THE DIFFICULTIES OF SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE TEXT AT SMP NEGERI 2 PEMATANGSIANTAR

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the difficulties faced by seventh-grade students in writing descriptive texts at SMP Negeri 2 Pematangsiantar. Writing, as a productive language skill, requires mastery of various components including content development, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. However, many students still struggle to express ideas effectively in written English. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, this study focused on analyzing students' writing performance using Jacobs et al.'s (1981) analytical scoring rubric. Data were collected through a descriptive writing test given to 90 students from three different academic ability levels. Each writing sample was assessed based on five writing components. The findings revealed that the most frequent difficulties occurred in mechanics, with 511 total cases, followed by language use with 238 difficulties. Errors in vocabulary (53), organization (41), and content (1) were considerably fewer, indicating that while students generally understood the descriptive writing format, their ability to apply proper grammar and writing conventions remained limited. The results suggest that the students' struggles were not primarily due to a lack of ideas, but rather insufficient control over the technical aspects of writing. This study highlights the importance of targeted instructional strategies in grammar and mechanics to support students' writing development. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate explicit writing practice and feedback into the classroom to improve students' overall proficiency in descriptive text writing.
Keywords: Writing Difficulties, Descriptive Text, Mechanics, Language Use, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the four essential language skills in English, alongside listening, speaking, and reading. Among these, writing is often considered the most complex and challenging for students to master, as it requires a combination of vocabulary, grammar, organization, and creativity. In junior high school, particularly for seventh-grade students, writing descriptive text is a fundamental part of the curriculum. Descriptive text aims to describe a person, place, object, or event in detail, requiring students to utilize appropriate adjectives, verbs, and sentence structures. However, many students face significant difficulties in writing descriptive texts. These difficulties are evident in their struggles with grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, coherence, and writing mechanics. According to Maulidiyah and Mandarani (2023), seventh-grade students often fail to structure descriptive texts correctly, particularly in organizing the generic structure (identification and description) and using appropriate vocabulary. Their study also found that many students had limited ability to use descriptive language effectively, resulting in vague and underdeveloped writing.

Furthermore, Eliskasari (2022) found that students frequently encountered obstacles related to grammar usage, especially the use of the simple present tense and the correct form of adjectives (Hulu et al., 2023). Problems in punctuation, spelling, and capitalization were also commonly observed. These mechanical issues, though often underestimated, significantly affect the clarity and readability of students' writing (Rumapea et al., 2025). Psychological and cognitive factors also play a role in students' writing challenges. Motivation, confidence, and interest in writing activities influence students' performance. Daulay et al. (2022)

reported that students lacked motivation to write in English due to fear of making mistakes and limited exposure to English outside the classroom (Sinaga et al., 2025). These affective factors contribute to a reluctance to engage in writing tasks, which in turn limits students' opportunities to improve.

In addition, instructional factors cannot be overlooked. Zahrah et al. (2023) emphasized that insufficient time allocation, lack of engaging teaching methods, and minimal use of media hinder students from developing their writing skills effectively. Teachers sometimes focus more on theory than practice, which leaves students with inadequate chances to apply what they learn. Without structured and consistent writing practice, it is difficult for students to build confidence and competence.

Although various studies have addressed students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts in several regions of Indonesia, there is limited research specifically focused on SMP Negeri 2 Pematangsiantar. Since each school has its unique environment, teacher quality, student demographics, and resources, localized research is important to identify the specific challenges faced by students in a particular context. Therefore, this study is aimed at investigating the difficulties encountered by seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Pematangsiantar in writing descriptive texts.

This study seeks to answer two key questions: (1) What specific difficulties do seventh-grade students face in writing descriptive texts? and (2) What are the underlying causes of these difficulties? The findings are expected to help teachers and school administrators develop more effective instructional strategies to improve students' writing skills, particularly in descriptive writing. The study is also expected to contribute to the broader body of

knowledge concerning English writing education in Indonesian junior high schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing descriptive text has been widely studied in EFL/ESL contexts, with recurring findings about which aspects are most difficult for students. Understanding what prior research has found helps situate the present study and refine what to look for at SMP Negeri 2 Pematangsiantar.

First, several studies report that generic structure (i.e., correctly forming the identification and description parts) is a common problem. For example, Maulidiyah and Mandarani (2023) found that seventh-grade students at SMP PGRI 16 Sidoarjo showed significant difficulty in arranging the generic structure of descriptive texts. Grammar and spelling were also weak. Similarly, Rahma Haritsa Fitriani (2024) in a study with class A students of SMPN 1 Ngadiluwih discovered that while many students could write the identification portion of descriptive texts properly, the description portion posed substantial difficulties; especially, students struggled to develop main ideas and maintain coherence in description, plus errors in simple present tense were very common.

Second, the linguistic features — including grammar (tenses, verb-agreement), vocabulary, specific participants (nouns, pronouns), adjective use — often present major hurdles. In the case of SMP PGRI 16 Sidoarjo, the same research by Maulidiyah & Mandarani (2023) noted errors in use of nouns, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and simple present tense. Also, in a study at SMK N 4 Jambi, Adla (2024) reports that students had pronounced difficulty with language features, especially sentence arrangement and use of vocabulary.

Third, writing mechanics — spelling, punctuation, capitalization — and sentence structure also emerge in many studies.

Hartina, Ningsih, & Sahraini (2022) studied senior high school students in Palopo and found misuse of writing mechanics among the common difficulties, along with problems following generic structure and applying linguistic features correctly.

Fourth, psychological / motivational and affective factors often exacerbate the linguistic and structural challenges. In "Junior High School Students' Difficulties in Writing Descriptive Text" by Syifa, Baekani, & Srisudarso (2022), students cited dislike for English writing tasks, lack of motivation, and fatigue or boredom in grammar and vocabulary learning as major causes of difficulty.

Fifth, instructional and environmental factors also recur. For example, in Difficulties in Teaching Writing Descriptive Text by Zahrah, Erlina, & Amrina (2023), teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Palembang pointed out that class size, limited teaching time, and lack of adequate learning media made it difficult to provide students with enough practice or individual feedback.

Sixth, there is variation by student ability / achievement. A study of high-achieving students at SMPN 1 Tempursari (Sarasa, Setyono, & Wahjuningsih, 2015) showed that while identification parts of texts were done correctly by such students, even high achievers struggled with the description part — developing content, maintaining coherence, applying grammar (especially simple present tense and subject-verb agreement).

Seventh, some studies show that sentence arrangement into paragraphs is specifically difficult; arranging multiple ideas in a paragraph, coherence, cohesion, transitions are weak. For instance, Adla (2024) in SMK N 4 Jambi found over 50% students had trouble arranging sentences into paragraphs, and that organizing sentences

coherently was among the highest difficulty percentages.

Finally, research suggests that limited vocabulary is cross-cutting: it hinders content, expression, and even mechanics when students cannot choose precise words. Studies like Hartina et al. (2022), Maulidiyah & Mandarani (2023), Syifa et al. (2022) all report vocabulary as a frequent cause of difficulty. These findings together point to a pattern: the most significant difficulties in writing descriptive texts are in generic structure, grammar & linguistic features, vocabulary, mechanics, sentence/paragraph cohesion, plus motivation and instructional constraints (Girsang et al., 2025). For your study at SMP Negeri 2 Pematangsiantar, these prior literatures suggest key aspects to investigate, and also possible causes to explore (e.g. whether similar issues appear; what the role of teacher, practice, class environment is).

RESEARCH METHODS
1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the types of difficulties encountered by seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Pematangsiantar in writing descriptive texts. A qualitative descriptive approach is considered suitable as it allows for a detailed exploration of student writing in its natural context, without manipulating the setting or introducing experimental variables. As stated by Bradshaw, Atkinson, and Doody (2017), descriptive qualitative research focuses on providing straightforward summaries of participant experiences in their own terms, grounded in the actual data.

The focus of this research is on specific areas of student writing performance, including content development, text organization, lexical choice, grammatical accuracy, and mechanics. The data will be collected through student-produced descriptive texts, which will then be analyzed using an analytic rubric developed by Jacobs et al. (1981), widely known as the ESL Composition Profile. This framework offers a detailed evaluation of writing across five components, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of where students face the greatest challenges.

2. Source of Data

The participants of this study will be seventh-grade students enrolled at SMP Negeri 2 Pematangsiantar during the 2025/2026 academic year. The total population includes 11 classes (VII-1 through VII-11), with an estimated 330 students. The sample will be selected through purposive sampling, as described by Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012), which allows the researcher to select participants based on specific characteristics aligned with the research objectives (Herman et al., 2023). In this study, three classes will be purposefully chosen to represent different levels of achievement:

1. Class VII-11 (high achievers, average scores $\geq$ 85),
2. Class VII-6 (moderate achievers, average scores between 70 and 80), and
3. Class VII-2 (low achievers, average scores < 70).

These classifications are based on each class's average English score in relation to the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC), which is set at 75. The total sample is expected to consist of approximately 90 students, providing diverse insights into the writing difficulties faced by students across different proficiency levels.

3. Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this research will be a writing task designed to prompt students to produce a descriptive text

on a topic relevant to their learning experience. This task will be administered under classroom conditions and will serve as the main source of data. To evaluate the students' compositions, the study will utilize an analytic scoring rubric based on the Jacobs et al. (1981) ESL Composition Profile. This rubric assesses writing across five domains:

1. Content (idea relevance and development),
2. Organization (logical sequencing and paragraph structure),
3. Vocabulary (word choice and range),
4. Language Use (grammar and sentence construction), and
5. Mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization).

Each category includes multiple scoring levels, allowing for an objective and detailed evaluation of students' strengths and weaknesses in writing.

4. Data Collection Techniques

To collect accurate data regarding students' writing performance, the researcher will employ two main methods:

1. Writing Task Administration
Students from the selected classes will be asked to complete a writing task in which they produce a descriptive paragraph. The topic will be chosen by the teacher to ensure contextual relevance and curriculum alignment. This task will allow the researcher to assess students' ability to construct a descriptive text using correct structure, grammar, and vocabulary.

2. Evaluation Using Analytic Scoring Rubric
Following the completion of the writing task, each student's work will be assessed using the Jacobs et al. (1981) rubric. This scoring system allows the researcher to break down student performance into specific areas, making it easier to pinpoint common difficulties. The results will be tabulated and categorized to provide a clear overview of writing challenges.

5. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis of student writing will be conducted using a content analysis approach. The steps will be modeled after Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-part framework: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

1. Data Reduction
This step involves examining each writing sample and categorizing the observed errors and difficulties into five writing domains: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Unnecessary or irrelevant data will be excluded to focus on core findings.

2. Data Display
The reduced data will be presented in descriptive and tabular form, enabling the researcher to highlight recurring patterns and identify which aspects of writing pose the most difficulty for students. This stage will also involve:

- Document analysis of student work.
- Tabulation of performance across the five aspects.
- Quantification of how many students struggled with each aspect.

3. Drawing Conclusions and Verification
The final stage involves interpreting the data and formulating conclusions about the types and causes of students' writing difficulties. This includes cross-checking findings, comparing across student levels, and relating results back to the research objectives. The conclusions drawn will answer the core research questions and may serve as the foundation for future instructional recommendations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the results of the research regarding the challenges faced

by seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Pematangsiantar in composing descriptive texts. The assessment was carried out using the analytical scoring model developed by Jacobs et al. (1981), which evaluates five essential components of writing: Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language Use, and Mechanics. The writing samples collected from 90 students were scored based on these criteria to identify both the students' writing achievements and their areas of difficulty.

1. Overall Student Performance

The evaluation revealed varying levels of writing performance among the students. In terms of Content, most students showed an understanding of the descriptive task. They were generally able to identify and describe a person using basic information. The average content score was approximately 19.77, indicating that the majority of students had relevant ideas and attempted to stay on topic. Only one student showed significant difficulty in this area, suggesting that content generation was not a major barrier. In contrast, Organization scores were more inconsistent. Students had an average score of 13.74, with several struggling to arrange their ideas logically or use proper paragraph structure. Some writings lacked clear introductions or failed to present descriptive details in a coherent sequence. This shows that while students understood what to write, many found it challenging to present their ideas in a structured and logical way.

The Vocabulary component yielded an average score of 14.06. While a portion of the students displayed an adequate range of descriptive words, especially adjectives, many still relied heavily on common and repetitive vocabulary. This limited the effectiveness of their descriptions. A number of students also made inappropriate word choices, which slightly hindered clarity. More serious difficulties emerged in Language Use, with the average score reaching only 14.84 out of 25. Common errors included incorrect use of tenses, missing articles, awkward phrasing, and subject-verb disagreement. These grammar-related issues suggest that many students had not fully mastered English sentence structure, which impacted the clarity and fluency of their writing.

The lowest average score was recorded in Mechanics, which covered spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing. With a mean of 2.62 out of 5, this aspect proved most problematic. A large number of students omitted punctuation marks, capitalized words incorrectly, or wrote with inconsistent spacing and indentation. These mechanical issues, though seemingly minor, significantly reduced the readability of their texts.

2. Range of Total Scores

In terms of overall writing scores (combined across all five aspects), students scored between 37 and 79. The highest scorer (Student No. 61) demonstrated strong performance in all categories, especially content development and grammar. On the other hand, the lowest score was recorded by Student No. 8, whose writing showed multiple weaknesses across organization, vocabulary, and mechanical accuracy. The average total score across the 90 students was approximately 64.93, suggesting a general writing ability that falls within the "average to good" range, though several students were still in need of targeted writing support. The score distribution shows that a portion of students are beginning to show proficiency in descriptive writing, while a significant number still struggle with essential writing conventions.

3. Identified Writing Difficulties

To further understand the students' challenges, each writing sample was manually examined for specific errors in each writing aspect. The total number of difficulties was tallied and summarized to show which aspects posed the greatest obstacles. Out of a total of 844 difficulties found across all students, Mechanics accounted for the largest portion, with 511 errors noted. These included common mistakes such as incorrect punctuation, misspelled words, and inconsistent use of capital letters. Many students also ignored paragraph formatting rules, such as indentation and spacing.

The second highest category of difficulty was Language Use, which had 238 cases. These grammar-related problems mostly involved verb tense confusion, incorrect word order, and incomplete sentence structures. These findings indicate that grammatical competence remains a major area of concern in students' English writing. Vocabulary and Organization followed, with 53 and 41 difficulties, respectively. Students frequently used vague or repetitive word choices and sometimes lacked variety in expression. In terms of organization, issues included unclear transitions, missing topic sentences, and lack of descriptive detail flow. Notably, Content was the aspect with the least number of difficulties, with only 1 instance reported. This suggests that although students struggled with how to express their ideas, they generally understood what to write about.
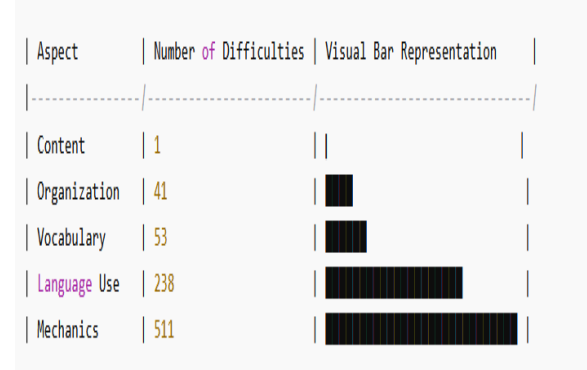

Figure 1. Total Writing Difficulties by Aspect

In conclusion, while most students demonstrated an ability to write relevant and coherent descriptive texts, they continue to face significant challenges in mastering grammar and mechanical conventions. The dominance of mechanical and grammatical errors suggests a need for greater emphasis on language accuracy and proofreading in classroom instruction. Addressing these issues through targeted activities and writing practice may help improve the students' overall writing competence.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Pematangsiantar encountered several notable difficulties in writing descriptive texts. While most students showed adequate understanding of the writing task and were able to generate relevant content, their primary challenges were related to language accuracy and writing conventions. The mechanical aspect, which includes spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, presented the most significant barrier, followed by grammar-related issues under language use.

The analysis of students' writing also revealed that issues with organization and vocabulary, though present, were less frequent. Students generally managed to stay on topic and provide appropriate

descriptions but often struggled to arrange their ideas logically or use varied and precise vocabulary. The high frequency of mechanical and grammatical errors indicates a gap in foundational writing skills, which should be addressed through increased practice, feedback, and focused instruction.

In summary, improving students' descriptive writing requires not only encouraging idea development but also strengthening their command of grammar and mechanics. Teachers are encouraged to integrate more structured writing exercises, peer reviews, and targeted grammar lessons into the curriculum. By addressing these key areas, students will be better equipped to express their ideas clearly and effectively in written English.

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