

Descriptive Writing Proficiency Among Vocational Students: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

This study examined the English proficiency of vocational students in Computer and Network Engineering in understanding and delivering information via descriptive texts using a genre-based approach. Qualitative research was conducted through a case study in eleventh graders at SMK Bina Karya Utama to investigate the English proficiency of vocational students of Computer and Network Engineering. The main findings in this study, that while vocational students possess foundational genre knowledge, they experience severe procedural bottlenecks in autonomous text organization due to an absence of rhetorical planning routines and heightened cognitive load from unfamiliar visual stimuli. Furthermore, observed linguistic deviations, transcend basic grammatical deficiencies, operating instead as adaptive cognitive strategies to manage real-time vocabulary retrieval constraints, and performance-induced affective anxiety. This study. This study offers significant theoretical and empirical novelty by transcending traditional product-based evaluations to expose the underlying cognitive, perceptual, and affective mechanisms governing vocational students' writing processes. Uniquely, it serves as an inaugural investigation into how prior topical familiarity directly mitigates cognitive load during visual translation, while delineating how static visual input semiotically induces cognitive tense shifts and how real-time vocabulary retrieval bottlenecks, rather than vocabulary size alone or trigger a feedback loop of syntactic simplification.

Keywords: *descriptive text, english proficiency, genre-based approach, vocational students*

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INTRODUCTION

English proficiency is an essential skill for high school students in the workplace. Students of Computer and Network Engineering need to be able to read and write technical documents, communicate with international teams, and navigate software (Natsir et al., 2022;



Risanti et al., 2025). Industry 4.0 has expanded the need for graduates who can understand and explain technical information in English. There is an increasing need for English language instruction for Indonesian vocational students. Researchers such as Setyowati et al. (2020) and Lesmana et al. (2024) found the gap between workplace requirements and the skills of Indonesian vocational students. Hidayani (2025) attributed low levels of communication competence to poor teacher's commitment, student readiness, and facilities. The results indicate a need for evidence-based instruction in the context of vocational education.

Descriptive texts are an important part of the learning process in the study of vocational English. According to Anderson and Anderson (1997) and Haryono (2023), descriptive texts enable students to communicate product specifications, features of processes, or workplace characteristics using written text. Descriptive texts must be understood through their generic structure (identification and description) as well as their linguistic features (specific participants, adjectives, simple present tense, and action verbs). Derewianka (1990) and Gerot and Wignell (1994) argued that the effectiveness of descriptive writing depends upon these elements.

This gap is also apparent in the recent literature. Azzahra et al. (2024) found that cooperative building activities in a genre-based approach improved students' descriptive writing with model texts as scaffolds. Hafizah et al. (2024) identified content, grammar, and mechanics as the most difficult areas of writing, with vocabulary deficiencies and organizational difficulties. However, they focused on written products rather than the ability to understand and convey information. Rusmawaty et al. (2023) confirmed the genre-based approach's effectiveness with vocational students, but didn't examine the specific abilities needed to process descriptions.

This study addresses these gaps in the information and communication skills of vocational students by examining their ability to understand and communicate information through descriptive text. The researcher advances Canale and Swain's (1980) concept of communicative competence by examining the ways in which grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies are connected during the construction of descriptive text. Furthermore, this study provides a framework for developing effective teaching strategies to address the specific problems faced by Computer and Network Engineering students. The instructional approach for this research is the Genre Based Approach (GBA). Hyland (2004) identified four stages of GBA, namely Building Knowledge of Field (BKoF), Modelling of Text (MoT), Joint Construction of Text (JCoT), and Independent Construction of Text (ICoT) that provide scaffolding to help students understand the social purpose, schematic structure, and linguistic features of genres. Rusmawaty et al. (2023) and Tampubolon et al. (2024), among others, have previously reported that GBA helped improve writing skills in vocational students.

Based on these explanation, this research was formulated three research question: (1) How do vocational students majoring in Computer and Network Engineering understand the generic structure and linguistic features of descriptive texts? (2) How do they convey information through descriptions based on visual stimuli? (3) What obstacles do they face in understanding and communicating information through descriptive texts?



METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995). The researcher chose this approach because the study needed to explore students' skills with descriptive texts in depth within a bounded real-world classroom context. This study was conducted at SMK Bina Karya Utama, which has a Computer and Network Engineering program, located in East Jakarta. This research took place during the first semester of the academic year 2025/2026 (Table 1). The researcher conducted this study in the English language classroom as the researcher and the English teacher for Grade XI in the Computer and Network Engineering class.

Table 1. Research Timeline (August-May 2026)

No	Phase	Activities	Duration
1	Preparation	Research permits and researcher coordination	August 2025
2	Data Collection	Observation, interview, and documentation	August-October 2025
3	Data Analysis	Reduction, display, and conclusion	October 2025-April 2026
4	Report Writing	Drafting, revision, and finalization	April-May 2026

The data were collected from the students, classroom activities, and tenth students' descriptive text assignments. The participants in this study were selected purposefully. Therefore, a purposive sampling technique was employed in this data collected. In this context, the sample was selected based on the following criteria: (1) enrollment in the Computer and Network Engineering program; (2) completion of fundamental English courses; (3) willingness to participate; and (4) representation of all achievement levels based on previous semester English grades. To safeguard the identities of the students, this research utilized pseudonyms through initial names to protect the anonymity.

To collect data from these sources, this study utilized semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. A semi-structured interview guide was used to uncover the students' understanding of descriptive texts, their writing processes, and the difficulties they encountered when writing descriptive texts. The interview process was facilitated by a smartphone's audio recording feature. Observations in this research were conducted to gather data regarding the learning process, student activities, and teacher activities during the descriptive text writing instruction. Meanwhile, documentation was utilized to collect various artifacts, such as videos of the learning process and the students' descriptive writing.

The acquired data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which encompasses data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The initial phase commenced concurrently with the data collection, involving the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data as it was gathered through observations, interviews, or text analysis. During the data display phase, information was organized in a coherent manner using matrices and tables developed to illustrate emerging



patterns. In the final step, "conclusion drawing" referred to the formulation of meanings as the data were initially displayed. The findings identified early in the research process remained tentative until verified through additional data examination. To confirm the validity of the findings, source triangulation was employed, wherein the students' texts were compared and contrasted with information gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation. The triangulation technique was also utilized, wherein data collected from observations were compared with interview data, and documentation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding of Generic Structure and Linguistic Feature

The analysis of students' descriptive texts assignment revealed varying levels of competence in applying the generic structure of descriptive texts. Table 2 presents the distribution of students across proficiency levels.

Table 2. Student Proficiency of Generic Structure

No	Description	N	Writing Proficiency Level
1	Clear identification and able to organized description into written descriptive text	7/10	High
2	Clear identification, incomplete or illogical description.	1/10	Medium
3	Identification and description merged without distinction.	2/10	Low

This table showed seven students identified the object in their topic sentence, and described it appropriately in terms of size, shape, size of a corner, location, or other characteristics. One student accurately identified the object but did not fully describe it. For instance BK and MR did not differentiate between identification and description.

"I know the first part should introduce what I'm describing, but sometimes I got confused about how much detail to put in the identification or the description part. The model texts helped me see the pattern, but when I write on my own, I forget to separate the introduction and the details," (MR).

Table 3. Student Proficiency on Linguistic Feature

No	Linguistic Feature	N	Writing Proficiency Level
1	Specific Participants	7/10	High
2	Adjectives	6/10	Medium
3	Verbs	5/10	Medium
4	Grammatical	4/10	Low

Specific participants were the most accurate, seven students correctly using specific nouns and proper names. Adjective use was moderate, with a few students utilizing incorrect collocations or comparatives. Action verb accuracy was moderate. As APP stated in the interview, "I know the object is doing something, but I don't know the right English word to



describe that action”. Simple present tense was the least accurate, only four students correctly using it.

Table 4. Students’ Written Descriptive Text Sample

No	Identification Component	Description Sample	Level
1	I study at SMK Bina Karya Utama.	It has three floors. The classrooms are spacious and clean. There is a computer laboratory with 30 computers.	High
2	This is a beach in Indonesia.	The water is blue. It attracts a crowd. Coconut trees abound.	Medium
3	I’m going to describe this picture.	I see water and sand. There are people. The sky is blue. I like this place.	Low

The finding that seven students successfully applied the generic structure to their writing reinforces the fundamental premise of genre-based education. As Derewianka (1990) asserts, understanding how texts function requires a deliberate focus on schematic structures. Similarly, Hyland (2004) emphasizes that genre knowledge is essential for second language writing. In this study, the students' reliance on model texts as valuable resources exemplifies the effectiveness of instructional scaffolding. Nevertheless, the persistent confusion expressed by specific students, namely BK and MR, indicates that comprehending schematic structures does not automatically translate into independent writing proficiency.

This finding aligns with Azzahra et al. (2024), who found that joint construction significantly supports vocational students in writing descriptive texts, demonstrating that collaborative text-building is a necessary prerequisite to independent writing. While Rusmawaty et al. (2023) reported that genre-based approaches improved vocational students' overall writing quality, their study did not address the complex pedagogical transition from guided practice to independent writing. Ultimately, whereas earlier research has frequently evaluated the mastery of schematic structures by relying solely on final written products, the interview data in this study reveals the underlying uncertainty writers experience, even when they successfully produce a structurally accurate text. Functional grammar explains the hierarchy of difficulty (Table 3). Gerot and Wignell (1994) state that there are different levels of grammatical complexity with the experiential metafunction (name the participant). Actions and states are described by more complex clauses, e.g., some are grouped as nouns, while others are listed in more complex clauses. This is why the naming of participants was the strongest feature and simple present tense the weakest. Yuniar and Siswana (2024) reported similar difficulty with linguistic features with high school students, but the current study adds further to their report that technical students were having difficulty with action verbs. The interview data from APP. showed that the problem was not the size of the vocabulary but rather a lack of access to words under pressure. This finding nuances the conclusions of Hafizah et al. (2024),



who identified vocabulary as a general difficulty but did not distinguish between vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary retrieval during the composing process.

The Information Conveyance Through Visual Stimuli-Based Descriptions

A wide range of abilities was observed in information conveying tasks based on visual stimuli. Seven from ten students accurately identified the main objects, background elements, and spatial relationships within the scenic images, only four of these individuals successfully organized this information in accordance with the generic structure of a descriptive text. The remaining students either omitted crucial details or included information entirely absent from the visual prompts. This lack of structural organization was illuminated by informant ASB, who articulated their cognitive response to the visual stimuli during the interview: “I just write what I see from left to right. I don't think about which part is more important”.

Furthermore, the participant accounts revealed that the students exhibited significantly higher confidence when describing familiar settings. While only half of the content generated for unfamiliar environments was accurate, nearly all the descriptive content pertaining to familiar locations was precise. APS stating, “It is easier to describe my school because I know every corner. The farm picture is difficult because I have never been to a farm.” Additionally, the data indicated a persistent tendency among the students to shift from the simple present tense to the past tense when interpreting visual stimuli. Informant MJF rationalized this grammatical deviation by explaining, “I see the picture and think about what happened, so I use past tense, but the teacher says when we’re describing things, we use present tense.”

The discrepancy between the initial recognition of visual information and its effective structural presentation demonstrates that visual perception is not inherently synonymous with information organization. According to Anderson and Anderson (1997) assert, descriptive texts are designed not only to reflect accurate observations but also to present that information logically. While Hafizah et al. (2024) acknowledged organizational difficulties in their research, they did not investigate the specific correlation between visual perception and textual arrangement. ASB’s “left-to-right” drafting approach exemplifies a distinct lack of rhetorical planning rather than a fundamental deficit in genre knowledge, especially considering that seven of the students could apply the generic structure when provided with adequate instructional support. However, the present study uniquely exposes this cognitive gap through process-oriented data. When describing familiar contexts, such as their school or village, the students were able to rely on deeply encoded schematic knowledge, thereby reducing the cognitive load associated with content generation and structural formatting. Conversely, unfamiliar settings provided insufficient prior knowledge from which to construct meaning. These findings parallel those of Yuniar and Siswana (2024), who determined that visual confusion in non-specific contexts was unrelated to explicit visual differences. Building upon this, the present research serves as the inaugural study to demonstrate how an individual’s prior topical knowledge directly dictates their capacity to translate visual stimuli into coherent



written text.

The phenomenon wherein visual stimuli prompted an unwarranted tense shift, as articulated by MJF constitutes a critical observation. The students fundamentally interpreted the static images as representations of past events; consequently, when confronted with the descriptive task, they intuitively defaulted to the past tense. Gerot and Wignell (1994) explain that distinct text types encode time differently, emphasizing that the simple present tense is predominantly utilized in descriptive texts to portray current states. The current study is unique in delineating how students' cognitive perceptions of visual stimuli directly impact their grammatical tense selection. Although both Hafizah et al. (2024) and Yuniar and Siswana (2024) documented similar tense errors, their studies failed to explore the underlying perceptual causes. Ultimately, these findings suggest that descriptive writing instruction must transcend basic grammatical mechanics to explicitly address the semiotic orientation required to convert visual input into accurate descriptive text.

The Challenges to Understanding and Communicating Information into Descriptive Text

Four primary challenge categories emerged from the researchers' analysis: (1) limited vocabulary, (2) difficulty organizing ideas, (3) low self-confidence, and (4) grammatical uncertainty. All participating students exhibited vocabulary limitations, which frequently led to confusion when attempting to describe surface-level visual features. Consequently, they relied heavily on compensatory tools such as Google Translate and bilingual dictionaries. This finding aligns with Yuniar and Siswana (2024) and Hafizah et al. (2024), who similarly identified vocabulary deficits as a major barrier to descriptive writing. In the present study, we extend these findings by investigating how vocabulary limitations impact other linguistic domains. The interview with informant M.H.A. revealed that when encountering unfamiliar target words, she struggled to retrieve appropriate synonyms during the writing process. As a result, M.H.A. experienced both an absence of target vocabulary and an inability to access alternative expressions in real time. She described this process as a cognitive feedback loop in which a restricted vocabulary leads to simplified syntax, ultimately constraining the range of descriptive meanings she can express. While previous literature has primarily characterized vocabulary deficits as an isolated barrier, this study demonstrates that for vocational students, vocabulary limitations directly hinder grammatical complexity and textual richness.

Second, the analysis highlighted significant challenges regarding the organization of ideas. The account from informant A.S.B. suggests that students lacked the planning and goal-setting strategies required to construct a coherent text. While earlier research often attributes poor textual organization to a deficit in genre knowledge, the data in this study indicate that the students possessed sufficient schematic knowledge (Table 2). However, they failed to operationalize this knowledge during autonomous writing due to an absence of established planning habits. This reveals a critical distinction between declarative knowledge of text structure and the procedural ability to execute it under the pressure of real-time text generation.

Third, the analysis identified low self-confidence as a prominent affective challenge. This struggle stems from the intense apprehension students experience when required to read



their completed texts aloud before their peers, which frequently inhibits their confidence to initiate the writing process. Canale and Swain (1980) noted that communicative competence encompasses not only grammatical and sociolinguistic skills, but also strategic competence and psychological readiness. While Hidayani et al. (2025) examined the communicative competence of occupational students, their study did not investigate how anxiety manifests during the oral sharing of written work. The present study reveals that low self-confidence leads to a rigid script dependence during oral performance, thereby preventing the interactive feedback that would otherwise support the writing process. The behaviors of informants O.G. and A.F. were symptomatic of heightened anxiety, as evidenced by their verbatim reading of their texts without engaging the audience.

Finally, grammatical uncertainty emerged as a major technical obstacle. One informant, R.A.S., deliberately simplified sentence structures to minimize potential grammatical errors. The students were not entirely ignorant of grammatical rules; rather, they lacked certainty regarding how to apply them under the combined pressure of real-time production and limited vocabulary. This finding contrasts with the studies by Hafizah et al. (2024) and Yuniar and Siswana (2024), which categorized grammatical errors strictly as knowledge gaps. Instead, the current data indicate that grammatical simplification serves as a conscious response to competing cognitive demands. These findings diverge from earlier observations by Setyowati et al. (2020), Risanti et al. (2025), and Natsir et al. (2022) within the vocational context. In this study, we contribute to the field by demonstrating that when vocational students are tasked with writing a descriptive essay, their difficulties are not merely language-based, but involve real-time vocabulary accessibility, planning routines, and affective filters. Integrating these interconnected factors yields a comprehensive profile of writing difficulty that unidimensional studies fail to capture.

CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that while a majority of vocational students possess sufficient declarative genre knowledge to identify participants and schematic structures, they encounter substantial cognitive and procedural bottlenecks during autonomous descriptive text production. Structurally, although seven of students successfully outlined the generic identification component, less than half could effectively operationalize this knowledge into logically organized descriptions, particularly when dealing with unfamiliar visual contexts that heightened cognitive load. Linguistically, students demonstrated high accuracy in naming specific participants but struggled significantly with real-time vocabulary retrieval, action verbs, and simple present tense application. Furthermore, the integration of visual stimuli exposed a critical perceptual phenomenon: students frequently adopted linear, non-rhetorical drafting habits (e.g., left-to-right reporting) and intuitively defaulted to the past tense because they interpreted static images as past events. Ultimately, student writing difficulties extend beyond basic grammatical deficiencies, encompassing an interconnected matrix of restricted vocabulary access, an absence of planning routines, affective performance anxiety, and deliberate syntactic simplification used to cope with competing cognitive demands.



This study offers significant theoretical and empirical novelty by transcending traditional product-based evaluations to expose the underlying cognitive, perceptual, and affective mechanisms governing vocational students' writing processes. Uniquely, it serves as an inaugural investigation into how prior topical familiarity directly mitigates cognitive load during visual translation, while delineating how static visual input semiotically induces cognitive tense shifts and how real-time vocabulary retrieval bottlenecks—rather than vocabulary size alone or trigger a feedback loop of syntactic simplification. Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the modest sample size ($N = 10$) drawn from a single vocational institution constrains the statistical generalizability of the findings across broader demographic contexts. Second, the analytical scope was restricted strictly to the descriptive text genre using static image prompts, which may inherently predispose students toward retrospective interpretations and may not fully reflect writing behaviors across dynamic media or alternative text genres (e.g., procedural or persuasive writing). Future research should expand the participant pool and incorporate diverse, dynamic visual modalities to further validate these findings.

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