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UNDERSTANDING LOW ACHIEVER STUDENTS' LINGUISTIC AND COGNITIVE PROBLEMS IN WRITING ENGLISH DESCRIPTIVE TEXT

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Abstract

Students' competence in writing skills plays a significant role in leading them to success in learning English. However, in reality, many Indonesian students experience problems in creating quality texts, in particular descriptive ones. This study aims to examine low-achiever students' problems in writing descriptive text. The study was conducted in a private Senior High School in Bandung. The data was gained from eight students' works on descriptive text. They were obtained from their English teacher. The data was analyzed qualitatively using Miles & Huberman' (1991) framework of qualitative data analysis, Jacobs et al's (1981) components of writing, and Byrne's (1998) types of writing difficulty. The finding shows that the students experienced serious linguistic and cognitive problems in writing the text, in particular in the areas of content, language use, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics. Finally, this finding implies that (1) teaching writing should emphasize the process rather than the product, and (2) providing knowledge of autonomous learning to students is essential so that students can learn and practice writing independently outside the classroom.

Keywords: Cognitive Problems; Descriptive Text; Linguistic Problems; Low-Achiever Students; Writing Difficulties

INTRODUCTION

Writing skill plays an essential role in student's success in their current school life and future career development (Bai et al, 2020) – including university, work, and social life. In school, writing skill is needed by students to record the learning materials, do the tasks, answer the questions on the tests, fulfill the teachers' demands, etc. Moreover, at the university level, the requirement to possess writing skills is much bigger – as such synthesizing, analyzing, criticizing, and writing research reports (Caroll, 2003). In that stage, students are required to do more complicated tasks demanding better writing competence. Likewise, in some workplaces, employers are recommended to have good writing skills to perform their jobs. Finally, in social life, it is currently an important feature of life since it is employed for communication, sharing ideas, persuading, expressing feelings, entertaining others, and many more (Graham, 2019). Therefore, Senior high school students who own the required writing skills are predicted to have potential success and take a range of advantages in the future life.

In response to the need for good writing skills, governments of many countries have emphasized the teaching of writing through their education policies, in particular language curricula, both in advanced countries (such as the USA and UK) and developed ones (such as Indonesia) (Emilia, 2010). In the Indonesian current curriculum (curriculum 2013 and *Merdeka* curriculum), especially at high school levels, students are required to be able to write a variety of texts well (such as descriptive, recount, procedure, narrative, and expository) (Kemendikbud, 2014; Kemendikbud, 2022).

Despite the curricula's mandate of students' writing competence, many students from different EFL countries find it difficult to compose good texts. Some previous studies have proved it. For instance, Nasser's (2019) study of Iraqi EFL students' difficulties in writing English texts regarding grammar, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting; Bui's (2022) works showing Vietnamese students' misconceptions of cohesive devices; and Nuralisaputri & Megawati's (2023) research finding that Indonesian Junior high school students experienced difficulties in writing descriptive text in terms of linguistic, cognitive, and psychological aspects. In the Indonesian context, studies concerning senior high school students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts are almost not found, in particular those which look at high and achievers' writing products. Therefore, a study that discusses this problem is needed to fill the gap. Thus, this study aims to explore students' difficulties in writing descriptive text especially as found in writing products of low achiever students.

In general, the term "writing" can be defined from two different sights, namely process and product. When writing is seen as a process, it is cognitive and physical activities to communicate ideas, thinking, feelings, etc. (Nunan, 2003) involving a range of phases of drafting, reviewing, redrafting, writing, rewriting, and revising which are done recursively (Harmer, 2007). In contrast, when writing is seen as a product, it is the final product or result of the entire writing process (Harmer, 2007).

In the writing process, as aforementioned, there are some steps to do. Oshima and Hogue (2006) have suggested more detailed steps of writing for students as follows.

Step 1: Prewriting (creating ideas)
- a. Choosing a topic and collecting information about it
  Selecting an interesting topic that meets the assignment
- b. Narrowing the topic.
  For example: environment → environmental pollution → pollution of the oceans → oil spills
- c. Generating ideas
  Getting sources: e.g. internet, newspapers, magazines, journals, books, interviews, life experiences

Step 2: Outlining
- a. Dividing the ideas into sub-lists and deleting any unused items
- b. Writing a topic sentence
- c. Writing an outline for a passage

Step 3: Writing a rough draft based on the outline

Step 4: Polishing
  Revising content and organization, including topic sentence, focus, supporting details, unity, coherence, and logic.
  Editing: polishing writing/paper for possible errors, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation.

The end product of students' writing is generally very genre-bound (especially in an academic context), meaning that students' writing must meet a certain structure or construction and feature following the purpose of the text-writing (Harmer, 2007). In Indonesian schools, for example, students are mandated to be able to write different kinds of genres of texts (Kemendikbud, 2014; 2022) such as descriptive, narrative, recount, procedure, expository, etc. In addition, students are also required to follow the conventions and language features of each type of writing.

In Indonesia, descriptive text is a type of text that is mandated to be taught to Junior and senior high school students. The purpose of descriptive text is to showcase an object to the readers what the writer has seen, heard, and felt about an object (Nafisah & Kurniawan, 2007). Further, the description of the object may be subjective, affective, or emotive since different students may have different perceptions and opinions about the object being described. Its grammatical features are as follows (Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Nafisah & Kurniawan, 2007).

a. The text is dominated by present tense or infinitive verbs (V1) such as *eat, drink, find, feel, sing,* and *read*
b. Relational verbs are employed to classify and describe qualities, appearance, functions, and divisions of the object (e.g. *is, are, have, has*)
c. Adjectives are used to give extra information to a noun, like *green, brown, beautiful, kind, serious,* and *inspiring*
d. Adverbs are employed to add information *to the verbs*, *to the adjectives*, about *manner, place,* or *time*.

Table 1. An Example of Descriptive Text

Present tense Relational verb Adjectives Adverb	Set in the heart of southern England, London is one of the biggest and busiest cities in Europe. A truly international city, London attracts millions of visitors every year from all over the world, yet never loses its own unique charm. London has many impressive sights to see, ranging from the historical beauty of St Paul's Cathedral and Big Ben to Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament. In this city of contrasts, you can be walking along one of the busiest streets, yet still be less than a mile from one of the many huge, peaceful parks. London is a great cultural center, too; the National Gallery contains one of the finest collections of classical paintings in the world. London is also well known for other things apart from its monuments and art galleries. Shoppers will enjoy visiting the department stores on Oxford Street or they could try Harrods, the most exclusive shop in London. For evening entertainment, the choice of theaters is enormous. From the famous Southbank Theater complex to the smaller theaters in Covent Garden, there is no end of plays to see. Soho and its pavement cafés are also worth visiting. London is an exceptional place, a truly modern city that has managed to keep its traditional style and sense of history. You may get exhausted in London, but one thing is certain; you will never get bored, as Dr. Johnson once said, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life." (Source: Virginia Evans, 2000)	General Statement Description Description Description

The stages or generic structure of a descriptive text consists of an *identification* (some scholars also call it a *general statement*) and *description*. In the first stage, the identification stage, the topic of the text is introduced. It can be a person, a place, a thing, an event, or an animal. In the second stage, the description stage, the characteristics of the object are described – such as appearances, behavior, personalities, qualities, and habits. (Emilia & Christie, 2013; Nafisah & Kurniawan, 2007).

In addition, there are also some aspects to consider to make a descriptive text good and interesting. For instance, visualizing the object using sensory experience, and making the object come alive using figurative language.

Jacobs et al (1981; cf Weigle, 2002) have mentioned that a writing product consists of five components including content, language use, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics. The content of the writing should mirror the writer's knowledgeability about the topic being talked about, thoroughly development of the text, and relevant to the determined theme or task. Further, the text's organization should showcase the writer's ideas clearly which are expressed fluently, briefly, cohesive, and well-organized. Specifically, every sentence should be constructed effectively; tense and number should be in agreement; and there is appropriate use of word order, article, pronoun, and prepositions. Furthermore, good vocabulary is reflected by the writer's effective choice of words, word usage, and appropriate register. Finally, good writing should employ good mechanics which are hinted by the writer's obedience to writing conventions including paragraphing, capitalization, spelling, and punctuation.

However, as it has been mentioned earlier, composing a good English text is not an easy thing for many language learners, in particular EFL students (including Indonesian). There are at least three aspects that cause them to experience various difficulties (although they may overlap) in writing – *psychological, linguistic,* and *cognitive problems*. The *psychological problems* are caused by the lack of feedback and guidance mainly from (interaction with) the teachers during the process of writing. The *linguistic problems* cover students' difficulties in forming grammatical sentences, connecting one sentence to another, and sequencing the sentences well and in logical order. Therefore, texts written by students with these problems are difficult to understand and can cause misunderstanding or misinterpreting. The *cognitive problems* include difficulties in communicating the writer's ideas in an effective way, organizing the content, and using written language (which is different from oral/spoken language) (Byrne, 1998).

METHOD

The site of the present study was a private Senior High School in Bandung. This site was selected because the school principal and the English teacher were open and welcomed the author during the research. The subjects of this study were eight hand-written descriptive texts composed by eight low-achiever students which had been submitted to their English teacher. Then the authors received the texts directly from the English teacher. The data were examined based on Miles & Huberman's (1990) framework of qualitative data analysis, Jacobs *et al*.'s (1981) ESL composition profile, and Byrne's (1998) types of students' problems in writing.

In addition, to identify low achiever students in the selected subject, the data of students' scores in English subject in the achievement-report book (*Buku Rapor Siswa*) was also examined. The data was obtained from the administration staff of the school. To honor the privacy of the institution and the participants, their names, identities, and the location of the school are not mentioned in this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the data, it is found that the low achiever students experienced difficulties in almost all aspects of writing including content, language use, organization, vocabulary, mechanics, linguistics, and cognitive. The general findings are presented in Table 2.

Based on the data, the students experienced difficulties in meeting the five components of writing as proposed by Jacobs et al (1981) – *content, language use, organization, vocabulary,* and *mechanics* aspects. These difficulties may be caused by cognitive and linguistic problems as mentioned by Byrne (1998). In addition, in the present study, the psychology problem cannot

be analyzed directly since this research merely focused on the students' artifact of difficulty in the forms of writing products regardless of the process of writing.

Table 2. General Findings of Students' Difficulties in Writing Descriptive Text

No.	Difficulty in meeting the Components of writing	Source of Difficulty	Samples of students' errors
1	Content	Linguistic & cognitive problems	"The last my holiday to garut for visit my grandfather is bad memorable and unforgotten for me, because I with my family can go there just once of the year. … I spend there with my grandfather …. he was die. He was sick for a long time so this is sadness memorable for me." (Student #5. SH)
2	Language use	Linguistic & cognitive problems	• "my the first brother Is man …. the first my brother have wedding and have a children 2 years old…." (Student #8, (LA) • "I like froud born in my family, because I have faher and mother who always love and affection to me…." (Student #2, PFA)
3	Organization	Cognitive & linguistic problems	"I was born in cililin. the beautiful city who was always make my days be a beautiful days. especialy in malaka village. Malaka village is village of moment, because there is a place. when i was in junior high school (SMP). … when I was find someone I was bron from a good family … and always make me smile every day …" (Student #1, Nhafa)
4	Vocabulary	Cognitive & linguistic problem	• "although I have Family which simple I very happy because around the scond in my parents. My parents is Price without sign merit… " (Student #3, SY). • "I in crease my hobbies, when I was boring, if there was a novel, I will spend leasure time for it, as it can get me interest." (Student #4, NH)) • I have brother he name is *** **** ****, he is very especialy for me in this room. Because that my dream, I dream I have my brother cild (Student #6, HFL)
5	Mechanics	Cognitive & linguistic problems	• *Spelling*: bron (Student #1), badroom (student#2) • *Capitalization*: i (Student #1), although, Family (Student #3) • *Punctuation*: "She has three children the first child name is *** ***** **** mybe now 12 years old. If she still alive, she died eighteen years old got a cancer…. " (Student #7, ReMu)

Based on the data, students experienced difficulty in meeting the first aspect of writing, the content. An example is the excerpt written by Student #5 (SH). She failed to meet this aspect since the text that she produced was mostly about what she had done in her last holiday (although two sentences were talking about a particular person). Therefore, her text was a recount text, not a descriptive one.

Likewise, in terms of language use, low-achiever students also found problems in constructing good and effective sentences. For instance, student #8 wrote, "my the first brother Is man …. the first my brother have wedding and have a children 2 years old…." In this writing, several errors appeared. For example, the writer used the noun phrase 'first brother' repeatedly. To make the sentence effective, the pronoun 'he' can be used in the second sentence to refer to her first brother. Further, there is a disagreement between the noun phrase "my brother" and the verb "have", and the article "a" and the plural noun "children".

Another problem faced by the students is forming a well-organized text. A sample of the artifact of this problem is found in the text composed by student #1. The text is not cohesive and sentences do not tie to each other. Therefore, the writer's ideas were not expressed clearly.
The next problem experienced by the students is their lack of vocabulary knowledge. Many of the students' sentences are hard to understand due to inappropriate or wrong word choices and usage. Examples of this fact can be found in almost all text presented in Table 2 which were written by the eight low-achiever students.
Finally, the mechanics aspect is also a problem possessed by the students in writing the text. Although this aspect is not as essential as other aspects, their inability to apply good mechanics may affect the meaning of the sentences they had composed and in turn make the texts meaningless, confusing, or at least readers-unfriendly.
When these errors are seen using Byrne's (1998) view, we can say that the students' inability to fulfill the criteria of good or excellent writing is caused by linguistic and cognitive problems possessed by the students. These are reflected in students' errors in writing such as "although I have Family which simple I very happy because around the second in my parents. My parents is Price without sign merit… " (Student #3, SY).

Discussion

The data presented in Table 2 shows students' complicated problems in writing English text, various aspects of writing were not fulfilled appropriately. First, in terms of content, students were unable to express their ideas well. They also did not show their knowledge about the topic being written and did not focus on one topic. This finding is in line with previous research that showed that EFL students had to struggle to produce good writing since they generally found difficulty in generating their ideas and commonly shifted their writing from one primary topic to another (Chen,2002), Elkhatib, 1984; cf. Asassfeh et al, 2020).
Second, in terms of language use aspect, the low achievers had problems in constructing sentences and applying grammar. It is proved by the sentences composed by student #1 which are far from having good grammatical sentences. For instance, the second sentence, * *'the beautiful city who was always make my days be a beautiful days.'* It is actually not a sentence since there is no main verb for the noun phrase 'the beautiful city'. Thus, it is only a long noun phrase. Moreover, several other errors appear here: (1) the relative pronoun *who* was used for the noun phrase *the beautiful city*; (2) an infinitive verb (i.e. *make*) is preceded by a linking verb (i.e. *was*); (3) the noun complement **a beautiful days* of the verb *make* is preceded by a word *be;* (4) the plural noun *days* is modified by an article *a*. (*see* Murphy, 2019). This finding proves Silva (1993) that foreign language learners commonly face difficulty in writing particularly in lexical and grammatical areas.
Third, concerning the organization, the low achiever students are also found facing difficulty in this aspect. This is proved by the paragraph that the students have produced, in which the ideas of the text were not clearly expressed and were disconnected (see the aforementioned two points). Therefore, communication of the idea didn't flow well. This can be seen clearly in the text written by student #1. At the beginning of her writing, she told about "I" , particularly about where she was born, Cililin. Then, she talked about a place called Malaka where she studied when she was in Junior high school. Surprisingly, in the next sentence, she wrote about someone. In other words, the content is not relevant to the topic and lacks of detail (*see* Jacobs et al., 1981; cf. Weigle, 2002). In addition, unity and coherence are not found in the paragraph, the topic sentence is not supported by sentences that follow it (*see* Oshima & Hogue, 2006). Previous studies also found that EFL learners experienced problems with coherence, cohesion, and logical order in writing English text (Asassfeh et al, 2020).

Fourth, the aspect of vocabulary is also one of the difficult aspects that hinder the low achiever students from producing good descriptive paragraphs. This is proved by the students' choice of words that were confusing or incorrect. For example,

a. "Malaka village is village of moment, because there is a place." (student #1)
b. "I like froud born in my family, because …" (Student#2)
c. "although I have Family which simple I very happy because around the scond in my parents. My parents is Price without sign merit… " (Student #3).
d. "I in crease my hobbies, when I was boring, if there was a novel, I will spend leasure time for it, as it can get me interest." (Student #4)

The above sentences are confusing and difficult to understand. The main cause of this problem is their lack of vocabulary knowledge, either in the aspect of meaning, form, and use of words (*see* Nation, 2001) since studies have shown that students' vocabulary knowledge plays a very significant role in their writing performance (e.g. Dabbagh & Enayat, 2017; Karakoç & Köse, 2017; Kim et al, 2022). In other words, a limited vocabulary becomes a barrier to writing quality text.

Fifth, the lack of knowledge about mechanics is also a problem experienced by low-achiever students. They experienced a serious problem in this aspect, particularly punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. The students did not understand well when to use a full stop (.) and coma (,) as in the sentence, "when I was find someone special, I was bron from a good family and always fight for pick up my dream. And alwas make me smIle everyday. Who was always be there for me." (*see* Oshima & Hogue, 2006).

Finally, based on the aforementioned mistakes or errors made by the students in their writing, we can infer that the students experienced serious and complicated difficulties in writing English descriptive text. Their difficulties are caused by internal factors that exist inside themselves. They are what Byrne (1998) called linguistic and cognitive problems. The first is the problem dealing with constructing grammatical sentences, connecting every sentence, and sequencing the sentences well and in logical order. On the other hand, the second problem, the cognitive one, covers all difficulties in effectively communicating the writer's ideas, organizing the content, and employing written language.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the problems faced by low-achiever students of a private Senior High School in Bandung. They are found to have serious problems in writing descriptive text, either in the aspect of content, language use, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics. The sources of these problems are inside themselves, the linguistic and cognitive problems. This finding implies that there is a big need for English teachers to refocus the teaching of writing on the process rather than on the product because the process of writing connects to quality writing (Schoonen et al, 2010). Although it may need more sacrifice from the teacher – in terms of time and energy – it will empower students to have better understanding, knowledge, and skills in writing paragraphs, particularly descriptive text. In addition, English teachers are suggested to teach (or at least inform) students of strategies to be autonomous and self-regulated learners so that they can learn and practice writing beyond classrooms without help from the teachers. We believe this can help them to be better writers of English texts.

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