

UNIVERSITY-LEVEL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

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ABSTRACT

While most studies have focused on the challenges faced by high school students in writing descriptive or recount texts, limited research has examined the difficulties encountered by university students, particularly those with low motivation and insufficient grammar proficiency. This study aims to investigate the specific challenges faced by university-level students majoring in English when composing descriptive texts. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through a questionnaire distributed via Google Forms and a descriptive writing test. The findings reveal that grammar is the most significant challenge, with the lowest average score of 69.3 among five assessed categories. Common errors include incorrect tense usage and word choice, leading to unclear or unintended meanings. These findings highlight the need for targeted instructional strategies to enhance students' grammatical competence and overall writing proficiency.

Keywords: Writing Difficulties, University Level Students, Descriptive Writing

INTRODUCTION

For writing to be effective, it must be clear, coherent, and easily understood by readers. However, in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, students often struggle with generating ideas and structuring sentences logically. Many university students face difficulties in writing due to limited proficiency, making them hesitant to engage in the task (Mohammad et al.,

2020). Even when students have ideas in mind, they often find it challenging to start writing. Unfortunately, if these ideas are not immediately recorded, they tend to be forgotten, leading to difficulties in expressing thoughts effectively in written form. Februansyah et al. (2020) highlighted that students struggle with generating ideas, organizing them coherently, and constructing sentences and paragraphs that



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are easily understood. Therefore, improving the quality of writing is essential for students.

Mastering English language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—is crucial for students. Among these, writing is often regarded as the most challenging, as it requires proficiency in multiple linguistic aspects, including grammar and vocabulary (Anh, 2019). Kurniawan et al. (2020) define writing as the ability to express ideas, thoughts, and emotions through words, sentences, and paragraphs. The importance of writing in language learning is widely acknowledged (Ariani, 2023), yet it remains one of the most demanding skills to acquire. For L2 learners, writing poses significant challenges and requires continuous practice.

Given these challenges, it is essential to assess students' writing difficulties to address them effectively. Identifying the root causes of these difficulties, exploring contributing factors, and helping students learn from their mistakes can prevent recurring issues. Previous studies (Zahra & Febria, 2023) have indicated that many students struggle with writing, particularly in structuring their ideas and expressing themselves clearly.

Even at the university level, freshman students encounter difficulties when writing descriptive texts. They must carefully examine details of the object they describe while ensuring grammatical accuracy. Ismayanti and Kholiq (2020) found that writing challenges arise due to multiple factors. These challenges often stem from three main causes: (1) limited proficiency in text production skills, leading to frequent spelling errors, inconsistent capitalization, and punctuation mistakes; (2) difficulties in

structuring paragraphs and sentences logically; and (3) the demanding nature of mastering foundational writing skills, which hinders the development of advanced abilities such as content planning and organization.

According to Wahyumi (2019), one of the key challenges in writing descriptive texts is providing a comprehensive and structured depiction of an object. Students must effectively organize their ideas into well-structured paragraphs to ensure readability. To facilitate this process, they should first identify the topic and then provide detailed descriptions. Descriptive writing enhances engagement by adding vivid details, making the text more immersive for readers. It also helps students expand their vocabulary and improve their ability to express ideas in writing. The authors believe that practicing descriptive writing fosters creativity and strengthens students' overall writing skills.

To further analyze these difficulties, the writers asked students to compose a descriptive text about an animal of their choice. Student S5 wrote about crows, describing their appearance, habits, and skills. Upon evaluation, the writers found issues with the generic structure, which typically consists of two paragraphs: identification and description. However, S5 presented only one paragraph and made grammatical errors. For instance, S5 wrote, "*Crow is the bird who known by it's chirp.*" The phrase should be corrected to "*Crow is a bird known by it's chirp,*" with "it's" instead of "its," as the latter is a contraction of "it is." Additionally, several spelling errors were noted. For example, S5 wrote, "*These qualities have long been known to man, particuly in skill stole various tools*



humans," where "particuly" should be "particularly."

Similarly, Student S2 wrote about pigs and exhibited spelling and grammar mistakes. S2 wrote, "*Pigs cannot live in a cold place like antartica,*" incorrectly spelling "Antarctica" without capitalization. Proper nouns like "Antarctica" should always begin with a capital letter. Another sentence from S2, "*Its tail is not that not long, it has a unique shape which is twisted like a tornado,*" is unclear. The phrase "*not that not long*" is confusing and should be revised to "*not very long.*" Research by Ismayanti and Kholiq (2020) also analyzed writing challenges faced by students at SMAN 1 Sukodadi, revealing three primary difficulties: (1) issues with understanding the generic structure of descriptive texts, (2) grammar-related challenges, particularly in forming correct sentences using the simple present tense, and (3) spelling difficulties in accurately writing English words.

Husna and Multazim (2019) conducted a study titled "*Challenges Faced by Students in Writing Recount Texts in Inclusion Classes,*" which identified difficulties in mechanics, grammar, vocabulary, content, and organization. The study found that 50% of students had a fair-to-poor level in mechanics, 43% struggled with grammar, 60% performed at a good-to-average level in vocabulary, and 43% demonstrated good-to-average skills in organization. Additionally, 47% of students had a fair-to-poor level in content development. Regarding the generic structure of recount texts, 57% of students struggled with reorientation, 53% with orientation, and 33% with event sections. The most significant challenges were observed in the orientation and reorientation sections, where students

lacked ideas to develop their content effectively.

Both Ismayanti and Kholiq (2020) and Husna and Multazim (2019) examined students' writing difficulties, though they focused on different text types—descriptive and recount texts, respectively. Their findings align in highlighting the common challenges students face in structuring their writing and mastering linguistic accuracy. According to Nasser (2019), students encounter various writing challenges throughout their learning journey, which can significantly impact their academic performance.

This study was inspired by the writers' past internship experience at a university in Batam, where they observed that many university students struggled with descriptive writing. Despite being at an advanced academic level, students continued to face difficulties in structuring paragraphs and constructing grammatically accurate sentences.

As noted earlier, most studies have focused on the challenges faced by high school students in writing descriptive or recount texts. This study, however, investigates the difficulties university students face in descriptive writing, particularly those with low motivation and limited grammar proficiency. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What challenges do university students encounter in descriptive writing?
2. What are the primary difficulties they face when writing descriptive texts?

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method to provide a comprehensive and detailed depiction of the challenges students face when writing descriptive texts.



The study focused on university-level students majoring in English, particularly those with experience writing descriptive texts. Most participants were native Indonesian speakers, with only a few having spent time in English-speaking countries. Students from different academic levels served as research subjects, with the primary objective being to examine the difficulties they encountered in writing descriptive texts.

Participants were selected from two universities in Batam, comprising 50 students majoring in English Language Education. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years, spanning first-year, second-year, and third-year students. University A contributed 30 students, while University B contributed 20. Among them, 20 were third-year students, 11 were second-year students, and 19 were first-year students.

English Language Education students were chosen as the focus of this research due to the expectation that they possess a higher level of English proficiency. Since writing is a core subject in their curriculum, this study was deemed essential to help students enhance their writing skills.

Two data collection techniques were employed: a questionnaire and a writing test. The questionnaire, distributed via Google Forms, covered various topics, including students' attitudes toward writing and their self-assessment of writing skills, with items adapted from Nurfidoh and Kareviati (2021). The results provided insights into the factors students believed contributed to their writing challenges. Each response was assigned a numerical value, enabling comparisons across participants and allowing for statistical analysis of the findings.

Once the students' descriptive texts were collected, the data analysis process began. Initially, the writers conducted a verification process to check the number of participants, the quantity of worksheets, and the completeness of their content. To maintain anonymity and minimize bias, each student was assigned a coded label, such as Student 1, Student 2, and so on.

The descriptive texts were then assessed using a designated rubric adapted from Marsevani and Yeo (2023). The writers carefully analyzed the texts, identifying the challenges students faced based on a structured scoring system. The students' scores were systematically arranged and presented in a tabular format. This process made the findings clear and easily comprehensible, providing a thorough understanding of the students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

The following results are derived from an investigation into students' descriptive writing abilities. As outlined in the previous section, the researchers utilized a questionnaire and a writing test to assess students' proficiency and identify the challenges they faced in composing descriptive texts. The study involved 50 participants enrolled in English Language Education programs at two universities in Batam. The students were distributed across different academic years, with University A contributing 30 students and University B contributing 20. Among them, 19 were first-year students, 11 were second-year students, and 20 were third-year students. Their writing skills were evaluated and classified into four levels: very good, good, poor, and very poor.



Students' ability in writing descriptive text

Paragraph Structure

Paragraph structure is essential in descriptive writing as it helps organize ideas clearly and logically. A well-structured paragraph ensures coherence and readability. However, many students struggle with maintaining distinct paragraph separation and appropriate placement of paragraph breaks. The following table presents students' performance in paragraph structure.

Table 1. Students' Average Score in Paragraph Structure Category

Category	Year	Average Score	Criteria
Paragraph Structure	All	69.72	Poor
	Third	70,25	Poor
	Second	69,64	Poor
	First	69,21	Poor

The data in Table 1 shows that all 50 students scored poorly in paragraph structure. The overall average score was 69.72, placing students in the "poor" category. First-year students had the lowest average score (69.21), suggesting difficulties in maintaining clear paragraph separation and appropriate placement of paragraph breaks.

Word Choice

Word choice enhances the vividness and clarity of the text. Effective word choice helps create a strong impression on the reader. However, many students struggle with selecting precise and varied words. The following table illustrates students' scores in the word choice category.

Table 2. Students' Average Score in Word Choice Category

Category	Year	Average Score	Criteria
Word Choice	All	69.36	Poor
	Third	70,95	Poor
	Second	70	Poor
	First	68	Poor

The data in Table 2 indicates that all 50 students performed poorly in word choice, with an overall average score of 69.36. First-year students had the lowest score (68.00). This suggests that students often use repetitive wording and lack the ability to incorporate more descriptive and precise vocabulary.

Grammar

Grammar is a fundamental aspect of writing that affects clarity and meaning. Errors in grammar can lead to confusion and misinterpretation. Many students struggle with grammatical accuracy, including subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, and verb tense consistency. The following table presents students' performance in grammar.

Table 3. Students' Average Score in Grammar Category

Category	Year	Average Score	Criteria
Grammar	All	69.3	Poor
	Third	69,6	Poor
	Second	69,45	Poor
	First	67	Poor

As shown in Table 3, all 50 students scored poorly in the grammar category, with an overall average of 69.3. First-year students had the lowest average score (67.00). Although grammatical errors did not significantly impact meaning, students struggled with subject-verb agreement, verb tense consistency, and sentence structure.



Addressing these difficulties is essential to improving their overall writing proficiency (Sandy, 2020).

Vocabulary

A strong vocabulary is crucial for effective descriptive writing, as it allows students to express their ideas more vividly and accurately. Limited vocabulary can hinder students from describing objects, people, or places in detail. The following table shows students' performance in the vocabulary category.

Table 4. Students' Average Score in Vocabulary Category

Category	Year	Average Score	Criteria
Vocabulary	All	70.96	Poor
	Third	71,9	Poor
	Second	70,09	Poor
	First	70,47	Poor

Table 4 shows that all 50 students received poor scores in vocabulary, with an average of 70.96. Second-year students had the lowest score (70.09). While students were able to choose appropriate words at times, their vocabulary range was limited, making it difficult for them to construct varied and engaging descriptive sentences.

Word Transition

Transitions are essential in descriptive writing as they help create a smooth flow between sentences and ideas. The appropriate use of transition words enhances coherence and readability. However, many students struggle to incorporate effective transitions in their writing. The following table presents students' performance in word transition.

Table 5. Students' Average Score in Word Transition Category

Category	Year	Average Score	Criteria
Word Transition Category	All	70.26	Poor
	Third	71,2	Poor
	Second	70,91	Poor

The data in Table 5 indicates that all 50 students scored poorly in word transitions, with an average score of 70.26. First-year students had the lowest score (69.42). Many students failed to use appropriate transition words, which affected the coherence and logical flow of their paragraphs.

Students' difficulties in writing descriptive text

Data analysis revealed that the majority of students faced challenges in writing descriptive texts, as evident in their writing test results. Across all categories, most students were classified as "poor."

In the grammar category, the average score was 69.3, with common errors in subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and dangling modifiers. Due to their limited grammatical proficiency, students struggled to write clearly and coherently. Their lack of grammar knowledge resulted in disorganized and unclear writing, making it difficult for readers to understand their intended message.

DISCUSSION

Students' difficulties in descriptive writing

After examining the test results, it is evident that all writing categories received a "poor" rating, indicating that students' writing skills are below the expected standard. This finding highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to enhance their writing abilities. The results suggest that



almost all students face difficulties across all assessed categories, reinforcing the importance of structured writing instruction and additional practice.

One of the most significant challenges students encounter is grammar proficiency. Mastering the grammar of a language, particularly English, requires a deep understanding of its complex rules. Many learners struggle because English has numerous intricate grammatical structures, making it difficult to determine when and why to use specific forms in both spoken and written contexts. Achieving grammatical proficiency is not merely about memorizing rules but also about applying them accurately and appropriately (Listia & Febriyanti, 2020). Grammatical challenges serve as barriers in language learning and must be addressed to improve students' overall writing skills (Marsevani, 2023; Sandy, 2020). Since grammar is fundamental in constructing correct sentences, students must be able to use appropriate tense forms and syntactic structures.

For instance, in one student's writing (S34), the phrase *"but he doesn't have a brown eyes like mine"* contains a grammatical error. The noun *"eyes"* is plural, making the use of *"a"* as a determiner incorrect. Certain determiners, such as *"the"*, *"this"*, *"that"*, *"my"*, and *"your"*, not only indicate quantity but also help define the noun phrase. Understanding and correctly using determiners is crucial in producing grammatically sound sentences (Tabiri et al., 2022).

Another significant challenge is word choice, which received the second-lowest score among the five categories, with an average of 69.36. According to Kao and Reynolds (2020), teachers of second language writing often do not provide direct feedback on word choice errors, possibly

due to the time constraints of analyzing multiple types of mistakes. As a result, many students continue to struggle with selecting precise and contextually appropriate words, leading to unclear and ineffective descriptions.

The third most notable issue students face is paragraph structure. Many students have difficulty understanding how to properly organize their writing, which affects coherence and logical progression. A lack of understanding of how to structure paragraphs often results in disorganized and fragmented writing. According to Alfaki (2015), students frequently struggle with arranging ideas within a paragraph, maintaining topic coherence, structuring overall discourse, and effectively developing a central theme. These challenges highlight the need for explicit instruction on paragraph development and coherence.

Among the five categories, word transitions received the second-highest rating. Mastering writing skills involves not only grammar and vocabulary but also the effective use of syntactic structures, semantics, and punctuation—all of which contribute to overall coherence. Transitional words play a crucial role in linking ideas logically and ensuring smooth progression from one point to the next. The ability to use appropriate transitions enhances text clarity and strengthens logical connections (Plančić & Ninčević, 2014). Abdulla (2023) also emphasizes that transitional words significantly contribute to the readability and organization of academic writing, making them essential for students' writing development.

Overall, the findings indicate that students face challenges across multiple aspects of writing, from grammar and word choice to paragraph structure and transitions. Addressing these difficulties



through targeted instruction and practice will be essential in helping students develop stronger writing skills.

Among the five writing categories, vocabulary received the highest score, averaging 70.96. However, despite this relatively higher rating, students still encountered difficulties in word selection and usage. A clear example is found in a descriptive text written by student S45, who stated: *"After I finished my messages, they give me a jahe to make my body feel warm and so relax."* In this case, the student likely intended to write *"massage"* instead of *"message,"* demonstrating a vocabulary-related error. According to Thornbury (1999), learning vocabulary presents multiple challenges, including understanding word meanings, using words appropriately, pronunciation, spelling, and connotation. Additionally, research suggests that words with complex pronunciations are often more difficult to learn.

Students frequently struggle with vocabulary selection in academic writing, particularly when transitioning from everyday language to a more formal, structured style. Many students tend to insert words without accurately assessing their appropriateness for an academic context, leading to inconsistencies in tone and formality (Thuy et al., 2022). This suggests that while students may recognize and use a wide range of words, they still require guidance in refining their vocabulary choices for academic writing.

Challenges in Descriptive Writing

The second research question focuses on identifying the main obstacles university students face in descriptive writing. The test results highlight a range of challenges that

hinder students' ability to produce effective descriptive texts. Writing is a form of communication in which individuals express their ideas through words and sentences (Bora, 2023). However, students often struggle with describing objects, people, or places clearly and coherently, largely due to difficulties in applying grammar rules effectively.

These findings align with Hafizah et al. (2024), who also identified grammar as a major issue in students' writing assessments. One significant problem observed in students' descriptive writing is the lack of creativity, resulting in repetitive and monotonous compositions. Research suggests that students' biggest challenges in writing stem from their limited vocabulary and insufficient grammar mastery (Alisha et al., 2019; Marsevani, 2023). Grammar errors frequently occur due to a weak foundational understanding, leading to incorrect tense usage and poor sentence construction (Marsevani, 2023). The questionnaire results further reveal that students often struggle to articulate their ideas in written form, reflecting a lack of confidence and fluency in their writing skills.

Enhancing Student Motivation and Writing Skills

The student questionnaire findings highlight the importance of making English lessons more engaging and enjoyable to boost motivation and interest in writing. Additionally, teachers must prioritize effective grammar instruction, as many students still experience confusion, particularly in forming the simple present tense. The assessment of writing skills should focus on students' ability to construct grammatically correct sentences



and well-structured paragraphs (Marsevani & Yeo, 2023). A well-developed writing ability is reflected in how students organize words and phrases coherently (Sugianto & Hasby, 2021). Moreover, addressing the challenge of expressing ideas clearly in writing is essential, as it remains a significant barrier for students in developing their writing proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to assess university students' proficiency in writing descriptive texts by analyzing their performance across key writing components. The findings reveal that while vocabulary received the highest score (70.96), students still struggle with selecting appropriate words, often leading to miscommunication. Additionally, grammar proved to be the most challenging aspect, with the lowest score of 69.3. Common issues included incorrect tense usage, poor sentence structure, and misused vocabulary, which hindered clarity and coherence in their writing.

Beyond grammatical difficulties, students exhibited a lack of creativity, making their descriptive texts repetitive and monotonous. Many relied on everyday language rather than adopting a more structured academic writing style, which aligns with previous studies highlighting students' struggles in transitioning from informal to formal. Furthermore, students faced difficulties in articulating their ideas effectively, indicating a need for stronger foundational skills in organizing and developing their thoughts in written form.

To enhance students' descriptive writing skills, it is crucial to implement targeted instructional strategies that emphasize grammar mastery, vocabulary precision, and creativity in expression.

Engaging and interactive teaching approaches can also help increase students' motivation and confidence in writing. Structured feedback and practice-based learning should be prioritized to help students develop a more sophisticated and coherent writing style. Addressing these challenges will improve students' descriptive writing and strengthen their overall academic writing proficiency.

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