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## Identifying The Vocational School Students' Difficulties In Writing Descriptive Text

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### ABSTRACT

Of the four skills in English, writing is a skill known as one of the most difficult skills to master. Therefore, there are still many students who experience many difficulties in the process, because there are several important components that students usually must fulfil in writing, such as organization, content, grammar, mechanics, vocabulary, etc. In English, there are many kinds of texts that students usually learn in writing, one of which is descriptive text. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify the difficulties experienced by students in writing descriptive text. Using quantitative descriptive as the research design, this research reveals that all students still had difficulties in all components. If the difficulties experienced by students were sorted based on the most identified difficulties to the least would be; mechanics with 100%, grammar with 100%, vocabulary with 55%, organization with 45%, and content with 30%. This research, therefore, has empirical and practical implications for both teachers and future researchers alike.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In learning English, all students at all levels learn two language skills, namely productive skills and receptive skills. Productive skills include writing and speaking since they involve the production of language, while receptive skill consists of listening and reading because they involve receiving messages (Sharma, 2015; Harmer, 2001). Linse (2005) also agreed with Sharma and Harmer's statement. He argued, "Listening and reading are receptive skills because the focus is on receiving information from outside sources. Meanwhile, speaking and writing are included in productive skills because the focus is on generating information." The statement given by Harmer and Linse implies that all four basic English skills which include listening, reading, writing, and speaking needs to be learned by all English learners. These four skills are generally inseparable from each other. Therefore, it is important for all English learners to master these four language skills.

According to Phuket and Othman (2015), writing is the most difficult skill to master, especially for students who are not native and study English as a foreign language (EFL), which is one of the reasons why English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students often make mistakes in the writing process. The mistakes that are often made by students, especially students who study English as a foreign language (EFL) in writing, are because they have difficulty fulfilling several important aspects that must be fulfilled in writing English. The important aspects referred to have been conveyed by Brown (2004), such as organization, content or logical development, grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary mastery.

The difficulties experienced by students usually occur due to certain factors. Ratnaningsih and Azizah (2019) have listed several factors that cause students' difficulties in writing such as difficulty finding ideas to write, difficulty expressing thoughts or feelings, and not being confident in their writing abilities. Belkhir and Benyelles (2017) also added several other reasons such as students having difficulty in writing because of the lack of reading, difficulties in first language transfer, and students' low writing practice.

There are various ways to find out what difficulties students experience in writing, one of them is by identifying students' difficulties through their writing documents. Thus, as stated by Ratnaningsih and Azizah (2019) identifying students' difficulties in writing is needed in order to help students to succeed in acquiring and improving their writing skills. Nair and Hui (2018) also added that by identifying students' difficulties, we can find out the students' progress and the teacher will also be given guidance to modify the lessons to help the students in order to overcome their difficulties.

### **1.1 Writing in English as a Foreign Language**

In language performance, writing is a very important component and writing skills are also considered to be the most difficult skill among the four existing skills in learning English (Phuket & Othman, 2015; Richards & Renandya, 2002). They also added that the skills involved in writing are very complex, not only in getting, organizing, pouring, and translating ideas that come to mind into readable text, but the difficulty also lies in lower-level skills such as spelling, punctuation, word choices, and others that second language (L2) learners should pay close attention to. However, if their language skills are low, the difficulties mentioned above will be more troublesome for them. Mohamed and Zouaoui (2014) also defined writing as a complex process that allows students to explore their thoughts and ideas and pour them into words to make them visible. Cumming (2001) also stated, "as people learn to write in a second language, they gain greater control over their abilities to plan, revise and edit their texts, to search for appropriate words and phrases (drawing on

their first and second languages as resources in the process), and to attend more often or intently to their ideas in respect to the forms of the second language “. Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that for a person or students who are studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL), writing in English can be said to be much more difficult and many times more challenging than writing in their native language.

Regardless of the complicated and complex writing process mentioned above, another reason why writing in English as a Foreign Language is more challenging for EFL learners is that good writing requires texts with complex syntax, complex morphology and a wide range of vocabulary choices (Cumming, 2001). Thus, writing is still an important component of language performance, which in the scope of education often occurs that most of the examinations that are conducted whether to measure students' knowledge, to test their English as Foreign Language skills or other abilities often depend on students' writing proficiency (Phuket & Othman, 2015; Harmer, 2004).

## **1.2 Writing Process**

According to Brown (2001), writing is the process of transacting and releasing ideas, thoughts, and things that the writer feels into words. The writing process may seem inefficient and long-winded because of the amount of writing and revisions of the writing itself. Thus, writing is still the best and truly efficient way of releasing what you want to say and how to express it. Meanwhile, the writing process itself is described by Harmer (2004) as the process the writer goes through in order to produce something in written form as a result. He also added that in the writing process, there are four elements that the writer must go through.

1. Planning. In this part, the writer usually plans in advance what they want to say before starting to write.
2. Drafting. In this section, a draft or what can also be interpreted as the first version of writing is made and usually, this draft can still be changed later.
3. Editing. After the draft has been made, it will usually be re-read to check which parts that need to be changed.
4. Final Version. The final version of the writing can be made if the existing draft has been edited and converted into appropriate writing if it is important and necessary and it may later be slightly different from what was planned and made in the first draft.

## **1.3 Descriptive Text**

### **A. The Definition of Descriptive Text**

Descriptive text is included in the type of text that in general has the aim of providing the reader with information (Anggun, 2016). In this case, Langan (2008) also argues that descriptive text is a text that tells something or someone clearly and in detail so that it can give the reader a clear picture through words. From the statement above, we can conclude that descriptive text is a text that provides detailed information about something or someone so that readers who read the writing will have an idea of what is written in the text.

### **B. The Generic Structure of Descriptive Text**

According to Pardiyono (2007) and Gerot & Wignell (1994), descriptive text is divided into two parts of a generic structure. First is Identification which is filled with statements

that identify a topic. Last is the description that is usually contains a detailed description of the object that has been identified in the identification section.

### **C. The Grammatical Feature of Descriptive Text**

According to Knapp & Watkins (2005: 98-99), descriptive text has several grammatical features which are explained as follows:

1. Simple present tense.
2. Past tense can also be used
3. Relational verbs
4. Action verbs
5. Mental verbs
6. Adjectives
7. Adverbs
8. Adverbial phrases

#### **1.4 Writing Components**

According to Brown (2004), there are five components that need to be considered in writing, including:

1. Organization: title, transitional expressions, supporting evidence, complete, etc.
2. Content: related to the topic, concrete and developed ideas, no extraneous material, reflecting thoughts.
3. Grammar: correct use of relative clauses, prepositions, articles, verb forms, tense sequencing, no fragments or run-on sentences.
4. Mechanics: writing conventions, margins, capitalizations, paragraph indents, punctuations and spelling.
5. Vocabulary: precise vocabulary usage, range, use of parallel structure, concise, and good register.

#### **1.5 Common Difficulties in Writing**

According to Rass (2001), writing is a difficult skill for native speakers and even less for non-native speakers because usually they are required to make a written final product that demonstrates mastery of all the elements of English writing skills. Therefore, writers who write English as a Foreign Language and only study English at school tend to encounter more difficulties. Richard and Renandya (2002) also added that writing will be much more difficult if the learner has weak English language skills. This can be seen from several researchers who support the statements above with their research findings regarding the common difficulties that are often encountered by students in writing.

In their research, Rofi'i, Rukmini & Hartono (2014) found that there are a lot of students who find difficulties in the process of writing such as the initial difficulty which lies in the weakness of students in generating ideas at the beginning of the writing process which in the end also causes other difficulties, namely; difficulty in creating writings that are in accordance with the chosen topic or idea also pouring and writing these ideas into readable text. Al-Badi (2015) also found in his research that students' difficulties in writing were normally in language use, coherency, cohesion, and finding relevant topics. Pablo and Lasaten (2018) also found in their research that students lacked of ideas and transitions to construct paragraphs and chose appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and inappropriate use of pronouns. Imani and Habil (2012) also added that grammar is also one of the most common challenges for non-native speakers and postgraduate students. Thus, it can be concluded

that students in various parts of the world whether they are still at the school level or even at the university level.

### **1.6 Previous Research on Students' Difficulties in Descriptive Text Writing**

Many researchers have studied the same problems of students' difficulties in writing English as a Foreign Language. The first previous research conducted by Daulay, Damanik & Annisa (2023) with titled Students' Difficulties on Writing Descriptive Text by Eighth Grade of Darussalam Junior High School Medan, it was found that overall students still had difficulty using content, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics in descriptive writing with the greatest difficulty lying in writing mechanics. There were still many students making mistakes, especially in capitalization, using less punctuation and paying less attention to the spelling of the words they choose.

The next previous research was conducted by Purwaningsih, Hadi & Rahayu (2022) entitled An Analysis of Students' Ability in Writing Descriptive Text During Online Learning, it can be concluded that students have low ability in writing descriptive texts. In the identification category based on gender, female students had many problems compared to male students which was because there were more female participants than male participants. Meanwhile, based on the identification category of the distance between school and home, it was found that the highest cases were experienced by students who owned houses with 6-10 KM. If it is concluded from the two categories, difficulties in mechanics are the difficulties most often experienced by students with both identifications. Then followed by organization in the second rank, word choice in the third rank and grammar the last rank.

Another previous research was conducted by Juanita Siahaan (2013) entitled An Analysis of Students' Ability and Difficulties in Writing Descriptive Text, it was found that students who represent middle and high achievers have good control over the schematic structure of descriptive text and can use precise linguistic features. On the other hand, the results also revealed that low-achieving students are still confused and have difficulty identifying the schematic structure of a descriptive text. Besides that, they also still need a lot of improvement and a lot of practice because there are still many errors found in the texts.

The last previous research was conducted by Noprianto (2017) entitled Student's Descriptive Text Writing in SFL Perspectives; the results showed that the main difficulties experienced by students were divided into three parts. The first is the difficulty in students' ability to adjust the social function of the text. The second is that students have difficulties in writing descriptive text with a chronological structure scheme. And the last is that students experience difficulty in filling in the text with appropriate and context-specific language features.

Based on the previous research stated above, students still experienced difficulties in writing descriptive text and there are differences between the previous research and the current research. All the previous research used different research designs from the present research which is a case study. Meanwhile, the current research used descriptive quantitative as the research design.

## 2. METHOD

In this research, in order to achieve the desired results from the objective of this research, the researcher used descriptive quantitative research. Descriptive quantitative research is used in this research because it is in accordance with the purpose of this research, namely to identify the phenomenon of difficulties experienced by students in writing descriptive texts that occurs in vocational schools.

In the process of selecting participants through purposive sampling, the researcher selected participants with the assistance of the recommendation of the English teacher who teaches at the school. In the end, one class in grade ten consisting of twenty students were selected as the participants for this research. This was because the teacher knew better the characteristics and abilities of the students at school. Moreover, one of the reasons why this class was selected as participants for this study was also conveyed by the teacher, namely because they are more interested in practical lessons than theoretical lessons which also caused their interest in learning English to be low.

The data for this research was obtained from the writing test. The data that was collected was examined according to each aspect of all the five components that must be fulfilled in writing which was conveyed by Brown (2004) to identify what kinds of difficulties were found in each category. To analyze the frequency of the difficulties of each component, the researcher used the following formula as Sudjono (2001:43):

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

Where:

P = Percentage

F = Frequency

N = The total number of respondents

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Findings

The researcher used a writing test as the technique to collect data. The purpose of the writing test was to get real and concrete data about the difficulties that the students experienced in writing descriptive text from twenty students in one class of the tenth grade at one of the Vocational Schools in Bondowoso that were examined according to the five components in writing mentioned by Brown (2004). In analysing the data, the researcher used the frequency distribution formula from Sudjono (2001), as already mentioned in the previous chapter and the formula is like the following:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

Where:

P = Percentage

F = Frequency

N = The total number of respondents

## A. Organizations

The first component that must be considered in writing a text is organization. During the data analysis process from the students' descriptive texts, there were many difficulties experienced by students in the organization category. The results below were the frequency of the students who experienced difficulties in organization:

**Table 1 – The Students' Frequency Result on Organization**

Components	Frequenc y	Percentag e
Organization	9	45%

Most of the students experienced difficulties in transitional expressions in which they wrote sentences that did not correlate with the previous or the next sentences. Transitional expressions are needed to connect to ideas or more so that it could create a better flow and coherence between the two sentences, making it easier for the reader to understand the intended meaning.

Secondly, there were still some students who did not show a proper and acceptable body of text. Most of the students who still experienced difficulty in this part created their descriptive text in a form of a list of important things about the subject being described which was incorrect since it did not form a proper and acceptable body of descriptive text.

Next, there were a few of the students who experienced difficulties in writing the appropriate text titles. According to Oshima and Hogue (2007), the placement of the title is in the centre of the paper. Abbreviations or words that have nothing to do with the text are also advised not to be included in the title of the text. However, there were students who still wrote their titles in Indonesian words, and there were also students who wrote the title with brackets, etc.

Lastly, there were some students who experienced difficulties in developing their ideas, meaning that the ideas they had in mind did not describe in a sentence in the way it has to be. Some of the sentences were not clear enough and did not convey the intended meaning by the student correctly, because the sentence was not well-organized and hardly understood which can cause confusion as it lacked specificity and clarity.

## B. Content

The next component that must be considered in writing a text is content. During the data analysis process from descriptive text, there were some students who experienced difficulties with content. The results below were the frequency of the students who experienced difficulties in content:

**Table 2 – The Students' Frequency Result on Content**

Components	Frequenc y	Percentag e
Content	6	30%

Most of the students who experienced difficulties in the content were mostly in terms of ideas that were not concrete enough and not fully developed. Many of the students' writings only wrote important points from the selected tourist spots but were not developed

in good and complete sentences or paragraphs, so their writing seemed like it was written in a hurry. Secondly, there were some students who did not convey correct information or ideas in their text. Next, there was one student whose text did not address the chosen topic. Lastly, there was one student who did not show correct and appropriate paragraph division.

### C. Grammar

Grammar is the third component that needs to be fulfilled in writing a text. During the process of data analysis of descriptive texts, there were many difficulties in grammar experienced by students. The results below were the frequency of the students who experienced difficulties in grammar:

**Table 3 – The Students' Frequency Result on Grammar**

Components	Frequency	Percentage
Grammar	20	100%

From the students' text, it can be found that many students experienced grammar difficulties mostly in run-on sentences, where they accidentally put together two or multiple ideas in one sentence without correctly separating or joining all the ideas with the correct punctuations or conjunctions.

The second most difficulty experienced by students was sentence fragments. In writing text in English, in one sentence at least there must and always be one subject and one verb. However, there were still a lot of students who wrote sentences that leave out either the subject or the verb, and there are also sentences that sometimes even ignored both. Leaving out the subject, verb, or even both is an error called a fragment in grammar (Oshima and Hogue, 2007).

Next, the third most difficulties experienced by students was subject-verb agreement. According to Oshima and Hogue (2007), subject-verb agreement means that the subject and verb in a sentence must agree in number. When a subject is singular, the verb should also be singular, and vice versa. There were a few students who made mistakes in subject-verb agreement, such as using the singular verb "is" when the subject is plural or vice versa.

The next difficulty experienced by students was in prepositions. There were students who used the preposition incorrectly that does not suit the context so it must be changed into the correct prepositions. On the other hand, there was one student who accidentally did not include the right preposition that suited the context when it was needed.

Articles also became one of the difficulties experienced by students during writing descriptive text. There were four out of twenty students still experienced difficulties in using a correct article in their descriptive text. Coincidentally, the four students had difficulties in using the same article, namely the definite article "The". There were two students who were missing the article "The" in the text they wrote and there were two students who used the article "The" incorrectly.

During the process of data analysis, it was also found that one student used two subjects in one sentence which made the sentence incorrect. The student accidentally wrote two subjects in one sentence. First, she wrote "It" which was a third-person singular pronoun. Secondly, the student also wrote "Ijen Crater" which was the subject of the topic being discussed. Using one of the two subjects was not wrong because it would not change the meaning of the sentence. Moreover, "It" already shows that it referred to Ijen Crater

which was discussed in the previous sentence and using "Ijen Crater" was also much better. However, identifying the subject is an important aspect of writing effective sentences

The next difficulty found during the data analysis was conjunctions. There were three out of twenty students were found still experienced difficulties in using conjunction that was more formal when writing text, especially descriptive text.

In the three sentences, the students started a sentence with the conjunction "So", which was correct and suitable according to the context of the sentences. However, the conjunction "So" is generally considered informal and should be avoided in formal academic writing such as descriptive text. The best solution to fix the sentences above was to replace the informal conjunction "So" with more formal conjunctions like "Therefore," "Thus," or "Hence, ". These words could provide a logical connection between ideas in a sentence and make writing more coherent and structured.

The next difficulty that was experienced by students was choosing the right verb forms. Choosing the correct word form is important in English grammar, as different forms of the same word could lead to different meanings and could be used in different ways. Therefore, it is important to have a good understanding of the different word forms and their usage in order to communicate effectively and accurately in English.

Difficulty in relative clauses was also found in students' writing. According to Herring (2016), relative clauses are dependent clauses which usually provide further descriptive information related to nouns. The sentences written by students were found to have difficulty in relative clauses because the relative pronoun "which" was used incorrectly. The use of multiple relative clauses with the relative pronoun "which" in the original sentence made the sentence confusing and unclear.

During the data analysis, it was also found that there was one student who had difficulty with pronouns, where the student might intend to use a possessive pronoun "its" that shows ownership but ended up creating an error since they add an apostrophe to it that leads into other words "it's" which was a contraction of "it is" and it did not show possession. The last difficulty found in the grammar category was tense sequencing. This kind of difficulty happened because the order of the verb tenses used by the student was inconsistent which made the sentence to be grammatically incorrect and made the tenses inconsistent.

#### **D. Mechanics**

The next component that needs to be fulfilled in writing according to Brown (2004) is mechanics. During the process of analyzing data from descriptive texts, the mechanics difficulties experienced by students were varied. The results below were the frequency of the students who experienced difficulties in mechanics:

**Table 4 – The Students' Frequency Result on Mechanics**

<b>Components</b>	<b>Frequenc y</b>	<b>Percentag e</b>
<b>Mechanics</b>	20	100%

From the students' writings, it was found that many students experienced mechanical difficulties in capitalization, punctuation, misspelt words, indented paragraphs and writing paragraphs that are not neat. The biggest difficulty in mechanics was capitalization,

especially in writing the first word in a sentence and when they wrote the name of the place, phenomenon, person, magazine, etc.

The second common difficulty experienced by students was punctuation. Most of the students still found difficulties in using proper punctuation such as full stops to end sentences, commas to separate sentences, colons to indicate a list of things, etc. Next, there were some students who experienced difficulties in spelling. There were many students who misspelt some of the words in their writing, and even so, the spelling errors in the words chosen by students could still be understood. Lastly, there were also some students who did not follow the margin and paragraph indent rules in writing paragraphs.

### E. Vocabulary

The last component that must be fulfilled in writing according to Brown (2004) is vocabulary. During the process of analyzing data from descriptive texts, there were many difficulties in the vocabulary experienced by students. The results below were the frequency of the students who experienced difficulties in vocabulary:

**Table 5 – The Students' Frequency Result on Vocabulary**

Components	Frequenc y	Percentag e
Vocabulary	11	55%

The biggest difficulty in vocabulary found in students' writing was in translating some words from Indonesian to English. The second common difficulty found was difficulty in correct and appropriate word choices. Some students still found it difficult to choose the correct and appropriate words that were suitable for the context of the sentences, and some others choose words that lead to other words that have different meanings, which could cause confusion to the reader. The last difficulty found in the vocabulary category was difficulty in choosing the right phrases, which could probably happen because the students still have a limited vocabulary, unfamiliar with English grammar and syntax, etc.

### 3.2 Discussion

Based on the findings discussed in the previous section, it was found that mechanics grammar was the most common difficulty experienced by Vocational School students in writing English descriptive texts. Most students who struggled with mechanics still experienced difficulty in using correct punctuation marks, capitalizations, applying paragraph indents and margins in their writing, and also difficulties in spelling a few words in the descriptive text they made. Meanwhile, in grammar, most students still experienced lots of difficulties mainly in run-on sentences, fragments, and subject-verb agreement.

The results of this study are also in line with two previous studies conducted by Purwaningsih, Hadi and Rahayu (2022) in analysing the ability of Tulakan high school students majoring in social studies in writing descriptive texts for online learning where the results showed that the main difficulty experienced by students at the school was mechanics. Thus, difficulties in mechanics, especially in using correct punctuation such as using periods to end sentences, using commas correctly, etc., were identified as common difficulties experienced by most students, both in SMA and SMK. The second research which is also in line with this research was conducted by Nair & Hui (2018) in analysing common descriptive writing mistakes of private school students in Malaysia, where the results revealed that grammar ranks first as the most difficult category to fulfil. by students

(mean=16.33, SD=8.38) compared to other types of errors in writing descriptive text. There are many students who have difficulty in subject-verb agreement, tenses, and articles.

There were different results that were found from this present study with the previous study conducted by Ismayanti and Kholiq (2021) on students of X MIPA 6 of SMAN 1 Sukodadi. The result revealed that the most difficulties that the students experienced were difficulties in generic structure which meant they were unable to compose text with the correct generic structure. This proved that there were differences in the difficulty in writing descriptive texts found between junior high school students and vocational school students.

According to Nila's explanation (2017), there were several reasons behind students' difficulties in mechanics. The first factor that often occurred in most cases was caused by the writing process that was too rushed and lacked accuracy in the writing process. The second was too focused on content and the end results so less attention was paid to the form of the writing. The third factor was the negligence of the writer who did not double-check the spelling of the selected word in the dictionary before or after writing a text. The last one was the lack of attention to the rules of using capital letters and the correct and proper punctuation in writing a text.

Furthermore, Islami (2020) also said that grammar also has an important foundation in terms of writing in English. If the foundation of writing in English in terms of grammar is not fulfilled properly, then other important parts of writing English will be disrupted. He also added that there are several factors behind the difficulties students experience in grammar, including English is rarely used in daily conversations, lack of educational support systems in English both in teaching staff and facilities and lack of teacher innovation in teaching. Therefore, the lack of enthusiasm, motivation, and earnestness in learning English especially grammar also has a big contribution to the difficulties experienced by students.

Besides the difficulty in the mechanics and grammar categories in writing especially descriptive text, there were also other aspects that contribute to the challenge of writing an English text. If the difficulties experienced by students were sorted based on the most identified difficulties to the least would be; difficulties in mechanics, difficulties in grammar, difficulties in vocabulary, difficulties in organization, and difficulties in content. Based on the discussion above, it could be summarized that mechanics and grammar were the most difficult category for tenth-grade students in a vocational school in writing descriptive text. In relation to the main difficulty, students were expected to improve their awareness of lower-level skills in writing in English, especially mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, etc). The students were also expected to increase their confidence and motivation in learning grammar to create better writing in the future.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the previous chapter, it has been stated that this research aimed to identify difficulties students experienced in writing descriptive text, especially based on the five categories that must be fulfilled in writing as presented by Brown (2004) at one of Bondowoso Vocational Schools. The identification of student difficulties in each category could be carried out by correcting and examining twenty documents of the descriptive texts on famous tourist spots in Bondowoso. The results revealed that all twenty students of tenth grade at SMK Negeri 3 Bondowoso had difficulties in all categories namely organization, content, grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary.

The most difficult components found were mechanics and grammar. The most frequently encountered mechanical difficulties were difficulties in capitalizing the proper noun or the first letter of the sentence, using the correct full stop and comma punctuation,

and misspelled words. As in grammar, the most frequently encountered difficulties were run-on sentences, fragments, and subject-verb agreement. On the other hand, the component identified with the least difficulty was content. The most common difficulties found were difficulties in accurately conveying correct and concrete information. If the difficulties experienced by students were sorted based on the most identified difficulties to the least would be; difficulties in mechanics with 100%, difficulties in grammar with 100%, difficulties in vocabulary with 55%, difficulties in organization with 45%, and difficulties in content with 30%. The difficulties identified based on the five components above still caused students to find it difficult to write in correct and appropriate English descriptive text.

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