punctuation as these elements can hinder originality and composition. Instead, when students can demonstrate that they can organize language content and

use their own words and ideas to communicate meaningfully, composition writing can be a useful evaluation tool. In addition, each group displayed students' writing ability based on five markers of English descriptive text. Content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics of English descriptive text are the markers that the researcher looks at. The researcher then examined each indicator that became a problem in creating English descriptive text.

The students' writing performance in descriptive texts was assessed based on five key indicators, namely content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Each component represents an essential element of descriptive writing and was evaluated through a structured scoring system, as presented in Figure 1. To begin with, content plays a crucial role in English descriptive writing since it covers the selection of topics and the inclusion of relevant details. The data show that 10% of students produced excellent writing content, which means that five students were able to connect topics with supporting details clearly and effectively. Meanwhile, 8% or four students were categorized as very good, and 18% or nine students reached a good level. However, a significant 64% or thirty-two students were placed in the very poor category, indicating that they struggled to identify appropriate topics and elaborate on them with relevant information. According to Rusmawan (2017), descriptive writing should include a clear main topic and supporting details to help the reader understand the text. In this case, the majority of students failed to establish this connection, resulting in unclear or incomplete descriptions.

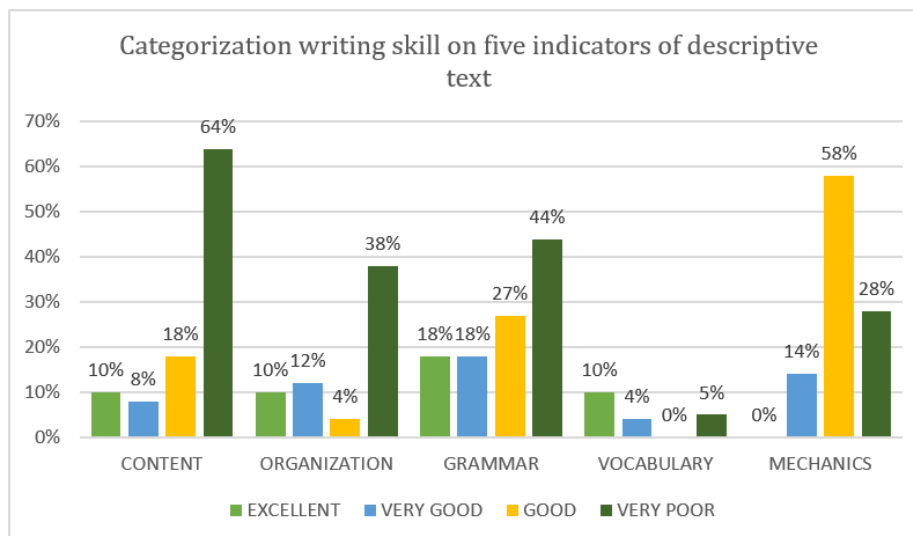


Figure 1. The categorization of English descriptive text

In addition to content, organization serves as the second essential aspect in assessing students' descriptive writing. Organization refers to how students structure their texts, particularly following the pattern of identification and description, which is typical in descriptive writing. The data revealed that 10% or five students demonstrated excellent organization by presenting a complete and well-structured descriptive text. Another 12% or six students were classified as very good, while only 4% or two students achieved a good score. Despite this, 38% or nineteen students performed very poorly, struggling to follow the expected structure. Indriyani (2013) found that students often experience difficulties in organizing their ideas effectively due to a lack of understanding of the descriptive

text structure. Similarly, Yoandita (2019) noted that students who could not properly organize their ideas tended to have trouble developing them. In this study, many students failed to construct a coherent general structure and could not effectively describe objects, leading to disorganized and unclear writing.

Moreover, grammar emerged as another critical indicator in evaluating students' descriptive texts. This component emphasizes the use of simple present tense, as well as action verbs, adjectives, and agreement. Based on the data, 18% of students demonstrated excellent grammar skills, and another 18% were categorized as very good. Additionally, 27% showed good grammar ability. However, 44% or twenty-two students were identified as having very poor grammar. These students frequently made mistakes in using the simple present tense, especially in distinguishing between singular and plural forms. They also appeared confused when constructing verbal and nominal sentences and misused verbs and adjectives. These findings align with Indriyani's (2013) study, which reported that students often made errors in tense usage when writing descriptive texts. It can be concluded that a lack of understanding of grammatical rules significantly hindered students' ability to write accurate and coherent descriptive texts.

Following grammar, vocabulary also plays a vital role in determining the quality of students' writing. The data indicated that 10% of students reached the excellent level in vocabulary use, and 4% were categorized as very good. Although a small number of students showed strong command of vocabulary, many others struggled. Notably, 0% of students were considered good, and 5% were categorized as very poor. This means that only a few students used vocabulary effectively in their writing, while others tended to use unrelated or irrelevant words that weakened the clarity of their texts. According to Brown and Abeywickrama (2010), appropriate vocabulary use is essential in helping readers understand the message conveyed in a text. In this case, students with limited vocabulary often misused words or chose terms that did not align with the topic, making their descriptions difficult to understand. Therefore, vocabulary development remains an area that requires attention and improvement.

Equally important is the aspect of mechanics, which refers to the correct application of punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. The data show that none of the students achieved an excellent score in this area, although 14% or seven students were classified as very good and 58% obtained good scores. In contrast, 28% or fourteen students were rated as very poor. Many of these students made errors in punctuation, such as placing commas incorrectly, and struggled with understanding sentence boundaries and the use of dependent and independent clauses. Spelling errors were also common, which in many cases altered the intended meaning of words. As Graham et al. (2002) explain, misspelled words can confuse readers or result in loss of meaning entirely. Therefore, it is important that students improve their mechanical skills to ensure that their writing is clear and understandable.

Considering all five indicators, it is evident that there are significant variations in students' performance. While a small number of students demonstrated competence across various areas, the majority showed considerable weaknesses, particularly in content, organization, and grammar. These findings suggest that further instructional support is needed to help students enhance their writing proficiency. To deepen the analysis, standard deviations were also

calculated for each indicator to identify the extent of variation among students' performance levels. This comprehensive evaluation provides valuable insights into areas that require targeted interventions, especially for improving clarity, structure, and accuracy in students' descriptive writing. The results show considerable variability, especially in the content, grammar, and vocabulary scores. The following table presents the mean scores and standard deviations of each indicator:

Table 1. The means and standard deviations of each indicator:

Criteria	Mean	Standard Deviations
Content	16.74	5.71
Organization	12.52	3.80
Vocabulary	12.83	4.93
Grammar	15.04	4.95
Mechanics	2.86	0.64
Total Score	57.14	18.33

In addition to the results of the written test, this study also involved collecting qualitative data through interviews with the ten lowest-scoring students, in order to dig deeper into the factors causing their low writing ability. The following are the findings from the interviews:

1. Limited Mastery of Vocabulary and Grammar

The majority of students expressed difficulty in choosing the right words and using appropriate sentence structures, especially in the use of simple present tense, agreement, and adjective order.

"I am often confused about choosing the right words, especially when describing something... sometimes I just use the words I know even though I am not sure they are right."

(Interview, Student 3)

"Grammar is the hardest, I don't know when to use verb 1 or when to use 'is' or 'are'." *(Interview, Student 7)*

This statement shows that students' weak vocabulary and grammatical competence is the main obstacle in composing accurate descriptive texts. This difficulty has a direct impact on the smooth expression of ideas and narrative structures that should characterize descriptive texts. This finding corroborates the opinion of Brown (2001) and Harmer (2004) who state that mastery of grammar and vocabulary is the main prerequisite for successful writing in a second language.

2. Lack of Exposure and Writing Practice

Some students admitted that they were not used to writing in English due to the lack of written practice in class, as well as the rarity of being given continuous writing assignments.

"Usually we are more practicing multiple choice questions or reading texts, rarely told to write long." *(Interview, Student 5)*

The lack of exposure to continuous writing practice causes students to be unaccustomed to composing paragraphs independently. Writing skills, different from passive skills such as reading or answering objective questions, require continuous development that can only be achieved through structured practice.

Graham and Perin (2007) emphasize that the intensity and consistency of practice greatly affect students' writing performance.

3. Lack of Motivation and Self-Confidence

Psychological factors such as fear of being wrong, lack of confidence, and the assumption that writing is difficult also affect student performance.

"I like to be embarrassed if my writing is wrong. So sometimes I just write short so I can finish it quickly." (*Interview, Student 1*)

"When told to write, I feel confused about where to start. I'm afraid of grammar mistakes too." (*Interview, Student 6*)

This statement shows that low self-confidence hinders students' creative process. The fear of negative evaluation causes them to avoid the long writing process. According to Dornyei (2005), intrinsic motivation is the main determinant in the achievement of language skills, including writing ability. When students have low confidence in their abilities, their cognitive potential cannot be optimally developed.

4. Limitations of Learning Support

Some students mentioned that learning materials or methods have not fully helped them understand the structure of descriptive text.

"Sometimes the teacher only gives an example once, and then we are told to make it ourselves. I don't understand yet." (*Interview, Student 2*)

Instructional methods that are less responsive to students' needs can lead to confusion in understanding text structure. Approaches that are too brief or lack explanations have a negative impact on the ability to organize descriptions systematically. This is in line with the opinion of Graham and Perin (2007) who suggest explicit learning models and scaffolding in teaching writing.

5. Lack of Access to Supporting Technology

Most students were not familiar with digital tools such as Grammarly or those that can help with the writing and editing process.

"I don't know if there are apps that can help me write. I just use Google Translate when I don't know the meaning of a word." (*Interview, Student 10*)

The lack of digital literacy makes students unable to utilize technology as a tool in text preparation and revision. In fact, various recent studies such as by Susanti and Azizan (2025) show that the use of AI-based technology can significantly improve the accuracy and quality of student writing. Without access or knowledge of these technologies, repeated errors in grammar and sentence structure are difficult to avoid.

The results of this study show that most of the students of grade XI of

SMAN 3 Aceh Barat Daya have not mastered the skill of writing descriptive text adequately. The low scores on the indicators of content, grammar, and organization indicate that students have difficulty in composing relevant ideas and applying appropriate language structures, including the use of simple present tense and the preparation of coherent paragraphs. This finding is in line with Brown's (2001) opinion which states that weak mastery of vocabulary and grammar is a major obstacle in students' writing ability. In addition, Harmer (2004) emphasizes that errors in cohesion and coherence are the main obstacles in conveying ideas effectively, which is also evident from the results of this study.

The high standard deviation scores on the content (5.71), grammar (4.95), and vocabulary (4.93) indicators indicate a large gap among students in terms of their

mastery of writing skills. While a small number of students showed high proficiency, most of the other students had very limited skills. This indicates that a uniform approach to learning is not effective enough, and different learning strategies need to be implemented to reach the needs of students with diverse abilities.

In addition, the results of in-depth interviews with the ten lowest-scoring students reinforced the quantitative findings. The five main factors identified were: (1) limited mastery of vocabulary and grammar, (2) lack of writing practice and exposure to descriptive texts, (3) low motivation and confidence in writing, (4) limited learning methods and teacher guidance, and (5) lack of access to writing support technology. These factors indicate that writing barriers are not only linguistic, but also include affective aspects and the learning environment.

This finding supports Dornyei's (2005) idea that motivation is a key element in successful learning, as well as Graham and Perin (2007) who emphasize the importance of effective teaching models in writing. Therefore, comprehensive interventions are needed, including contextual approaches, the application of technology such as autocorrect applications, and the use of collaborative methods such as peer review (Nation, 2009). Teachers also need to provide formative feedback consistently as suggested by Xie and Lei (2019), to help students understand errors and improve their writing skills gradually.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to measure the ability to write descriptive texts in English of class XI students of SMAN 3 Aceh Barat Daya and identify the factors that cause their low scores. The results showed that the majority of students had not mastered the structure and linguistic elements in descriptive texts, especially in the aspects of content, idea organization, and grammar. The main difficulties found include the use of inappropriate grammar, lack of relevant vocabulary, and ignorance in composing logical and structured paragraphs.

On the non-linguistic side, interviews with students revealed that lack of motivation, lack of writing practice, low self-confidence, and limited teaching and technological support were the main inhibiting factors in the development of writing skills. This shows that the problems students face are very complex and require multidimensional solutions. To improve students' overall writing ability, it is recommended that teachers apply a contextual learning approach (CTL), utilize technology as a writing aid, and provide specific and constructive feedback. In addition, continuous writing practice programs and collaborative activities such as peer review need to be developed so that students are more accustomed to expressing ideas in writing. With the right support, students are expected to improve their writing skills and achieve the expected competencies in English language learning.

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