

EFL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE TEXTS: EXPLORING COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the cognitive and emotional responses of six eleventh-grade EFL students at an Indonesian vocational high school following a descriptive writing task. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings highlight several challenges faced by students, including difficulties with vocabulary, sentence structure, and organizing ideas effectively. These challenges were compounded by emotional responses such as pressure, frustration, self-awareness, motivation, and pride. Vocabulary limitations were identified as the most significant barrier to clear expression. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated increased motivation and reflective thinking, recognizing the need for improvement in their writing skills. The study emphasizes the value of incorporating pedagogical strategies that address both linguistic development and emotional support, offering valuable insights for enhancing EFL writing instruction.

Keywords: descriptive text, EFL writing, metacognition, student experience, vocabulary challenges

ABSTRAK

Studi ini meneliti respons kognitif dan emosional enam siswa kelas sebelas EFL di sebuah sekolah menengah kejuruan di Indonesia setelah mengerjakan tugas menulis deskriptif. Dengan mengadopsi pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan kerangka kerja yang diusulkan oleh Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña. Temuan menyoroti beberapa tantangan yang dihadapi siswa, termasuk kesulitan dengan kosakata, struktur kalimat, dan pengorganisasian ide secara efektif. Tantangan ini diperparah oleh respons emosional seperti tekanan, frustrasi, kesadaran diri, motivasi, dan kebanggaan. Keterbatasan kosakata diidentifikasi sebagai hambatan paling signifikan untuk ekspresi yang jelas. Terlepas dari tantangan ini, siswa menunjukkan peningkatan motivasi dan pemikiran reflektif, menyadari perlunya peningkatan keterampilan menulis mereka. Studi ini menekankan nilai penggabungan strategi pedagogis yang membahas perkembangan linguistik dan dukungan emosional, menawarkan wawasan berharga untuk meningkatkan pengajaran menulis EFL.

Kata Kunci: Teks deskriptif, penulisan EFL, metakognisi, pengalaman siswa, tantangan kosakata

A. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a fundamental skill in learning English, particularly within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), alongside other essential skills such as listening, reading, and speaking. Developing writing proficiency in an EFL context can be particularly challenging. According to Emilia (2011), many EFL students encounter significant difficulties in composing coherent texts. These challenges often encompass organizing ideas, employing appropriate vocabulary, and adhering to correct genre structures and conventions.

In the high school curriculum, known as the "Merdeka Curriculum," English is a compulsory subject. Learning involves students being more active, known as student-centered learning. In connection with genre analysis, students are required to actively participate in understanding the aspects of constructing the narrative legend and gain a better comprehension of the stages of text writing, thus making English learning more effective.

To assist EFL students in developing knowledge and skills in writing, particularly in constructing texts, effective strategies or methods are needed. The genre-based approach to teaching writing is a pedagogical approach that focuses on teaching students to write by familiarizing them with various text genres, each with its own distinct structure, purposes, and language features.

This issue emerged because the students were not aware that they needed to work on their writing skills, which were still deemed to be deficient in vocabulary, syntax, and the ability to generate original ideas. The majority write their own words without considering English grammar and vocabulary, and it is well known that the hardest part of writing is coming up with thoughts to convey in words. Because of this, something had to be done to help kids get better at producing descriptive text.

Within the context of Indonesian education, teaching strategies for high school students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) mainly focus on different types of written texts,

especially descriptive genres. However, students often face difficulties in maintaining a clear connection between ideas within their writing and in expressing their creativity or originality.

These challenges can be traced back to differences in language use and cultural expectations that influence how students interpret and apply writing conventions. Despite these obstacles, understanding and addressing these issues is crucial for developing effective teaching methods that help students improve their writing skills in English, enabling them to communicate more confidently and effectively across diverse contexts.

A descriptive text is characterized by its function of elaborating on a tangible entity, encompassing individuals, settings, or items (Fitriani et al., 2019). The primary objective is to furnish the audience with a more precise comprehension of the subject matter. The fundamental organizational components of descriptive texts are identification and elaboration.

Identification entails establishing the nature or classification of an entity. Subsequently, elaboration involves detailing its attributes. Authors and

speakers alike employ descriptive compositions to convey information about entities, individuals, fauna, locales, or occurrences to their intended audience (Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Fitriani et al., 2019).

Several previous studies have explored EFL students' difficulties and strategies in writing descriptive texts, focusing on various aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, and the generic structure. For example, Fiscarina & Fauziati (2024) noted that students can apply the basic generic structure of descriptive texts, comprising identification and description, but struggle with linguistic features, particularly the relational process, which is common.

Mi'raj et al. (2022) also pointed out similar challenges, particularly related to mechanics and vocabulary. Meanwhile, Purnamasari et al. (2021) found that students often fail to follow the proper sequence of ideas in descriptive writing. Studies by Priyanka et al. (2025) and Anhar et al. (2023) address the common difficulties faced by students when writing descriptive texts in English, such as limited vocabulary, difficulties with grammar (like tense usage), and sentence structure. These issues are

compounded by the cultural and linguistic differences between the students' native language and English. In particular, challenges in using the correct tense or in organizing ideas logically remain significant hurdles for students.

Research conducted by Madjdi & Rokhayani (2022) and Purnamasari et al. (2021) emphasizes the importance of understanding the generic structure of descriptive texts. These texts generally consist of two main parts: the identification and the description. The identification section introduces the subject, which could be a person, a place, or a thing, providing basic information about it. The description section then elaborates on the features or characteristics of the subject, offering detailed attributes that help readers form a clear mental image.

The main research question of this study is: What is the experience of EFL students after producing a descriptive text? The purpose of this research is to examine students' post-writing perspectives in order to uncover metacognitive insights that can inform reflective teaching practices. By exploring learners' reflections and experiences after

writing, the study seeks to understand how students process ideas, make linguistic choices, and evaluate their own performance, which can provide valuable information for improving instructional strategies.

B. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), qualitative research is utilized to explore and interpret the meanings attributed by individuals or groups. A qualitative approach was suitable because the study aimed to explore students' experiences, feelings, and reflections after writing descriptive texts. The case study design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in a specific educational context.

The study was conducted at Al-Fathimiyyah Vocational High School in Karawang, West Java. The participants were six eleventh-grade EFL students who were selected purposively based on the English teacher's recommendation. The students represented different levels of writing ability, including low, middle, and high skill levels.

In addition, interviews were utilized as a data collection method in this research, involving six students chosen for their varied learning experiences and differing qualities of descriptive compositions. This approach was adopted to enrich the research findings and gain a comprehensive understanding of the students' perspectives and experiences related to descriptive writing.

The researcher used an interview guide with four questions of semi-structured and open-ended questions focused on the descriptive learning process, student outcomes, and encountered challenges. The interview guides are adapted from research by Fiscarina & Fauziati (2024). Six participants took part in these interviews.

The guide helped participants give detailed and varied responses, making it easier and more adaptable for them to share their experiences. This approach allowed the researcher to collect comprehensive data. The interviews were conducted face-to-face. This format enabled participants to freely express their perspectives and experiences without restrictions,

which ensured the data collected was clear and accurate for the research.

The data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, a comprehensive framework that encompasses three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction stage, students' interview responses were carefully selected and systematically classified according to relevant themes that emerged from their answers, allowing for a more manageable and meaningful dataset.

In the subsequent data display stage, the responses were organized into clearly defined categories such as feelings experienced after writing, vocabulary problems encountered, sentence arrangement issues, and perceived overall difficulty, facilitating easier interpretation and comparison.

Finally, in the conclusion drawing stage, the researcher interpreted the organized findings by connecting them with established theories related to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing and Systemic Functional Linguistics, thus providing a theoretical framework to better understand the underlying factors

influencing students' writing experiences and challenges.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on students' responses in the semi-structured interviews. The findings are analyzed through two main dimensions, namely the cognitive dimension and the emotional dimension. Each main dimension has sub-themes, namely the cognitive dimension and the emotional dimension.

These dimensions were used to understand students' writing experiences not only from the linguistic aspects, but also from the mental and emotional processes involved during and after writing. The cognitive dimension refers to the students' thinking processes in writing descriptive texts, such as choosing vocabulary, arranging sentences, developing ideas, and describing details. Meanwhile, the emotional dimension refers to students' feelings and self-perceptions after completing the writing task, including pressure, insecurity, challenge, motivation, satisfaction, and pride.

Through these two dimensions, the discussion provides a more comprehensive understanding of how students experienced descriptive writing in an EFL context. The cognitive dimension explains the problems students faced in constructing meaning through language, while the emotional dimension shows how students responded affectively to the writing process. Therefore, the findings are discussed by connecting students' interview responses with relevant theories and previous studies, so that the analysis can reveal how cognitive and emotional factors influence students' ability and confidence in writing descriptive texts.

1. Cognitive Dimension in Writing Descriptive Text

This section discusses the cognitive dimension involved in students' experiences when writing descriptive texts. The cognitive dimension refers to the mental processes that student used during writing, such as generating ideas, selecting appropriate vocabulary, arranging sentences, and developing descriptive details.

In this study, students' cognitive experiences were reflected in their difficulties in finding suitable words, constructing sentences, elaborating ideas, and describing their dream place clearly. Therefore, this section highlights students who dealt with the thinking and language-related demands of writing descriptive texts in English.

a. Vocabulary Limitation and Lexical Choice

This section appeared in question:

"What was the hardest thing when describing your dream place?"

The first cognitive issue was related to vocabulary limitation and lexical choice. Most students stated that they had difficulty finding appropriate words to express their ideas. This can be seen from Respondent 1, who said, *"I still don't know much vocabulary to express my dream place."* Respondent 2 also stated, *"The lack vocabulary that I know,"* while Respondent 3 explained that

the difficulty appeared because *"I don't know the right words."* Similar responses were also given by Respondent 4, *"I don't know the right words to describe,"* and Respondent 5, *"I lack vocabulary."*

This sub-theme also appeared in another question:

"Which aspect of the writing process did you find most challenging?"

In the second question, vocabulary limitation was also found in the responses of several students. Respondent 2 stated, *"I have trouble describing my dream place because I don't know the right words."* Respondent 3 answered, *"The lack of vocabulary to express my dream place,"* and Respondent 5 said, *"I don't know the right word to describe."* These responses strengthen the finding that vocabulary limitation and lexical choice were major cognitive issues in writing descriptive texts.

b. Sentence Construction Difficulties

In this section question appeared:

"Which aspect of the writing process did you find most challenging?"

In this cognitive dimension was sentence construction difficulties. This problem appeared when students were asked about the most challenging aspect of the writing process. Respondent 1 stated, *"I don't know how to arrange sentences,"* while Respondent 4 answered, *"To make the sentences."* These responses indicate that students not only struggled with vocabulary but also with arranging words into clear and meaningful sentences. In writing descriptive texts, sentence construction is important because students need to organize their ideas into readable and coherent descriptions.

c. Content Development and Descriptive Details

This section has two questions that appeared:

First, *"What was the hardest thing when describing your*

dream place?"

Second, *"Which aspect of the writing process did you find most challenging?"*

This cognitive section was related to content development and descriptive details. This can be seen from Respondent 6, who said that the hardest thing was *"to describe the details of the place."* In another response to the second question, the same respondent also stated, *"I still don't know much about the place."* These answers show that some students had difficulty developing ideas and providing enough details about the object being described. Therefore, writing descriptive text requires not only vocabulary and grammar, but also the ability to elaborate on ideas so that the reader can imagine the place clearly.

d. Perception of Writing Difficulty

The question that appeared in this section:

"How would you rate the difficulty of writing descriptive text in English?"

The students' cognitive experience was also shown

through their perception of writing difficulty. When they were asked to rate the difficulty of writing descriptive text in English, three students considered it difficult, while the other three considered it moderate. Respondent 1, Respondent 4, and Respondent 5 stated, "*It is difficult.*" Meanwhile, Respondent 2 and Respondent 3 answered, "*Moderate,*" and Respondent 6 said, "*It is moderate.*"

These responses show that none of the students considered writing descriptive text easy. This indicates that writing descriptive text in English was perceived as a demanding task because it involved several cognitive processes, such as selecting vocabulary, constructing sentences, organizing ideas, and developing detailed descriptions.

In conclusion, the cognitive dimension in students' experiences of writing descriptive texts shows that writing in English is a

demanding process for EFL students. The main difficulty experienced by the students was related to vocabulary limitation and lexical choice, as most of them could not find enough appropriate words to express their ideas clearly. Besides vocabulary, students also faced problems in sentence construction, especially in arranging words into meaningful and coherent sentences. Another issue was related to content development and descriptive details, where some students found it difficult to elaborate their ideas and describe the place in detail.

The students' perception of difficulty also supports these findings. None of the students considered writing descriptive text in English easy. Some students rated it as difficult, while others considered it moderate. This indicates that descriptive writing requires several cognitive abilities at the same time, including selecting vocabulary, constructing sentences, organizing ideas, and developing clear

descriptions. Therefore, the cognitive dimension reveals that students need more support in vocabulary mastery, sentence-building practice, and idea development to help them write descriptive texts more effectively and confidently.

The findings related to the cognitive dimension are generally in line with previous studies and relevant theories on EFL descriptive writing. In this study, the cognitive dimension was reflected in students' difficulties with vocabulary limitation, lexical choice, sentence construction, content development, descriptive details, and their perception of writing difficulty. Most students stated that they had problems finding appropriate words to express their ideas, while others experienced difficulties in arranging sentences and describing the details of their dream place. These findings indicate that writing descriptive texts requires students to manage several cognitive processes at the same time, including selecting vocabulary, organizing sentences,

generating ideas, and developing descriptions.

This finding is consistent with Anhar, Abduh, and Aeni (2023), Mi'raj, Sabarun, and Qamariah (2022), and Purnamasari, Hidayat, and Kurniawati (2021), who found that EFL students commonly face difficulties in writing descriptive texts because of limited vocabulary, weak sentence organization, and difficulty expressing ideas clearly. In the present study, vocabulary limitation appeared as the most dominant problem, as several students stated that they did not know enough vocabulary or could not find the right words to describe their dream place. This supports the idea that vocabulary plays an important role in descriptive writing because students need specific words to describe objects, places, qualities, and details accurately.

The findings are also in line with the Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2013), Gerot and Wignell (1994), and Martin and Rose (2007). From the SFL perspective, language is

viewed as a resource for making meaning. Therefore, students' difficulty in choosing vocabulary and constructing sentences can be understood as a limitation in using linguistic resources to represent experiences. In descriptive texts, students need to use appropriate nouns, adjectives, relational processes, and descriptive expressions to describe a person, place, or object clearly. When students lack vocabulary or do not know how to arrange sentences, their ability to construct meaning in descriptive writing becomes limited.

In addition, the findings support the genre-based approach explained by Emilia (2011), Knapp and Watkins (2005), and Swales (1990). Descriptive text has a specific social function, generic structure, and language features. Therefore, students need to understand not only what they want to describe, but also how to organize their description according to the genre. The students' difficulties in developing details and arranging sentences show that they still need guidance in constructing

descriptive texts based on genre expectations. This is also related to Harmer's (2005) view that writing is a process involving planning, drafting, organizing, and revising.

Furthermore, the finding that students perceived descriptive writing as moderate to difficult is also consistent with Baharudin et al. (2023) and Jiang and Kalyuga (2022). These studies suggest that writing in a foreign language can create cognitive load because students must think about content, vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and organization at the same time. Therefore, the cognitive findings of this study do not contradict previous research. Instead, they strengthen the argument that EFL students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts are mainly related to vocabulary mastery, sentence construction, idea development, and the cognitive demands of writing in English.

2. Emotional Dimension in Writing Descriptive Text

This section presents the emotional dimension of students' experiences in writing descriptive

text. The emotional dimension refers to students' feelings, attitudes, and self-perceptions after completing the process of writing descriptive text. This dimension appeared in the question, "*How did you feel after the process of writing the descriptive text?*"

a. Writing Pressure and Linguistic Insecurity

The first emotional response was writing pressure and linguistic insecurity. Respondent 1 answered, "*Pressure,*" which shows that the writing process created emotional tension. This feeling may occur because students have to think about vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and ideas at the same time. In addition, Respondent 3 stated, "*I feel that my English is not very good when writing.*" This response shows linguistic insecurity because the student became aware of their limited English ability during the writing process. These answers indicate that writing descriptive text in

English could make students feel pressured and less confident.

b. Challenge as Learning Motivation

The second emotional response was challenge as a learning motivation. Respondent 2 stated, "*I feel challenged to write the text in English,*" while Respondent 5 said, "*I feel challenged.*" These answers show that some students viewed the writing task as a challenge. More specifically, Respondent 4 stated, "*I feel challenged to study more about English, especially the vocabulary.*" This response indicates that the feeling of being challenged could encourage students to improve their English skills, especially their vocabulary. Therefore, the challenge experienced by students didn't only represent difficulty, but also became a source of motivation for further learning.

c. Positive Reflection and Writing Satisfaction

The third emotional was positive reflection and writing satisfaction. This appeared in Respondent 6's answer, "*I feel pleased and proud.*" This response shows that the student experienced a positive feeling after completing the writing task. The words *pleased* and *proud* indicate satisfaction and a sense of achievement. This finding suggests that writing descriptive text can also create positive emotional experiences when students feel that they are able to complete the task successfully.

In conclusion, the emotional dimension in students' experiences of writing descriptive texts shows that writing in English created various emotional responses among the students. Some students experienced negative feelings, such as pressure and linguistic insecurity, because they felt that their English ability was still limited. This indicates that

writing descriptive text can make students feel less confident, especially when they have to deal with vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and idea development at the same time.

However, the emotional responses were not entirely negative. Some students felt challenged by the writing task, and this challenge became a source of motivation for them to improve their English skills, particularly their vocabulary. In addition, one student felt pleased and proud after completing the task, showing that writing descriptive text can also create a sense of satisfaction and achievement.

Therefore, the emotional dimension reveals that students' feelings play an important role in their writing experience. Writing descriptive text in English can create pressure and insecurity, but it can also encourage motivation,

confidence, and positive self-reflection when students are able to complete the task successfully.

The findings related to the emotional dimension are also in line with previous studies, although they extend the discussion beyond linguistic and cognitive difficulties. In this study, the emotional dimension was reflected in students' feelings after writing descriptive texts, including pressure, linguistic insecurity, challenge, motivation, satisfaction, and pride. Some students experienced negative emotional responses, such as feeling pressured and feeling that their English was not good enough. However, other students expressed more positive responses, such as feeling challenged, motivated to learn more vocabulary, pleased, and proud after completing the writing task.

These findings are consistent with Farooqui (2023), who explains that students' writing difficulties are often influenced by emotional factors such as anxiety, lack of confidence, and

awareness of linguistic limitations. In this study, Respondent 1's feeling of "pressure" and Respondent 3's statement that their English was "*not very good when writing*" show that descriptive writing can create emotional tension for EFL students. This emotional response may occur because students have to deal with vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and idea development at the same time. As a result, writing becomes not only a linguistic task, but also an affective experience.

The finding that several students felt challenged is also important. Respondents who stated that they felt challenged to write in English or to study more vocabulary show that challenge does not always have a negative meaning. Instead, it can become a source of learning motivation. This finding is in line with Setyawan, Suwastini, and Ratminingsih (2020), who argue that writing instruction through a process approach can support students' confidence and encourage gradual improvement. When students recognize their

weaknesses, especially in vocabulary, they may become more motivated to improve their English writing ability.

The emotional dimension also supports the cognitive-affective view of writing discussed by Baharudin et al. (2023) and Jiang and Kalyuga (2022). Writing in a foreign language involves cognitive load, but that cognitive load can also influence students' emotions. When students struggle with vocabulary or sentence construction, they may feel pressured or insecure. On the other hand, when they are able to complete the task, they may feel satisfied and proud. This can be seen from Respondent 6, who stated that they felt "*pleased and proud*" after writing. This response shows that completing a descriptive writing task can create a sense of achievement.

Therefore, the emotional findings of this study are mostly in line with previous theories and studies. However, they also add a broader perspective by showing that students' experiences in writing descriptive texts are not only about difficulties, errors, or

linguistic limitations. The students also experienced motivation, satisfaction, and pride. This means that descriptive writing in EFL contexts should be understood as both a cognitive and emotional process. While the cognitive dimension explains what students find difficult in writing, the emotional dimension explains how students feel when facing and completing the writing task.

D. Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that EFL students' experiences in writing descriptive texts involve two main dimensions, namely the cognitive dimension and the emotional dimension. The cognitive dimension was reflected in students' difficulties in using vocabulary, choosing appropriate words, constructing sentences, developing ideas, describing details, and perceiving the difficulty level of writing descriptive texts. Most students stated that limited vocabulary and difficulty finding the right words became the most dominant problems. Some students also experienced difficulties in arranging sentences and developing

detailed descriptions. These findings indicate that writing descriptive texts in English requires students to manage several cognitive processes at the same time, including idea generation, lexical selection, sentence organization, and content elaboration.

Meanwhile, the emotional dimension was reflected in students' feelings after completing the writing task. The students showed various emotional responses, including pressure, linguistic insecurity, challenge, motivation, satisfaction, and pride. Some students felt pressured and less confident because they realized that their English ability was still limited. However, other students viewed the writing task as a challenge that motivated them to learn more, especially in improving their vocabulary. One student also felt pleased and proud after completing the task, indicating that writing descriptive texts can create a sense of achievement.

Overall, the findings show that writing descriptive texts in an EFL context is not only a linguistic activity, but also a complex process involving both cognitive and emotional aspects. Students' cognitive difficulties, such as limited vocabulary and sentence

construction problems, can influence their emotional responses, such as pressure and insecurity. At the same time, emotional responses such as challenge, motivation, and pride can encourage students to improve their writing ability. Therefore, students' experiences in writing descriptive texts should be understood as an interaction between thinking processes and emotional responses.

Theoretically, this study supports the view that writing in an EFL context should be understood as a cognitive and emotional process. The findings strengthen the idea that writing descriptive texts requires not only knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and text structure, but also students' ability to manage their feelings during the writing process. Therefore, future theoretical discussions on EFL writing should pay more attention to the connection between cognitive factors, such as vocabulary mastery and sentence construction, and emotional factors, such as pressure, motivation, confidence, and satisfaction.

Practically, the findings suggest that writing instruction should provide more structured support for students. Teachers need to give clear guidance in vocabulary development, sentence-

building practice, and idea organization before asking students to write a complete descriptive text. Writing activities should also be designed gradually, starting from brainstorming ideas, listing vocabulary, making simple sentences, developing details, and revising the final text. This kind of process can help reduce students' cognitive burden and support them in producing clearer and more meaningful descriptive texts.

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