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Students' Difficulties in Writing Descriptive Text at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the difficulties faced by second-semester students of the English Education Study Program at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi in writing descriptive texts. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the specific aspects of writing that students struggle with, including organization, vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and content. The research uses a quantitative survey method involving 68 students as respondents. Data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of 20 items. The results indicate that vocabulary is the most significant difficulty (69.85%), followed by mechanics (67.74%), content (62.96%), and organization (62.68%). Grammar was identified as a moderately difficult aspect (62.13%). These findings highlight the need for more targeted instructional strategies to improve students' writing abilities, particularly in expanding vocabulary, mastering writing conventions, and enhancing text coherence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is considered the first foreign language that must be mastered by students at every educational level, ranging from elementary school to tertiary education. Language serves as the primary means of communication, providing a systematic way for speakers and listeners to exchange ideas and messages effectively. Among the four fundamental language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—writing stands as one of the most crucial skills to be developed. Writing allows individuals to express ideas, share information, and communicate their knowledge in a structured manner (Wahyu G.E et al., 2022).

At the secondary education level, particularly in junior and senior high schools, writing instruction becomes more complex and detailed. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the mastery of various text genres such as narrative, recount, descriptive, and procedural texts. According to Ritonga (2021), students are expected not only to understand the purpose, generic structure, and linguistic features of these texts but also to demonstrate the ability to compose them effectively. Therefore, writing proficiency is a significant indicator of students' success in mastering English as a foreign language.

Writing is a productive skill that involves expressing ideas, opinions, and knowledge in written form. As Tahang (2020) explains, writing is a cognitive process that requires planning, organizing, and revising to produce meaningful and coherent text. It reflects the writer's ability to structure ideas logically and communicate them effectively to readers. Writing also enables

students to engage with their thoughts more deeply, thereby enhancing their cognitive and linguistic competence.

However, writing is not merely about recording ideas but also about transforming abstract thoughts into tangible written expressions. Jumiaty et al. (2021) highlight that writing serves as both a communication tool and a medium of self-expression, allowing individuals to convey their emotions, experiences, and viewpoints. Yet, writing effectively demands mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and spelling, as well as the ability to organize sentences coherently. Unfortunately, many students struggle to meet these linguistic requirements, which hinders their writing development.

According to the 2014 PISA report distributed by the OECD, Indonesian students' writing performance ranked 62nd out of 72 participating countries, indicating a significant weakness in writing ability (Ni et al., 2020). This low achievement is partly attributed to a diminishing culture of writing among students, which has been overshadowed by the rapid advancement of digital technology. In addition, findings from preliminary research conducted among second-semester students of the English Education Study Program at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi revealed persistent difficulties in writing tasks, particularly descriptive text.

Many students reported feeling anxious and unmotivated when assigned English writing tasks. The primary challenges included generating ideas, organizing sentences, and applying correct grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, most students relied heavily on literal translation from Indonesian, resulting in unnatural or incorrect English expressions. These findings indicate that writing difficulties are influenced by both linguistic factors (such as limited vocabulary and grammar mastery) and psychological factors (such as low motivation and confidence).

Previous studies have shown that vocabulary mastery significantly affects writing proficiency. Ghonivita et al. (2021) assert that strong vocabulary knowledge supports overall language competence and enables students to express ideas more effectively in writing. Similarly, Ghufron & Ermawati (2018) emphasize that writing allows learners to reformulate and develop their ideas creatively. Ramadhani (2021) adds that effective teaching strategies, especially in descriptive text writing, can enhance students' engagement and interest in learning English. Therefore, strengthening vocabulary and teaching methods plays a vital role in overcoming students' writing challenges.

Based on the background above, the researcher formulates the main research question as follows: What are the difficulties faced by the second-semester students of the English Education Study Program at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi in writing descriptive texts? This question focuses on identifying specific factors that hinder students from producing well-organized and grammatically correct descriptive writing.

The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the difficulties faced by second-semester students in writing descriptive texts at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi. The findings of this research are expected to provide useful insights for teachers, students, and future researchers. For teachers, this study offers valuable information to design more effective writing instruction; for students, it serves as motivation to improve their writing performance; and for future researchers, it provides a foundation for further investigation into improving students' English writing skills.

2. METHODS

This research was conducted at the Islamic University of Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, specifically involving the second-semester students of the English Education Study Program in 2025. The study employed a quantitative research method using a survey design, which aimed to collect and analyze numerical data through statistical analysis. Four classes were chosen as the research population, consisting of 68 students in total. Since the number of subjects was fewer than one hundred, the researcher decided to include all students as the sample using a cluster random sampling technique, following Arikunto's (2006) recommendation.

The main instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire designed to identify students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items based on five indicators of writing—organization, vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and content—

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adapted from Brown (2004). Each item used a four-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (4). Before distributing the questionnaire, the researcher explained its purpose and instructions clearly to ensure valid responses. The use of a direct (face-to-face) questionnaire method allowed for a higher response rate and minimized misunderstanding among respondents.

To analyze the data, the researcher applied descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS version 22. The percentage formula $P = \frac{F}{N}$ x 100 was used to determine the proportion of responses for each indicator, where P represents the percentage, F is the frequency of responses, and N is the total number of respondents. The interpretation of the results was based on predetermined percentage intervals, categorizing students' difficulties as "very difficult," "difficult," "moderate," or "easy." This analysis aimed to provide a clear understanding of the specific areas where students face challenges in writing descriptive texts.

3. RESULTS

This study was conducted at the Islamic University of Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi and involved 68 second-semester students of the English Education Study Program in 2025. Of the total participants, 53 were female students (77.9%) and 15 were male students (22.1%). The data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 items that represented five main indicators of writing skills: organization, vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and content. Each item was rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree (1)* to *Strongly Agree (4)*. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with SPSS version 22.

The descriptive results are summarized in Table 1, which presents the mean percentages and categories of students' writing difficulties across the five indicators.

Table 1. Students' Difficulties in Writing Descriptive Text

No	Writing Component	Mean (%)	Category	Rank of Difficulty
1	Vocabulary	69.85	Difficult	1st (Most Difficult)
2	Mechanics	67.74	Difficult	2nd
3	Content	62.96	Moderate–Difficult	3rd
4	Organization	62.68	Moderate–Difficult	4th
5	Grammar	62.13	Moderate–Difficult	5th (Least Difficult)

The results show that vocabulary was the most challenging aspect of writing for students, with an average score of 69.85%, classified in the "difficult" category. This indicates that most students struggled with word choice, variety, and appropriateness in expressing their ideas.

The mechanics component ranked second with a mean of 67.74%, showing that many students experienced difficulties in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling accuracy.

Meanwhile, the content aspect (62.96%) and organization (62.68%) were both within the "moderate to difficult" range. This implies that students had challenges in developing ideas and structuring descriptive paragraphs cohesively.

The grammar aspect recorded the lowest difficulty level (62.13%), indicating that although students demonstrated a basic understanding of English grammatical structures, they still committed frequent errors in verb tense, subject–verb agreement, and article usage.

Item analysis revealed that the highest response frequency (72.06%) was associated with the statement, *"My vocabulary in writing is monotonous and lacks variety."* Another item, *"I do not clearly separate one sentence from another because I do not follow writing rules well,"* also received 72.06%, highlighting students' weaknesses in mechanics. These results emphasize that limited vocabulary and insufficient knowledge of writing conventions significantly hinder students' ability to produce effective descriptive texts.

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4. DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that vocabulary mastery remains the most dominant difficulty faced by students in writing descriptive texts. A significant portion of students expressed that their vocabulary was monotonous and lacked variety, which hindered them from expressing their ideas clearly and creatively. Limited vocabulary reduces lexical richness and causes redundancy in word usage, making their descriptive sentences less engaging and vivid. This suggests that vocabulary is a foundational aspect that directly affects the overall quality and fluency of students' writing.

The results correspond with the findings of Yoandita (2019), who revealed that vocabulary limitation is the most significant barrier encountered by students in writing descriptive texts. The present research supports this notion by showing that the majority of participants struggled to find appropriate words when describing objects or people, often relying on repetitive and simple expressions. Furthermore, students frequently resorted to literal translation from Indonesian to English, resulting in awkward and sometimes grammatically incorrect sentences. Such dependence on translation also reflects a lack of exposure to authentic English input in daily learning.

In relation to vocabulary teaching, these findings highlight the importance of contextualized vocabulary instruction. Instead of merely memorizing word lists, students should be encouraged to acquire vocabulary through context—by reading descriptive passages, engaging in vocabulary games, or using word-mapping techniques. These methods allow learners to understand not only word meaning but also how words function within sentences. Teachers can integrate vocabulary learning into writing activities so that students immediately apply newly learned words in meaningful contexts, thereby reinforcing retention and usage.

The second most difficult component identified was mechanics, including punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. Errors in mechanics often disrupted the clarity and coherence of students' writing, causing misinterpretation of meaning. For example, students frequently failed to separate sentences properly or used commas and periods inconsistently. The analysis showed that many students admitted they did not follow writing rules carefully, which contributed to confusion in sentence boundaries and structure.

The result is in line with Sartika and Nurdin (2019), who found that students' mechanical errors substantially lowered the overall quality of their written work even when their grammar and vocabulary were acceptable. The current study reinforces their conclusion by demonstrating that a lack of attention to mechanics remains a persistent issue among EFL learners. This indicates that mechanical accuracy should be emphasized alongside other linguistic elements. Teachers need to include specific lessons on punctuation, spelling, and capitalization rather than assuming students will acquire these skills incidentally.

To improve mechanical accuracy, explicit instruction and continuous feedback are necessary. Teachers can employ peer-editing sessions, where students check each other's writing for mechanical errors, thereby fostering awareness of correct conventions. Moreover, the use of technology-based tools such as grammar checkers can serve as supplementary resources to help students identify and correct mistakes independently. Incorporating these activities regularly may help develop greater accuracy and attention to detail in students' written work.

The content aspect ranked third in difficulty, showing that many students struggled to develop their ideas thoroughly. Several respondents reported that they lacked sufficient background knowledge about the topic they were asked to describe, which made it difficult to elaborate on details or provide vivid descriptions. As a result, their paragraphs tended to be general and lacked depth. The inability to expand content not only affects the richness of the text but also reduces reader engagement.

This finding aligns with Putri and Suryani (2020), who found that students' lack of topic familiarity often leads to underdeveloped content and incoherent ideas. In the present study, some students produced descriptive texts that contained accurate grammatical structures but minimal descriptive detail. This demonstrates that grammatical knowledge alone is insufficient for effective writing. Teachers should therefore incorporate pre-writing activities such as

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brainstorming, clustering, and mind mapping to activate students' prior knowledge and assist them in organizing ideas before drafting.

In terms of organization, students also faced moderate difficulty. Many students could identify the basic structure of descriptive text, which includes identification and description, but struggled to connect these sections cohesively. Transitions between sentences or paragraphs were often abrupt, leading to fragmented writing. This reflects students' limited understanding of textual coherence and cohesion. Proper organization is essential in descriptive writing because it ensures logical flow and clarity of information.

To address organizational problems, teachers can introduce model-based writing instruction, where students analyze well-written descriptive texts to observe how ideas are sequenced and connected. Additionally, teachers can provide graphic organizers to guide students in structuring their descriptions logically. Through guided practice, students can gradually internalize the concept of coherence and apply it consistently in their writing tasks.

The grammar aspect showed the lowest level of difficulty (62.13%), suggesting that students possess an intermediate understanding of English grammatical structures. However, common errors persisted in areas such as subject–verb agreement, article usage, and tense consistency. Many students were found to confuse verb forms in the simple present tense or omit auxiliary verbs. Although grammar was not the most serious problem in this study, consistent reinforcement remains necessary to prevent fossilization of these errors.

Interestingly, these results differ from the findings of Rahayu (2020) and Yoandita (2019), who reported grammar as the most problematic area in EFL writing. The relatively lower difficulty in grammar observed in this study may reflect the effectiveness of the grammar instruction provided at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi. Frequent exposure to grammar-focused lessons in earlier semesters could have improved students' syntactic awareness, although some occasional mistakes still occurred due to carelessness or lack of proofreading.

Beyond linguistic factors, this study also identified psychological influences such as low confidence, writing anxiety, and lack of motivation as contributing factors to students' writing difficulties. According to Rahmawati (2021), students' emotional state significantly affects their writing performance, as anxious learners often avoid participating actively or experimenting with language. In the current study, some students expressed fear of making mistakes, which led them to use simpler structures and limited vocabulary. This finding underscores the need for a supportive classroom environment that fosters risk-taking and creativity.

Overall, the discussion reveals that students' writing difficulties are multidimensional, encompassing both linguistic and psychological aspects. Effective writing instruction must therefore integrate vocabulary development, mechanical accuracy, and affective support. Teachers should balance form-focused instruction with meaning-focused activities that encourage students to use language communicatively. Furthermore, continuous feedback and scaffolding can help learners improve progressively.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide valuable pedagogical insights. For teachers, it is crucial to design writing lessons that emphasize vocabulary enrichment, mechanical correctness, and idea organization. For students, consistent writing practice and extensive reading are essential to expand linguistic competence and enhance writing fluency. Finally, for future researchers, it is recommended to conduct qualitative investigations—such as interviews or classroom observations—to explore how students plan, process, and revise their writing. Such research would provide deeper understanding of students' writing behavior and inform the development of more effective instructional strategies.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that students in the second semester of the English Education Study Program at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi face significant challenges in writing descriptive texts. The most dominant difficulties encountered are in the areas of vocabulary (69.85%), mechanics (67.74%), and content (62.96%). These challenges affect their ability to express ideas clearly, structure texts coherently, and adhere to writing conventions.

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Although grammar was classified as moderately difficult (62.13%), it still presents considerable obstacles that need to be addressed. Overall, these findings suggest the necessity of improving various aspects of writing instruction to support student success in descriptive writing.

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