

Exploring Vocational High School Students' Difficulties in Writing Descriptive Texts across the Stages of the Genre-Based Approach

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Abstract

Despite the wide implementation of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) in EFL contexts, vocational high school students continue to experience persistent challenges in descriptive writing. This research aims to investigate students' difficulties in learning writing descriptive text using GBA across its learning stages. The study employed a descriptive qualitative method conducted at SMK Bina Insan Bangsa Ngamprah, involving 25 eleventh-grade students. Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations across GBA sessions and semi-structured interviews with both students and the English teacher. The findings revealed that students experienced difficulties in generating ideas, organizing paragraphs, using appropriate vocabulary, and applying correct grammar, alongside affective barriers such as writing anxiety. Notably, these challenges were most dominant during the Independent Construction of the Text (ICOT) stage, where limited vocabulary and grammatical weaknesses significantly hindered individual performance. Rather than indicating an insufficiency in the approach itself, the findings highlight that GBA requires more intensive scaffolding, interactive modeling, guided practice, and continuous constructive feedback. Ultimately, this research offers practical implications for educators to optimize pedagogical support and tailored language practice when implementing GBA in vocational education.

Keywords: Writing; Descriptive Text; Genre-Based Approach

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most essential skills in learning English, particularly for students at the senior high school level. It allows learners to express their ideas, share experiences, and communicate meaning in a structured way. According to Harmer (2006), writing encourages students to focus on accurate language use and develop their ideas logically. In addition, writing is not only a productive skill but also a complex cognitive process that involves planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Therefore, mastering writing becomes a crucial component in achieving overall English proficiency.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), writing is often considered the most difficult skill compared to listening, speaking, and reading. This difficulty arises because writing requires students to integrate various components, such as grammar, vocabulary, organization, and mechanics, simultaneously. According to Crossley (2020), writing involves multiple cognitive aspects that must be mastered at the same time, making it a challenging task for learners. As a result, many students struggle to produce coherent and meaningful texts, especially in academic and vocational settings.

One of the primary text types taught in Indonesian senior high schools is descriptive text. Descriptive text aims to describe a person, place, object, or event in detail so that the reader can

clearly imagine it. According to Knapp and Watkins (2005), descriptive text helps students develop their ability to use adjectives, nouns, and sensory language effectively. Furthermore, descriptive writing plays an important role in improving students' ability to organize ideas and express them clearly in written form. Despite its importance, many students still face difficulties in writing descriptive text. They often struggle to differentiate between identification and description, leading to disorganized paragraphs and limited vocabulary use.

To address these challenges, the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) has been widely adopted in Indonesian EFL classrooms. GBA provides a systematic framework through four distinct stages: Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF), Modeling of the Text (MOT), Joint Construction of the Text (JCOT), and Independent Construction of the Text (ICOT). While foundational frameworks emphasize GBA's capacity to guide learners from dependent to independent writing (Feez & Joyce, 1998; Baxoromovna, 2024), recent empirical studies indicate that students still encounter persistent barriers during its implementation. Recent research highlights that although GBA offers explicit scaffolding, EFL learners frequently struggle during the transition from collaborative group writing to independent construction (Aulia, 2024; Hitimala et al., 2024).

Although previous studies have extensively explored GBA in general secondary contexts (Maulani, 2021; Rusmawan, 2017), there remains a clear research gap regarding how vocational high school (SMK) students—who often possess unique technical backgrounds and varied baseline English proficiencies—navigate each specific stage of GBA. Preliminary observations at SMK Bina Insan Bangsa Ngamprah revealed that students face distinct hurdles at each phase: confusion in idea generation during BKOF, structural difficulty in MOT, over-reliance on peer/teacher guidance during JCOT, and severe writing anxiety during ICOT.

This study offers novelty by providing a comprehensive, stage-by-stage qualitative analysis of students' writing difficulties across all four phases of GBA within a vocational high school setting. By examining both linguistic shortcomings and affective barriers (Salihoglu, 2024), this research aims to explicitly explore vocational high school students' difficulties in learning descriptive text through GBA and provide practical insights for optimizing pedagogical scaffolding in EFL classrooms.

METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative method to explore students' difficulties in learning writing descriptive text using the Genre-Based Approach (GBA). Qualitative research was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding and descriptive analysis of educational phenomena within their natural classroom context without applying experimental treatments (Creswell, 2014). The study was conducted at SMK Bina Insan Bangsa Ngamprah during the 2024/2025 academic year. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, involving 25 eleventh-grade students from class XI TKJ (Computer and Network Engineering) and their English teacher. This class was intentionally chosen because the students had undergone descriptive text instruction integrated with the four stages of GBA.

Data were collected through two main qualitative instruments: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. First, non-participant classroom observations were conducted across the GBA learning cycle using a structured observation sheet. The observation focused on specific indicators across classroom activities: idea generation in Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF), generic structure identification in Modeling of the Text (MOT), peer

collaboration and teacher dependency in Joint Construction of the Text (JCOT), as well as independent drafting, revision, and writing anxiety in Independent Construction of the Text (ICOT). Second, semi-structured interviews were carried out with students and the English teacher to gain deeper insights into students' responses, writing hurdles, and psychological barriers. Key interview questions included inquiries such as, "What difficulties do you face when constructing sentences in English?" and "Which GBA stage do you find most challenging and why?"

Data were analyzed following the interactive qualitative analysis procedures proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), executed operationally through three continuous steps. In the data reduction stage, raw notes from classroom observations and verbatim interview transcripts were filtered, categorized, and coded according to writing aspects (content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics) and GBA stages. Next, in the data display stage, the reduced data were organized into structured thematic tables and narrative descriptive paragraphs to visualize recurring patterns of difficulty. Finally, during conclusion drawing and verification, overarching insights regarding students' difficulties were formulated and continually verified against observational evidence. To ensure data trustworthiness and validity, methodological and source triangulation were applied by cross-verifying observation field notes with students' responses and teacher's judgments. Research ethics were strictly observed by obtaining formal permission from the school principal and securing informed consent from all participants while maintaining anonymity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this research were obtained from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 eleventh-grade students and the English teacher at SMK Bina Insan Bangsa Ngamprah. To provide an empirical and systematic presentation, the results are organized into two distinct subsections: classroom observation findings and interview insights.

1. Classroom Observation Findings across GBA Stages

Classroom observations were conducted across four main stages of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA): Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF), Modeling of the Text (MOT), Joint Construction of the Text (JCOT), and Independent Construction of the Text (ICOT). Table 1 summarizes the observed indicators, occurrence of difficulties, and empirical evidence recorded during the lessons.

Table 1. Classroom Observation Matrix Across GBA Stages

GBA Stage	Observed Difficulty Indicator	Observed/ Not Observed	Empirical Evidence/ Classroom Observation Notes
BKOF (Pre-Activity)	Difficulty generating ideas related to the topic	Observed	Most students remained silent and confused when asked open-ended questions like "What is your favorite animal?"
BKOF (Pre-Activity)	Limited topic-related vocabulary	Observed	Students heavily relied on online translation tools or

			asked peers for basic English terms.
MOT (Pre/Whilst-Activity)	Confusion regarding generic structure and text purpose	Observed	Students struggled to differentiate between <i>identification</i> and <i>description</i> parts of model texts.
JCOT (Whilst-Activity)	Difficulty organizing sentences into coherent paragraphs	Observed	Group drafts contained fragmented sentences with poor logical flow and lack of cohesive markers.
JCOT (Whilst-Activity)	Heavy reliance on teacher guidance	Observed	Students frequently paused their work and waited for teacher confirmation before proceeding.
ICOT (Post-Activity)	Inability to revise, edit, or identify grammatical errors	Observed	Students left mechanical and grammatical errors uncorrected in their individual drafts.
ICOT (Post-Activity)	High writing anxiety and low confidence during individual presentation	Observed	Several students appeared nervous, hesitated to write on the whiteboard, or explicitly refused to share their work.

As illustrated in Table 1, student difficulties were observed across all stages of GBA, with the highest frequency of hesitation and errors occurring during the ICOT stage.

During the BKOF stage, when the teacher attempted to activate background knowledge on descriptive themes (e.g., "My Favorite Animal"), the majority of students responded with single-word answers such as "Cat" or "Dog".

In the MOT and JCOT stages, structural and grammatical errors became prominent. In student writing samples, recurring errors in grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics were documented:

- Grammatical Errors: Students frequently misused verb forms and infinitive structures, producing sentences like "My cat like to eating fish" or "I love to swimming" instead of "I love to swim".
- Vocabulary & Spelling Errors: Misspelled words were prevalent in student drafts, such as writing "recieve" instead of "receive", and confusing homophones like "to" and "too".
- Structural/Organizational Errors: When assigned to expand an identification statement (e.g., "My mother gave me a kitten. I called her Kitty"), students struggled to develop coherent supporting description paragraphs due to limited adjective repertoire.

During the ICOT stage, students demonstrated a notable lack of self-editing awareness, leaving punctuation marks omitted and capitalization uncorrected.

2. Interview Results

To triangulate the observational findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and the English teacher.

Student Interview Responses

Student responses confirmed that limited vocabulary, fear of making grammatical errors, and individual task execution were the primary sources of difficulty:

- a. Grammar and Sentence Construction: When asked about difficulties in arranging words, Student 4 stated: *"Suka takut salah dalam menuliskan kalimat sesuai grammar yang benar"* (I am afraid of writing sentences with the wrong grammar).
- b. Vocabulary Limitations: Regarding word selection, Student 1 noted: *"Iya bu, suka bingung kalau tidak tahu artinya"* (Yes ma'am, I feel confused if I do not know the meaning).
- c. Affective Barriers and Anxiety: Regarding confidence, Student 5 shared: *"Kalau disuruh nulis ke depan suka cemas dan deg-degan"* (When I am asked to write in front of the class, I feel anxious and nervous).
- d. Most Challenging GBA Stage: Most students identified the individual stage (ICOT) as the hardest. Student 6 stated: *"Kalau waktu ngerjain tugas kelompok mah bisa karena bareng-bareng, tapi waktu tugas sendiri itu kadang suka masih bingung cara penulisannya..."* (When doing group assignments I can manage because we work together, but during individual tasks, I am still often confused about how to write...).

Teacher Interview Responses

The English teacher corroborated the students' self-assessments, emphasizing that baseline vocabulary deficits directly impacted structural expansion and individual independence:

- a. On Vocabulary and Structure: The teacher remarked: *"Kebanyakan siswa sulit mengembangkan kalimat dari identification menjadi description... karena kosa kata yang mereka miliki tidak banyak, dan tidak tahu cara menuliskannya dalam bahasa Inggris"* (Most students have difficulty developing sentences from identification into description because of their limited vocabulary).
- b. On Individual Construction (ICOT): The teacher highlighted that ICOT was the most challenging stage: *"Di bagian tugas individu ya, Independent Construction of the Text... ketika diberi tugas individu, banyak siswa yang mengeluh 'Bapak tugasnya kelompok aja biar gampang, kalau sendiri mah gak ngerti'"* (The most challenging stage is ICOT. When given individual tasks, many students complain, 'Sir, let's make it a group task because it's easier. If alone, I don't understand')

Discussion

The empirical findings demonstrate that vocational high school students encounter multi-layered difficulties when writing descriptive texts through the Genre-Based Approach (GBA). These difficulties encompass cognitive, linguistic, structural, and affective dimensions. Rather than viewing writing as a simple linear task, these challenges illustrate that writing is a complex cognitive process requiring the simultaneous integration of multiple linguistic and psychological skills (Crossley, 2020).

During the Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF) stage, students struggled with idea generation and topic-related vocabulary. This occurred primarily because vocational students often have limited prior exposure to descriptive English input outside the classroom, leading to an underdeveloped schema. When prompted to describe familiar subjects, students remained silent not due to a lack of ideas, but because they lacked the English lexical items to translate their mental concepts into target language structures. This finding aligns with Kareem (2022) and Harmer (2006), highlighting that vocabulary deficits act as a fundamental bottleneck in the initial phase of text production.

In the Modeling of the Text (MOT) and Joint Construction of the Text (JCOT) stages, organizational and grammatical hurdles became clear. Students struggled to differentiate between identification and description, often producing disorganized paragraphs. This issue stems from the fact that students frequently transfer L1 (Indonesian) rhetorical patterns into

English, resulting in literal word-for-word translation without adhering to English modifier-noun order or verb agreement. Furthermore, during JCOT, while student-centered group work provided a collaborative buffer, it also fostered passive reliance on more proficient peers or teacher validation. This indicates that collaborative practice alone does not automatically guarantee individual internalizations of genre conventions unless explicit individual accountability is embedded (Feez & Joyce, 1998; Siregar & Dongoran, 2020).

A key contribution of this study lies in revealing the strong interplay between linguistic incompetence and affective barriers, particularly during the Independent Construction of the Text (ICOT) stage. As students transitioned from group scaffolding to independent writing, their writing anxiety spiked significantly. Limited vocabulary and grammatical uncertainty directly triggered fear of negative evaluation, causing students to experience hesitation, self-doubt, and reluctance to share their drafts publicly. This psychological barrier, as noted by Salihoglu (2024), severely restricts cognitive capacity, preventing students from editing their work or applying self-correction strategies during the post-activity phase.

Crucially, these findings should not be interpreted as an indication that GBA is ineffective in vocational settings. Since this study employed a descriptive qualitative design without an experimental control group, it does not evaluate the overall effectiveness of GBA compared to other methods. Instead, the results indicate that GBA requires more explicit, continuous pedagogical scaffolding and interactive feedback to successfully bridge the gap between joint construction and independent performance.

Pedagogical Implications and Study Limitations

The pedagogical implications of this study suggest that English teachers in vocational high schools should enrich the BKOF stage with multimodal media (e.g., visual vocabulary maps) and provide micro-grammar mini-lessons prior to independent drafting. Furthermore, teachers need to establish a low-anxiety classroom environment that treats writing errors as natural developmental milestones rather than failures.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. The investigation was confined to a single class of 25 eleventh-grade TKJ students at one vocational high school over a limited instructional cycle. Consequently, the findings reflect context-specific insights rather than broad generalizations across all EFL vocational settings. Future research is encouraged to examine instructional interventions across larger, multi-school vocational samples.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that vocational high school students experience interconnected linguistic, structural, and affective difficulties across the four stages of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA). These challenges manifest as idea generation hurdles in Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF), generic structure confusion in Modeling of the Text (MOT), over-reliance on peer and teacher guidance in Joint Construction of the Text (JCOT), as well as pronounced writing anxiety, vocabulary deficits, and grammatical errors during Independent Construction of the Text (ICOT). Notably, the ICOT stage represents the most critical phase where linguistic gaps directly exacerbate students' psychological barriers. Rather than indicating an inadequacy of GBA, these findings demonstrate that the approach requires continuous pedagogical scaffolding to facilitate students' transition from collaborative learning to independent writing.

Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations

This study offers practical implications for EFL educators in vocational high schools. Teachers are encouraged to integrate visual media and vocabulary enrichment strategies during early GBA stages, provide targeted micro-grammar instruction, and foster a supportive, low-anxiety learning atmosphere that builds students' writing confidence.

However, this research is limited by its small sample size involving 25 eleventh-grade students from a single vocational high school over a limited instructional cycle, which limits the direct generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future researchers are recommended to explore specific instructional interventions—such as incorporating digital scaffolding tools or multimodal media within GBA stages—across larger and more diverse vocational student populations to better support independent descriptive writing.

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