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STUDENT'S DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE TEXT: A CASE OF ONE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL IN BATANGHARI

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ABSTRACT. *Writing descriptive texts is an essential skill for senior high school students, yet many still struggle to express their ideas in written English. This study aimed to analyze the difficulties students experience in writing descriptive texts. A descriptive qualitative design was employed with 34 eleventh-grade students of SMA Negeri 3 Batanghari, Jambi Province. Data were collected through a descriptive writing task completed by all participants and semi-structured interviews with six students selected according to their writing performance, from the best to the weakest, and were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The findings show two main themes of difficulties: cognitive and linguistic problems. Cognitive problems consisted of difficulties in generating ideas, organizing ideas, and translating ideas from Indonesian into English, whereas linguistic problems consisted of limited vocabulary and grammatical errors, especially in the simple present tense, the verb to be, and subject–verb agreement. Translating ideas from Indonesian into English emerged as the most dominant difficulty. The study concludes that students' difficulties are shaped by the interaction of cognitive and linguistic factors. Teachers are therefore encouraged to provide process-based writing practice, strengthen students' vocabulary and grammar, and encourage students to think directly in English.*

Keywords: *Descriptive Text, Writing Difficulties, Cognitive Problems, Linguistic Problems, Qualitative Research*

ABSTRAK. Menulis teks deskriptif merupakan keterampilan penting bagi siswa sekolah menengah atas, namun banyak di antara mereka yang masih kesulitan mengekspresikan gagasan mereka dalam bahasa Inggris tertulis. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesulitan yang dialami siswa dalam menulis teks deskriptif. Desain kualitatif deskriptif digunakan dengan melibatkan 34 siswa kelas XI SMA Negeri 3 Batanghari, Provinsi Jambi. Data dikumpulkan melalui tugas menulis deskriptif yang diselesaikan oleh semua peserta serta wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan enam siswa yang dipilih berdasarkan kinerja menulis mereka, mulai dari yang terbaik hingga yang terlemah, dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik Braun dan Clarke (2006). Temuan menunjukkan dua tema utama kesulitan: masalah kognitif dan linguistik. Masalah kognitif meliputi kesulitan dalam menghasilkan ide, mengorganisasikan ide, dan menerjemahkan ide dari bahasa Indonesia ke bahasa Inggris, sedangkan masalah linguistik meliputi keterbatasan kosakata dan kesalahan tata bahasa, terutama pada bentuk simple present, kata kerja "to be", dan kesesuaian subjek-predikat. Menerjemahkan ide dari bahasa Indonesia ke bahasa Inggris muncul sebagai kesulitan yang paling dominan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kesulitan siswa dipengaruhi oleh interaksi antara faktor kognitif dan linguistik. Oleh karena itu, guru didorong untuk memberikan latihan menulis berbasis proses, memperkuat kosakata dan tata bahasa siswa, serta mendorong siswa untuk berpikir langsung dalam bahasa Inggris.

Kata Kunci: *Descriptive Text, Writing Difficulties, Cognitive Problems, Linguistic Problems, Qualitative Research*

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is a productive skill that allows people to convey ideas, opinions, and feelings in an organized and meaningful way. Semi (2020) describes writing as a creative activity of conveying thoughts or ideas through written symbols, while Dalman (2018) defines it as a creative process of expressing ideas in written language for specific purposes, such as informing, convincing, or entertaining readers. Writing is therefore not merely a matter of conveying a message; what is written must also be understandable to the reader. Because it involves generating and arranging ideas as well as choosing suitable language, writing draws on both cognitive and linguistic abilities.

Writing is also a process rather than a single act. Oshima and Hogue (2007) describe five steps in the writing process: prewriting, organizing, writing a rough draft, polishing (revising and editing), and producing the final copy. The quality of the final product depends on several components. Harris (1974) identifies five primary components of writing, namely content, form or organization, grammar, style, and mechanics. Together, these components show that successful writing requires the ability to generate and organize ideas as well as the ability to control language, including vocabulary and grammar.

Among the text types taught at senior high school level in Indonesia, the descriptive text is one of the fundamental genres. According to Dalman (2018), a descriptive text describes objects or events clearly and in detail so that readers can feel or visualize what is being described. Its generic structure consists of two parts: identification, which introduces the person, place, or object being described, and description, which presents its parts, qualities, or characteristics. Descriptive texts typically rely on adjectives, linking verbs, and the simple present tense. Mastering this genre therefore trains students to choose words carefully, organize their thoughts, and use language creatively.

Despite its importance, many students still find descriptive writing difficult. Adla (2023) reported that more than half of the students at SMK Negeri 4 Jambi struggled with text organization, language features, limited vocabulary, and the ability to build cohesive paragraphs. Hartina et al. (2024) found that students at a senior high school in Palopo had difficulties with text structure, linguistic aspects, and mechanics, which were related to a lack of writing practice, limited ideas, poor vocabulary, and low motivation. Yuniar and

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Siswana (2022) reported that students at a private senior high school in Jakarta found grammar the most difficult (50%), followed by vocabulary (30%), content development (30%), and idea generation (20%). Similar problems were reported by Almunawar (2024), who identified difficulties in organization, content, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics among tenth-grade students; by Chairunnisa (2021), who found mechanics to be the most dominant difficulty (61.63%); and by Waruwu (2023), who found that eleventh-grade students struggled with generic structure and language features because of limited vocabulary, insufficient grammar understanding, and a lack of motivation and practice.

These studies were conducted in other regions and school contexts, and research on this topic in Batanghari Regency, where English learning conditions may differ from those in larger cities, remains limited. This study addresses that gap by examining the difficulties faced by eleventh-grade students of one senior high school in Batanghari in writing descriptive texts. It draws on Byrne's (1988) distinction between cognitive difficulties, which concern generating, arranging, and expressing ideas, and linguistic difficulties, which concern command of vocabulary and language structures. The research question was: what are the students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts? Accordingly, the study aimed to analyze the difficulties experienced by students in writing descriptive texts.

Research into improving descriptive writing skills is urgently needed, particularly in rural high schools such as SMAN 3 Batanghari, because students often face dual barriers in the form of cognitive issues (such as difficulty generating and organizing ideas, as well as reliance on translating from Indonesian to English) and linguistic issues (limited vocabulary and grammatical errors). This in-depth investigation is crucial for understanding the root causes of the problems that hinder students' written communication effectiveness in real-world settings. Ultimately, this study provides significant practical benefits for teachers in designing more targeted, process-based learning strategies, helps students overcome their writing barriers, and enriches the body of literature for future educational research.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. Bungin (2022), qualitative research is a method that was generate descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observed behaviors. The main goal of this approach was to

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understand social phenomena from the participants' perspectives." This design was chosen because the study aimed to obtain detailed information about students' difficulties, their experiences in writing, and the factors influencing their writing performance.

The study was conducted at SMA Negeri 3 Batanghari, a public senior high school in Batanghari Regency, Jambi Province. Before data collection, the researcher met the student affairs officer and the English teacher to obtain official permission. The participants were 34 eleventh-grade students who studied under the Merdeka Curriculum. They were selected through purposive sampling, a non-random technique in which participants are chosen deliberately because they have characteristics relevant to the study (Campbell et al., 2020). The class was selected on the advice of the English teacher, who was familiar with the students' learning progress, because the students had already studied descriptive text and were willing to write and to be interviewed. In qualitative research, the depth of the information obtained matters more than the size of the sample (Sugiyono, 2022). Six students were then selected for interviews based on their performance in the writing task, ranging from the best to the weakest. They are referred to as SS1 to SS6 in this article.

Two techniques were used to collect data. The first was a writing task given to all participants. Writing tasks involve a range of cognitive processes, including planning, organizing, monitoring, and rewriting (Castells et al., 2023), which makes them suitable for observing students' writing performance. The students were asked to write a descriptive text about their idols and to note briefly the difficulties they experienced while writing. The texts were collected and examined for patterns related to vocabulary, grammar, content, and structure, including the use of adjectives and the simple present tense.

he second technique was a semi-structured interview conducted after the writing task. The interview guide covered the students' experiences in writing descriptive texts, difficulties in planning and finding ideas, difficulties with language and text structure, the processes of writing and revising, and suggestions for making lessons easier. Follow-up questions were asked based on the students' answers. Each interview lasted approximately 5–10 minutes and was conducted face to face in a quiet classroom. The interviews were held in Bahasa Indonesia so that the students could express their ideas easily. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis and reporting. Participation was voluntary, the participants could refuse to answer

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any question or stop at any time, and their identities were replaced with codes.

The writing samples and interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which consists of six phases: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The researcher read and re-read the data, coded recurring words, phrases, and patterns manually by highlighting them, and sorted the codes into potential themes such as limited vocabulary and grammar problems. The themes were then reviewed against the data, named, and reported with extracts from the students' interviews and writing.

The trustworthiness of the study followed Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was supported by data triangulation between the students' writing and interviews, time spent in the research setting, and member checking, in which interview summaries and interpretations were confirmed with the participants. Transferability was supported by a description of the setting, the participants, and the data collection process. Dependability was supported by an audit trail documenting each stage of the research. Confirmability was supported by reflexivity and by backing the findings with direct quotations and samples of students' writing.

RESULTS

The analysis of the students' writing tasks and interview transcripts revealed two main categories of difficulties in writing descriptive texts: cognitive difficulties and linguistic difficulties. Cognitive difficulties comprised three subthemes: difficulty generating ideas, difficulty organizing ideas, and difficulty translating ideas from Indonesian into English. Meanwhile, linguistic difficulties consisted of two subthemes: vocabulary limitations and grammatical difficulties.

Cognitive Difficulties

Cognitive difficulties refer to challenges in the thinking processes involved in generating, organizing, and expressing ideas in written form (Byrne, 1988). The findings revealed three subthemes: difficulty generating ideas, difficulty organizing ideas, and difficulty translating ideas from Indonesian into English.

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Difficulty Generating Ideas

The first subtheme was difficulty generating ideas. During the interviews, students SS6 and SS3 reported that they had difficulty choosing an appropriate title and determining how to begin their descriptive texts. This finding was supported by the students' writing products, as student SS1 submitted a completely blank answer sheet, indicating difficulty initiating the writing task.

Difficulty Organizing Ideas

The second subtheme was difficulty organizing ideas. During the interview, student SS2 reported difficulties connecting sentences and choosing appropriate conjunctions. The analysis of SS2's writing further supported this finding, as the student combined several ideas into one excessively long sentence without appropriate punctuation or connecting words. This suggests that organizing ideas into clear and coherent sentences was a challenge for the student.

Difficulty Translating Ideas from Indonesian into English

The third subtheme was difficulty translating ideas from Indonesian into English. Students SS1, SS4, SS5, and SS6 reported that they struggled to find English equivalents for their ideas and tended to formulate their thoughts in Indonesian before translating them into English. This difficulty was also evident in SS5's writing, which contained Indonesian words and phrases inserted directly into English sentences.

Linguistic Difficulties

Linguistic difficulties refer to challenges related to the language resources required to produce accurate written texts. In this study, two subthemes were identified: vocabulary limitations and grammatical difficulties.

Vocabulary Limitations

The first subtheme was vocabulary limitations. Interview responses from students SS1, SS4, and SS5 indicated difficulties selecting appropriate words, descriptive adjectives, and English titles. The students' writing samples provided further evidence of these difficulties.

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For example, SS4 used the phrase "care boy," which appeared to be an inappropriate word combination in context, while SS5 mixed Indonesian and English vocabulary within the same text. These findings suggest that limited vocabulary knowledge affected the students' ability to express their descriptions clearly and appropriately.

Grammatical Difficulties

The second subtheme was grammatical difficulties. During the interview, student SS3 acknowledged having difficulty understanding grammatical rules. The writing samples also revealed grammatical errors. Student SS4 produced structures such as "He born" and "he look," while SS3's writing contained errors involving verb forms and subject–verb agreement. In addition, SS5 omitted subjects in some sentence structures and misspelled "born" as "Bron." These examples indicate that the students experienced difficulties applying grammatical rules and constructing accurate English sentences.

Difficulties in generating ideas

Several students had difficulty deciding what to write and how to begin. SS6 said,

> *"The hardest part for me is coming up with a title, arranging words into descriptive sentences, and it makes me think really hard,"*

and added,

> *"I'm confused about what to write."*

SS3 explained that the introduction was the part revised most often

> *"because it's quite difficult to get into the flow and start a sentence."*

The writing task showed the same problem: SS1 left the answer sheet blank. The student understood the instructions but could not decide what to write. These findings show that students need a lot of time to think before they begin, and that the inability to generate ideas is an obstacle to producing descriptive texts.

Difficulties in organizing ideas

Several students also struggled to arrange their thoughts into logical sentences and to link those sentences into meaningful paragraphs. SS2 stated,

> *"I have trouble connecting sentences or choosing conjunctions like 'and,' 'or,' and other connecting words."*

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This difficulty can be seen in SS2's text, "The Best Father,"in which several ideas are packed into one long sentence without proper punctuation or connecting words, for example, "he is the head of household who suports my family with his backbone, he is someone who never gives up, a hard worker someone who doesn't want to look sad or have problems in front of his family" (original spelling retained). As a result, the text becomes ambiguous, and the paragraph lacks coherence and unity.

Difficulties in translating Indonesian into English

Most of the interviewed students thought in Indonesian first and then translated their ideas into English, which made it difficult to build correct sentences and choose the right words. SS1 said,

> *"I have trouble finding the words to describe objects, especially in English."*

SS4 explained,

> *"The difficulty lies in finding the right words or replacing them with English equivalents to form correct sentences."*

SS6 found it confusing because

"sometimes I have to think in English,"

which was stressful because of time constraints or the number of sentences required. SS5 was afraid that the description would not match the object exactly. The same tendency appeared in SS5's writing, where Indonesian words and phrases such as "Rambutnya," "sangat," and "warna kulitnya sawo matang" were left in the English text because the student could not find the English equivalents. This indicates that students still depend on their first language, which affects the quality of their writing.

Linguistic problems concern vocabulary and grammar

Byrne (1988) argues that students with a limited command of vocabulary and language structures have difficulty expressing their ideas in writing.

Vocabulary difficulties. Limited vocabulary was one of the most common problems. SS1 stated,

> *"It's hard to find the right words to form sentences."*

SS4 said,

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"My difficulty is choosing English words to create a title."

SS5 added,

"It's hard to write adjectives and translate them into English,"

for example when describing someone as a nice person who is sometimes mischievous. In the writing task, SS4 used the phrase "care boy," which suggests that the student had not yet found the vocabulary needed to convey the intended meaning, and SS5 used Indonesian and English interchangeably. These results indicate that a lack of vocabulary prevents students from expressing their ideas clearly and precisely.

Grammar difficulties

Grammar was also difficult for the students.

SS3 said,

"It's pretty hard when I have to write and deal with figurative language because, honestly, I don't really like writing, so I don't really understand how to use proper grammar."

The students' texts confirmed this. SS4 wrote "He born on March 9, 1993" without the auxiliary verb was, and "On stage he look so cool but off stage he so funny," which should read "looks" and "is" in the simple present tense. SS3 wrote "He lived in [village name], is 17 years old, and has a family who lived with him," which contains verb form and subject–verb agreement errors. SS5 wrote "Name is [name]. Bron on November 10, 2008," omitting the subject and misspelling born. Overall, the students still had difficulty with sentence structure, subject–verb agreement, auxiliary verbs, and verb forms, which made some statements grammatically wrong and hard to understand.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings show that the students' difficulties arise from the interaction of cognitive and linguistic factors. Cognitive problems appear at the beginning of the writing process, when students brainstorm, formulate ideas, and move their ideas from Indonesian into English, while linguistic problems appear when students put those ideas into words and sentences.

The difficulty in generating ideas is consistent with Byrne's (1988) view of writing as a cognitive activity that requires the ability to conceive, develop, and convey ideas. When students have trouble at this first stage, the later stages of writing are also affected. Oshima

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and Hogue (2007) describe prewriting as the step in which writers choose a topic and gather ideas through techniques such as listing and brainstorming, so the students in this study may need more support at this stage. The finding also agrees with Almunawar (2024), who found that students had difficulty developing content in descriptive texts, and with Waruwu (2023), who found that students had difficulty describing objects in detail. Difficulty in organizing ideas, in turn, matches Oshima and Hogue's (2007) point that arranging ideas into a logical order allows writers to communicate in a systematic way. SS2's text suggests that this stage had not yet been achieved, so the paragraph was incoherent.

Translating ideas from Indonesian into English appeared to be the most prominent difficulty in this study, because most of the interviewed students described thinking in Indonesian before writing in English, and the writing samples contained Indonesian words and phrases. This reliance on the first language is closely linked to the other problems found. Students who must search for English equivalents while composing face problems with word choice and sentence construction, and some fall back on Indonesian when they do not know the English word. The translation process therefore seems to be a source of both vocabulary and grammar errors.

The vocabulary difficulties are in line with Yuniar and Siswana (2022), who identified limited vocabulary as a major reason for students' difficulty in producing descriptive texts. Because a descriptive text aims to help readers visualize its subject (Dalman, 2018), a limited stock of adjectives and specific words directly limits how detailed and vivid students' descriptions can be. The grammar difficulties agree with Hartina et al. (2024) and Yuniar and Siswana (2022), who also identified grammar as a problem. In this study, the errors involved the simple present tense and the verb to be, the very forms that descriptive texts require. Grammar is one of the five components of writing (Harris, 1974), and errors in it make the writer's message less clear.

Taken together, the findings suggest that writing descriptive texts depends not only on mastery of vocabulary and grammar but also on the ability to generate and organize ideas and the confidence to think directly in English. Since the data were drawn from one school and from the students' own perspectives, these findings should be read as a description of this context rather than as a generalization.

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CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed the difficulties faced by eleventh-grade students of SMA Negeri 3 Batanghari in writing descriptive texts, using a writing task completed by 34 students and semi-structured interviews with six students. Two main types of difficulties were found. Cognitive problems consisted of difficulties in generating ideas, organizing ideas, and translating ideas from Indonesian into English. Linguistic problems consisted of limited vocabulary and grammatical errors, especially in the simple present tense, subject–verb agreement, the verb to be, and verb forms. The most dominant difficulty was translating ideas from Indonesian into English, which suggests that many students still rely on their first language when writing in English. The students' difficulties result from the interplay of cognitive and linguistic factors; therefore, improving their descriptive writing requires not only attention to vocabulary and grammar but also regular training in generating and organizing ideas and encouragement to think and write directly in English.

Based on these findings, English teachers are advised to use process-based activities such as brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising, and editing, to give regular writing practice with feedback on idea development, vocabulary, and grammar, and to use contextualized activities such as pictures, videos, vocabulary games, and project-based learning. Students are encouraged to practice writing regularly, to read English texts to enrich their vocabulary, to review the simple present tense, subject–verb agreement, and sentence structure, and to make outlines or mind maps before writing. This study was limited to one school, a small number of participants, and the students' perspectives. Future researchers are suggested to involve other educational levels, locations, and larger groups, to include teachers' perspectives, and to design and test learning strategies, instructional media, and teaching models that address students' cognitive and linguistic difficulties in descriptive writing.

DECLARATIONS

AI Usage Declaration

AI Use Declaration. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used responsibly to assist with language refinement, grammar checking, and improving the clarity of the manuscript. The research process, data collection, data analysis, and conclusions remain the responsibility of the author.

Auhtor Contributions

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Author Contribution. (VV) was responsible for conceptualizing the research, collecting and analyzing the data, and preparing the manuscript. (NF) and (NA) contributed to research supervision, methodological guidance, critical review, and manuscript revision. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

Conflict of Interest. The author declares no conflict of interest in conducting or publishing this research. Appropriate permission and consent were obtained from the relevant parties and participants before data collection. The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 3 Batanghari, Jambi Province, Indonesia.

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