The Challenges and Strategies in Writing Descriptive Text on Local Places in the EFL Essay Writing Course

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to explore the challenges faced by students in writing descriptive text about local places and to describe how they deal with these challenges. A descriptive method was used, with a writing test and a questionnaire as instruments. From the results of the writing test, the students' scores on the organization aspect were the lowest, which means that students still have difficulties structuring their writing effectively and presenting their ideas in a clear and logical way. It involves issues like paragraph structure, coherence, and transitions between paragraphs. In addition, from the students' responses in the questionnaire, it was found that more than half of the students who participated in the questionnaire section felt that limited vocabulary was their main challenge in writing descriptive texts about local places. This indicates that the students felt that they did not have enough choice of words or phrases to effectively describe the place they were writing about. Moreover, to deal with the challenges, they used various strategies to navigate the complexity of writing about local places. These strategies include thorough observation, pre-writing, revision before completion, seeking examples, seeking feedback from peers, utilizing the power of artificial intelligence (AI), utilizing visual references, and regular practice. In conclusion, the paper shows the challenges students faced in writing descriptive text about local places and the strategies they employed to address these challenges.

Keywords: *Challenges, Writing, Strategies, Descriptive Text, Local Places*

INTRODUCTION

At the university level, students are required to master the English language. This is not only a requirement for academic success but also a skill that enhances their competitiveness in the global job market (Zamzam, et al., 2021). In the field of English education, the ability to write effectively is of utmost importance for students to express their thoughts, communicate ideas, and demonstrate their understanding of various topics. However, only a few students can express their feelings, emotions, desires, and thoughts in English fluently and accurately. Most of them cannot write with accurate word usage, grammar, and style in English (Putera & Sugianto, 2020). According to Sangkala (2012), writing is a process of exploring thoughts and ideas and making them visible and concrete. It is a means of communicating ideas, thoughts, and information through the use of a written script or alphabet. To write, students need to have an idea, information, or concept that they wish to express in words (Thohir et al., 2023). It means that writing requires a sense of purpose and direction. Without a clear idea or concept to convey, students may struggle to find the motivation to write or to create a cohesive piece of work. However, mastering the skill of writing can be challenging, particularly when it comes to specific genres or types of texts.

One such genre that may be difficult for students is descriptive text, which requires students to describe objects, places, or events in detail (Gerot & Wignel, 1994). In writing descriptive text, students need to have a deep understanding of the subject, employ effective language skills, compose structured paragraphs, make the right word choices, use creative imagination, and persist in the writing process to create strong and convincing descriptive texts. Descriptive text helps students develop their observational and descriptive skills,

as well as their ability to engage readers through vivid and sensory language (Martin, 1992). It empowers students to become more perceptive observers, articulate describers, and skilled communicators.

Furthermore, both native and non-native English speakers find writing to be a challenging skill (Ulya & Srisudarso, 2023). According to Sribagus (2018), writing is the most complicated and tiring job because it is very complex. Students need to be able to write on a variety of topics while considering content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, and writing mechanics like grammar, spelling, and capitalization (Rass, 2001). Many students also lack awareness of writing strategies such as brainstorming, outlining, revising, and editing (Graham, 2006). Therefore, writing requires much practice for students to enhance and develop their writing skills.

Moreover, the challenges of 21st-century education encompass various aspects, including the development of creative and critical thinking skills, proficiency in English writing, and the exploration of local issues such as places (Putera, 2023). Exploring local issues enhances students' understanding of their immediate environment. Based on a preliminary study, learning to write descriptive text can be challenging for several reasons. Common problems include a lack of vocabulary, weak observation skills, difficulties in structuring the text, overusing adjectives and adverbs, and inadequate editing and revision. These challenges can hinder the ability to effectively convey details and create vivid imagery. By determining the challenges students face in writing descriptive texts about local places, efforts can be made to develop more effective and responsive learning programs. As a result, students can acquire better writing skills and become capable of expressing their thoughts and ideas more clearly and coherently through descriptive texts. Therefore, success in writing an essay can be a motivation for students to learn English proficiency (Thohir, 2017).

By focusing on local places, this research connects language learning with students' immediate surroundings, to increase relevance and engagement. In addition, this study highlights the importance of developing writing skills at the university level. Good writing ability is a key competency in higher education, which not only affects students' ability to convey ideas and information clearly, but also affects their ability to think critically, analyze information, and solve problems. This comprehensive approach allows for a deeper understanding of the specific stages and aspects of writing that provide challenges for students. Therefore, this study identifies the challenges faced by students and describes the strategies used by students in dealing with these challenges.

METHODS

This research employed a descriptive method, which was expected to find out the challenges encountered by students and the strategies they employed in writing descriptive text about local places. The population of this research was the third-semester students in the EFL Essay Writing Course at the University of Mataram. Using the purposive sampling technique in the essay writing course at the University of Mataram 30 students from class 3E were selected as participants. According to Hikmawati (2020), descriptive research is non-experimental research because it is not intended to test certain hypotheses but only describes a variable, symptom, or situation. In this study, the researcher collected the data by gathering students' documents in writing descriptive texts about local places and then analyzing them statistically using Brown and Bailey's (1984) analytical scale for assessing the text. The analytical scale consists of five components of writing: organization, content, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Additionally, the questionnaire was conducted to provide specific responses regarding their strategies for overcoming the challenges of writing descriptive text about local places. It consists of 1 open-ended question and 13 close-ended questions in the form of a Google Form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results
1. The Challenges Faced by the Students in Writing Descriptive Text about Local Places

In order to find out the challenges students faced in writing descriptive text about local places, the researcher analysed students document and a questionnaire as part of the data collection. The researcher evaluated 30 students' documents in writing descriptive texts about local places by considering the five components of writing namely organization, content, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Specifically, the
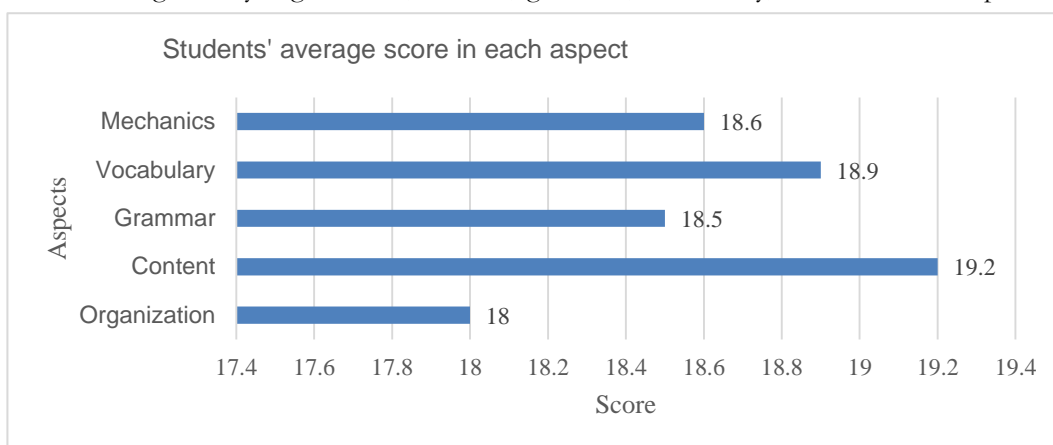
results of students writing abilities are presented in the following Figure 1.

Figure 1 Students' Ability in Writing Descriptive Text About Local Places

Based on the scoring rubric developed by Brown and Bailey (1984) the range of scores that fall into the excellent category is 18-20. from the data above it can be seen that the range of students' scores in each aspect is 18-19, from these results it can be said that students' ability to write descriptive texts about local places is excellent. However, in terms of organization, their performance was slightly lower, obtaining a cumulative average score of 18. In other words, the students find it difficult to structuring their sentences effectively. In addition, the questionnaire section revealed that the major challenge of students in writing descriptive text about local places could be seen in the Figure 2.
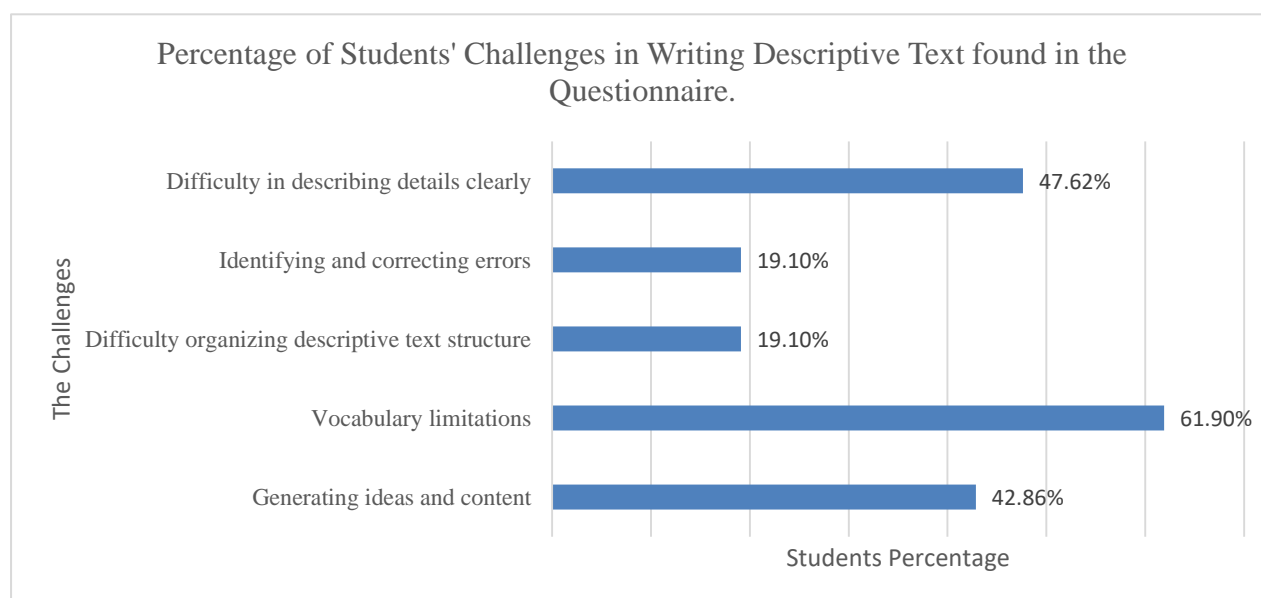

Figure 2. Percentage of Students' Challenges Writing Descriptive Text found in the Questionnaire

The data in Figure 2 presented the students encountered challenges in descriptive writing. However, 61.90% of students indicated vocabulary limitations, indicating a struggle in word choice. Overall, from the questionnaire results, limited vocabulary is the main challenge for students in writing descriptive texts.

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that students in the EFL Essay Writing Course at Mataram University faced challenges in selecting appropriate vocabulary and organizing the text correctly.

2. The Challenges Faced by the Students in Writing Descriptive Text about Local Places

    To know how the student's deal with the challenges of writing descriptive text about local places, a questionnaire was employed to further understand their approaches and strategies. The results of the questionnaire could be seen in Figure 3.

Percentage of Students' Strategies in Dealing with the Challenges in Writing Descriptive Text about Local Places found in the Questionnaire.

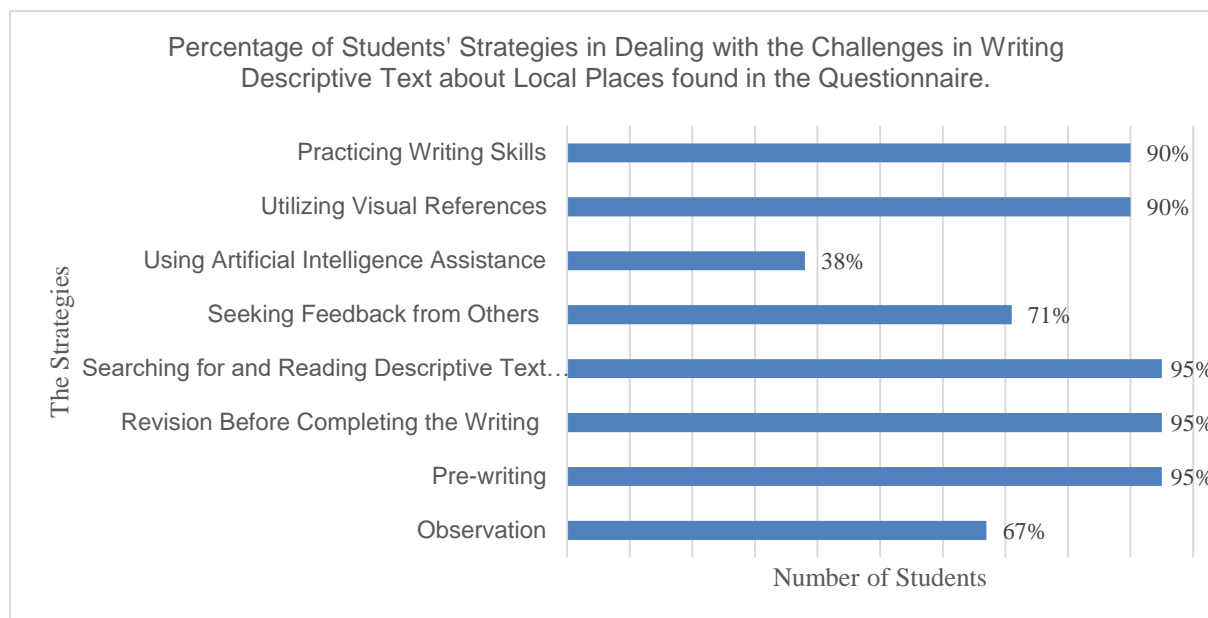| The Strategies	Number of Students
Practicing Writing Skills	90%
Utilizing Visual References	90%
Using Artificial Intelligence Assistance	38%
Seeking Feedback from Others	71%
Searching for and Reading Descriptive Text…	95%
Revision Before Completing the Writing	95%
Pre-writing	95%
Observation	67%

Figure 3 Percentage of Students' Strategies in Dealing with the Challenges in Writing Descriptive Text about Local Places found in the Questionnaire.

    Based on the questionnaire data, it appears that students use a variety of strategies to deal with the challenges of writing a descriptive text on local places. The strategies they employ are as follows:

1. Observation and Research: 67% of students mentioned that they observe and research the local place before writing. This indicates that firsthand experience and gathering information play a crucial role in their writing process.
2. Pre-writing Process: 95% of students do pre-writing before starting to write a descriptive text. This suggests that they find it helpful to plan and organize their thoughts before actually starting to write.
3. Revision Before Completion: 95% of students stated that they revised their work before finishing the text. This shows that they recognize the importance of reviewing and refining their descriptive text.
4. Seeking Examples and References: 95% of students search for and read descriptive text examples about local places before writing. This demonstrates that they find it beneficial to refer to existing examples for inspiration and guidance.
5. Seeking Feedback: 71% of students ask for feedback from others about their writing. This indicates that they value external input and are open to improving their work based on suggestions.
6. Utilizing Artificial Intelligence (AI): 38% of students reported using AI assistance in their writing process. This shows that some students are open to leveraging technology to aid in their writing endeavors.
7. Utilizing Visual References: 90% of students find visual references like images or videos helpful in describing local places in detail. This indicates the importance of visual aids in their descriptive writing process.
8. Frequency of Practice: 29% of students practice their writing skills often, while 62% do so rarely. This suggests that a significant portion of students might benefit from more regular practice

Discussion

1. The Challenges Faced by the Students in Writing Descriptive Text about Local Places

    Based on the findings from document analysis and questionnaire, the researcher found that some students had successfully overcome the challenges of writing descriptive texts about local places. However, some students still faced challenges in writing descriptive texts about local places, particularly in the aspects of vocabulary and organization. In other words, the students find it difficult to selecting appropriate words and structuring their sentences effectively. These were identified as the main problems and challenges for the students. This finding is also supported by previous research, Husna (2017) found that the students faced some difficulties in organizing ideas and developing ideas. Some of the students were unable to develop the ideas well. In addition, Nurfoidah (2021) conducted research that based on questionnaires and observations, from the results of her research the students also faced similar challenges. The challenge faced by students is vocabulary, students find it difficult to choose the right words to clearly describe a scene or object that appears and how students organize their ideas is a challenge faced by students.

    Therefore, strategies are needed in writing descriptive texts. By implementing the strategies, it can help students overcome the challenges identified in the study and improve their ability to write descriptive texts about local places effectively.

2. The Students Strategies in Overcoming the Challenges

    Based on the findings, the researcher knows that students faced challenges in writing descriptive texts about local places have several strategies that help guide and direct them to write effectively. These strategies aim to achieve their desire for expressing ideas and thoughts into writing. As Thohir et al. (2023) stated, to write, students need to have an idea, information, or concept that they wish to express in words.

    First, the research findings show that 67% of students observed and conducted research before writing descriptive texts about local places. In writing descriptive texts about local places, observation is important. By gathering first-hand information and allowing in-depth observations, the students can establish a personal connection with the object or place to be described. This not only increases the credibility of the text but also allows the reader to experience the situation more clearly. Observation also allows the students to avoid inaccurate or clichéd information while encouraging active observation and creativity. In line with this, Serravallo (2017) "modelling" strategy, where she emphasizes the importance of giving students examples or demonstrations of how to conduct research before writing.

    Moreover, the research findings show that 95% of students do pre-writing. Pre-writing is a crucial early stage in descriptive text writing. It allows the students to organize thoughts, gather information, and choose a relevant focus. By creating a plan or outline, the students can incorporate specific details more effectively. Pre-writing also encourages creativity and helps save time during the writing process. It ensures quality and consistency in the resulting descriptions. This is in line with Serravallo (2017) "Goal Setting" strategy, where she encourages students to set specific goals in writing.

    Furthermore, the research findings showed that 95% of students revised their work before completing it. Revision before completion is a critical stage in the descriptive text writing process. It allows students to refine and perfect their work before the final presentation. With revision, students can identify and address potential grammatical errors, clarify descriptions, and ensure storyline consistency. In addition, this process allows students to check the appropriateness of the details used, ensure proper use of words, and ensure that the message to be conveyed is read clearly. This is in line with Serravallo (2017) "Feedback and Assessment" strategy, where she encourages continuous writing and provides feedback for improvement.

    Then, the research findings showed that 95% of the students looked for examples of descriptive texts before writing. Seeking examples and references in writing descriptive texts is essential, as it provides valuable frameworks and inspiration for students. These examples serve as real models that illustrate effective ways to describe local places, offering insights into descriptive language, structure, and overall style. They empower students to imagine different approaches and techniques, allowing them to create more vivid and engaging

descriptions. In addition, references offer a broader perspective, enriching the narrative with diverse details and perspectives that might otherwise be missed. This is in line with Serravallo (2017) strategy of emphasizing the use of mentor texts or examples as guides.

Besides, the research findings show that 71% of students seek feedback from others. Seeking feedback when writing descriptive texts has a very important role. Feedback from others provides a new perspective and allows the students to see the strengths and weaknesses in their writing. By receiving constructive feedback, the students can improve design details, ensure clarity of description, and improve the overall structure of the text. In addition, the process of receiving feedback also helps build self-assessment skills and prepares the students to openly accept criticism, which is a key element in growing as a competent writer. This is in line with Serravallo (2017) strategy to encourage inter-student collaboration and acceptance of constructive feedback.

In addition, the research findings showed that 38% of students used artificial intelligence assistance in their writing process. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in writing descriptive texts has significant advantages in improving the quality and efficiency of the writing process. AI can provide automatic suggestions and corrections for grammar, spelling, and sentence structure, helping to correct mistakes that human writers may miss. Moreover, with its ability to analyze massive data and search for information quickly, AI can enrich descriptions with additional facts and details. This not only strengthens the authenticity of the text but also improves the accuracy and completeness of the description. This is also supported by Alharbi (2023) who stated that second language learners can utilize artificial intelligence (AI) in improving the quality of their writing appropriately. By leveraging AI technology, the students can optimize their potential and achieve more powerful and informative descriptive text results.

Furthermore, the research findings show that 90% of students find visual references such as pictures or videos helpful in describing local places in detail. Utilizing visual references in writing descriptive texts is essential, as it allows the students to present a more vivid and in-depth picture of the object or place being described. Images or videos can provide visual details that are difficult to express only through words, allowing readers to imagine more clearly. In addition, visual references also allow the students to capture nuances, textures, and specific details that may be difficult to describe verbally. This is in line with Zamzam et al. (2021) who stated that information technology can be useful for students to improve their ability in English.

Finally, the research findings show that most students (62%) practiced their writing skills. Practice in writing descriptive texts plays an important role in honing writing skills. With consistent practice, the students can develop observational skills, organize ideas, and choose words appropriately. Practice also allows the students to improve grammatical sophistication and understand the nuances of effective sentence design. In addition, through practice, the students can build accuracy and precision in describing objects or situations in detail. This can be linked to Serravallo (2017) strategy to encourage regular practice and develop writing skills consistently.

CONCLUSION

From this study, the researcher concluded that the students faced challenges when writing descriptive texts about local places. Based on the results of document analysis and questionnaire responses, limited vocabulary and difficulty organizing texts were the main challenges faced by students. These findings align with broader research in the field, emphasizing the critical role of vocabulary development and effective organization in the production of descriptive texts. It is imperative to address these challenges with targeted interventions and strategies to further enhance students' descriptive writing skills.

In response to the identified challenges, students have demonstrated a commendable level of resourcefulness and adaptability. They employ a variety of strategies to navigate the complexities of writing about local places. The strategies include thorough observation and research, engaging in comprehensive pre-writing activities, meticulous revision before completion, seeking out examples and references, actively

soliciting feedback from peers, harnessing the power of artificial intelligence (AI), utilizing visual aids, and recognizing the importance of regular practice. These strategies collectively form a powerful set of tools that empower students to overcome the challenges faced in composing descriptive texts.

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