

Mastering Descriptive Text: A Study of Seventh Graders at SMP Kristen Makale

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Abstract

English is a crucial international language, and mastering its four core skills speaking, writing, reading, and listening is essential for learners. This study focuses on the reading skill, specifically students' mastery of descriptive texts, which play a vital role in vocabulary expansion and grammatical understanding. Conducted at SMP Kristen Makale, this quantitative research investigates the ability of seventh-grade students to identify the generic structure and language features of descriptive texts. Data were collected via a multiple-choice test administered to 30 students, assessing comprehension of text components and grammar, such as the simple present tense, adjectives, and linking verbs. Results reveal that only 10% of students achieved a very good mastery level, while the majority exhibited fair to poor understanding. The findings indicate significant challenges in grasping key linguistic elements, suggesting the need for more interactive and focused instructional strategies. This study underscores the importance of tailored teaching approaches to improve students' descriptive text comprehension, contributing to their overall English language proficiency.

Keywords: *Mastery Level, Generic Structure, Language Features, Descriptive Text*

Introduction

English is universally recognized as one of the most influential and widely spoken languages in the world. It serves as a critical medium for interpersonal and cross-cultural communication, enabling individuals to convey thoughts, emotions, intentions, and information effectively (Atasheva, 2023; Liu et al, 2023). The centrality of language to human interaction underscores its irreplaceable role in societal functioning, and among the myriad of global languages, English stands out due to its pervasive international use. As a global lingua franca, English bridges communication across diverse linguistic and cultural boundaries (Patel, 2023). It is the dominant or official language in many international institutions, media, academia, and multinational businesses. Proficiency in English, therefore, significantly enhances an individual's ability to participate in global discourse, opening up pathways to competitive employment, access to global knowledge systems, cross-border networking, and international mobility (Hidayat, 2023).

Moreover, English functions as a critical language of power and influence in contemporary global affairs. It plays a strategic role in sectors such as communication technology, global commerce, international education, scientific research, and diplomacy (Çika et al, 2023). In the Indonesian context, English is formally recognized as the first foreign language and is an integral part of the national education curriculum, introduced from primary to tertiary levels (Intiana et al, 2023). The emphasis on English education reflects the country's recognition of its importance for national development, global engagement, and the personal advancement of its citizens. In

English language learning, reading is vital because it supports vocabulary acquisition, grammar mastery, and critical thinking (Nasrullah, 2015). These skills are interdependent and contribute to a learner's overall proficiency. Among them, reading is particularly vital as it forms the foundation for academic success and lifelong learning. Reading not only facilitates vocabulary acquisition and grammatical awareness, but also fosters critical thinking and comprehension skills, which are essential for processing and interpreting a wide range of texts (Putri et al, 2023).

The importance of reading in educational contexts is underscored by its central role in curriculum design, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels (Hussaini et al, 2023). Through systematic reading instruction, learners engage with a variety of text types that reflect different communicative purposes and genres. Common reading texts used in English classrooms include narrative texts, which tell stories and enhance imagination; recount texts, which report past experiences in chronological order; descriptive texts, which detail the characteristics of people, places, or objects; report texts, which provide factual information about general phenomena; and news item texts, which inform readers about recent events. Each of these text types offers unique linguistic and cognitive demands, contributing to the learners' ability to interpret diverse information and communicate effectively in various contexts. As such, effective reading instruction must go beyond decoding text to include strategies that develop inferential thinking, summarization skills, and contextual understanding, which are crucial for academic literacy and real-world communication (Istorianana et al, 2023).

Descriptive text consists of two primary elements: identification and description. It commonly employs the simple present tense, adjectives, linking verbs, and noun phrases (Noprianto, 2017). This type of text often engages the senses by detailing what something looks like, sounds like, or feels like. The main purpose of descriptive text is to reveal and describe specific entities, making it essential for students to understand (De Andrade et al, 2019). The simple present tense is commonly used in descriptive text to convey factual information. The social function of a descriptive text is to provide a detailed portrayal of a specific person, place, object, or phenomenon, with the aim of informing and enabling the reader to visualize or understand the subject more clearly. This text type is not merely a literary exercise but serves a communicative purpose within both academic and everyday contexts. By learning to compose and interpret descriptive texts, students engage in the social act of sharing knowledge, observations, and experiences in a structured and meaningful way (Naumenko, 2023). Additionally, working with descriptive texts helps learners internalize common grammatical patterns, especially those of the simple present tense and subject-verb agreement, which are fundamental for constructing accurate and coherent descriptions. From a reading and comprehension perspective, exposure to descriptive texts enhances students' ability to extract specific information, identify main ideas, and recognize supporting details (Cwinya'ay, 2018). These skills are foundational not only for understanding descriptive texts themselves but also for developing more advanced reading strategies across genres. Moreover, descriptive texts foster critical language awareness, enabling learners to observe how language can be shaped to reflect perspective, emphasis, and detail.

Through writing and analyzing descriptive texts, learners also develop greater sensitivity to the function of language in social interaction, particularly how language choices reflect intention and audience (Chun et al, 2016). This aligns with broader goals of literacy education, which emphasize the development of both expressive and receptive language skills within meaningful contexts. Based on preliminary observations conducted by the researcher at SMP Kristen Makale, specifically among seventh-grade students, it was found that many students still

struggled with understanding descriptive texts. For instance, students had difficulty identifying the generic structure and language features, as well as defining descriptive texts, despite having been taught the material. The English teacher confirmed that the topic had been covered and the students were expected to have achieved the basic competencies. Considering the issues mentioned above, the objective of the research is to investigate the mastery level of seventh-grade students at SMP Kristen Makale in understanding and identifying the generic structure and language features of descriptive texts. The novelty of this research offers valuable opportunities to expand vocabulary, especially adjectives and expressions related to the senses, which are crucial for conveying nuanced descriptions.

Method

This study adopted a quantitative research paradigm, employing a descriptive quantitative method aimed at systematically measuring students' competence in identifying both the generic structure and language features of descriptive texts (Akyıldız et al, 2021). The choice of a descriptive quantitative approach was appropriate for capturing observable patterns and trends in student performance through numerical data, allowing for objective analysis and generalization within the study context. The research was conducted at SMP Kristen Makale, a junior high school situated at Jln. Nusantara No. 6/102, Makale, Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi, during January 2019. The total population of the study comprised 206 seventh-grade students enrolled in the 2018/2019 academic year, organized into eight parallel classes. A cluster sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness and logistical feasibility in selecting the sample. Class VII-D, consisting of 30 students, was chosen to participate in the study.

Data collection was primarily conducted using a structured written multiple-choice test based on a descriptive text titled "My Cat." The test was specifically designed to assess students' understanding of key components of descriptive texts, particularly the generic structure (identification and description) and the use of the simple present tense, which is fundamental in descriptive writing. The items measured both form recognition and functional use of grammatical features within the context of the text. In addition to primary data obtained from students' test responses, secondary data were gathered through interviews with English teachers, review of relevant undergraduate theses, academic books, and credible digital sources to strengthen the conceptual and contextual grounding of the research. The research instruments included the written test and supporting documentation for triangulation and validation purposes.

Data collection techniques encompassed both library research—which was used to obtain theoretical and empirical support—and field research, which involved the direct administration of the test in the classroom setting. The students' scores were analyzed using statistical procedures to ensure precision and reliability. Individual performance was calculated using the scoring formula, while the class average (mean score) was used as an indicator of overall learning achievement. Furthermore, students' performance was classified into five distinct proficiency categories—very good, good, fair, poor, and very poor—following the classification criteria. This categorization provided a clear benchmark for interpreting student outcomes. Overall, the structured quantitative approach enabled the researcher to draw valid, data-driven conclusions regarding students' understanding of descriptive texts and highlighted areas for pedagogical improvement.

Results

The mastery level of seventh-grade students at SMP Kristen Makale in understanding and identifying the generic structure and language features of descriptive texts

This research was conducted with the primary objective of evaluating the level of mastery among seventh-grade students at SMP Kristen Makale in comprehending and identifying the essential elements of descriptive texts. Specifically, the study focused on students' ability to recognize the generic structure and language features that characterize this particular genre. Given the significance of descriptive texts in junior secondary English curricula—where students are expected to develop both analytical reading and accurate writing skills—the research sought to provide data-driven insights into students' proficiency levels and instructional needs. To achieve this objective, the researchers employed a structured, multiple-choice written test grounded in a carefully selected sample text titled “My Cat.” This text was designed to reflect the prototypical features of a descriptive text, making it an appropriate and valid instrument for assessing students' knowledge. The test items were aligned with the learning objectives for descriptive text comprehension and targeted two major areas:

In learning descriptive texts, students were guided to identify the generic structure, which consists of two main components. The first is *Identification*, the part of the text that introduces and names the subject to be described. The second is *Description*, which elaborates on the subject's characteristics, attributes, or features in more detail. In addition, students were asked to recognize the typical language features found in descriptive texts through a series of questions. These features include the use of the *Simple Present Tense* to state facts and habitual actions, reflecting the timeless nature of the subject being described; the use of *adjectives* to qualify nouns and provide vivid details about appearance, quality, size, color, and other attributes; and the use of *linking verbs* such as *is*, *are*, *has*, and *have*, which connect the subject to its description and ensure sentence clarity. Furthermore, students were introduced to *noun phrases*, which are combinations of articles, adjectives, and nouns that serve as fundamental building blocks of descriptive sentences. By focusing on both structural and linguistic features, the instrument provided a comprehensive measure of students' understanding of descriptive texts. The results of this test were then analyzed to determine individual and group performance, offering insight into common areas of strength and difficulty. Ultimately, this research aimed not only to assess student mastery but also to inform pedagogical strategies that could enhance the teaching and learning of descriptive text in English classrooms. A total of 30 students participated in this research. The results were analyzed using a standard classification of scores:

Table 1. *Descriptive text student scores*

Student	Score	Classification
Student 1	85	Very Good
Student 2	82	Very Good
Student 3	80	Very Good
Student 4	78	Good
Student 5	75	Good
Student 6	74	Good
Student 7	72	Good
Student 8	70	Good
Student 9	69	Fair
Student 10	68	Fair
Student 11	66	Fair
Student 12	65	Fair

Student	Score	Classification
Student 13	63	Fair
Student 14	62	Fair
Student 15	61	Fair
Student 16	60	Fair
Student 17	59	Poor
Student 18	58	Poor
Student 19	56	Poor
Student 20	55	Poor
Student 21	53	Poor
Student 22	51	Poor
Student 23	50	Poor
Student 24	48	Very Poor
Student 25	45	Very Poor
Student 26	42	Very Poor
Student 27	40	Very Poor
Student 28	35	Very Poor
Student 29	30	Very Poor
Student 30	25	Very Poor
Total score	1.777	
Average	59,23	

Based on the analysis of student test results, the average score achieved by the 30 seventh-grade students at SMP Kristen Makale was 59.23. According to the predetermined mastery level classification, this score falls into the “Poor” category. This indicates that, on average, students demonstrated a limited ability to identify the generic structure and language features of descriptive texts. The result reflects significant challenges in comprehending key elements such as the use of the simple present tense, linking verbs, adjectives, and noun phrases. These findings underscore the need for targeted instructional strategies to strengthen foundational grammar and enhance students' understanding of descriptive text conventions.

Table 2. *The mastery level in understanding and identifying the generic structure and language features of descriptive texts*

Score Range	Classification	Number of Students	Percentage
80 – 100	Very Good	3	10%
70 – 79	Good	5	16.7%
60 – 69	Fair	9	30%
50 – 59	Poor	7	23.3%
0 – 49	Very Poor	6	20%

From the table above, it is clear that student performance varied considerably in their ability to identify the structure and language features of descriptive texts. Only 3 students (10%) achieved the *very good* level, demonstrating strong competence in recognizing both structural components and key linguistic elements. Meanwhile, the majority of students—9 individuals or 30%—were classified in the *fair* category, indicating a basic yet incomplete understanding of the material. Most notably, a substantial portion of the class, 13 students or 43.3%, fell into the *poor* to *very poor* categories, highlighting significant challenges in comprehending and applying the concepts being assessed. The findings of this study indicate that the overall mastery of descriptive text among seventh-grade students at SMP Kristen Makale remains relatively low, with a considerable portion of learners demonstrating limited comprehension and underdeveloped analytical skills. While a minority of students—10% of the sample—achieved a very good level of performance, showcasing their solid understanding of both the generic structure (identification and description) and linguistic features (such as the use of the simple

present tense, noun phrases, and linking verbs), the majority of students fell short of this benchmark.

Approximately 30% of the participants were classified within the fair category, suggesting that although these students have acquired some basic awareness of descriptive text conventions, their knowledge is fragmented and lacks the accuracy and depth required for proficient performance. This partial understanding often manifests in errors related to tense consistency, improper use of descriptive vocabulary, and confusion between text types. More concerning is the significant proportion of students—43.3%—who were categorized as poor or very poor. These students exhibited serious difficulties in identifying key textual elements, constructing grammatically correct sentences, and distinguishing the functions of linguistic features within the descriptive genre. Such results point to persistent gaps in foundational grammar, particularly in the application of the simple present tense, as well as in structural understanding of descriptive texts. This suggests that many students are struggling not only with surface-level comprehension but also with the deeper cognitive processes involved in decoding and producing descriptive language.

The data collectively highlight a potential misalignment between the current instructional strategies and the learners' needs. It appears that existing pedagogical approaches may not be sufficiently scaffolded to support students at varying proficiency levels. Therefore, targeted instructional interventions are urgently needed—especially those focused on reinforcing core grammar concepts, explicit teaching of text structure, and integrated reading-writing activities. Tailoring instruction to address these specific areas can enhance students' ability to internalize the conventions of descriptive texts, thereby improving both comprehension and productive skills in English.

Discussion

The mastery level of seventh-grade students at SMP Kristen Makale in understanding and identifying the generic structure and language features of descriptive texts

Findings revealed that only 10% of students reached a "very good" level of mastery. Many students struggled to distinguish identification from description and frequently misused verb forms (e.g., "was" instead of "is"). Errors were also observed in the use of linking verbs and noun phrases (Inayati, 2016). This finding aligns closely with preliminary observations conducted by the researcher during classroom interactions, in which students frequently showed hesitation and uncertainty when analyzing or responding to descriptive text tasks. Specifically, many learners struggled to differentiate between the structural components of a descriptive text—identification, which introduces the subject, and description, which elaborates on its characteristics. Furthermore, the difficulties extended to the recognition and application of grammatical features commonly found in descriptive texts. Students appeared particularly challenged by the consistent use of the simple present tense, which is essential for conveying factual and timeless information, as well as by the correct use of adjectives and noun phrases necessary for rich, detailed descriptions (Davidse et al, 2019). These gaps in understanding suggest that foundational grammatical concepts have not been fully internalized, thereby impeding students' ability to comprehend or construct descriptive texts accurately.

The findings suggest that current instructional approaches may need substantial recalibration to better support students' understanding of both text structure and grammatical conventions in descriptive writing. Many students appear to lack a clear conceptual framework for distinguishing between the different components of a descriptive text, and this gap impairs

their ability to comprehend, analyze, and produce such texts effectively. The absence of targeted, genre-specific instruction—particularly in the form of guided practice and explicit modeling—has likely contributed to the observed deficiencies. Without interventions that reinforce both the function and form of descriptive language, students may continue to struggle with broader issues of reading comprehension, written expression, and genre awareness. A closer examination of the students' written responses reveals several key contributing factors behind these challenges. First, a significant number of students demonstrated limited comprehension of the generic structure of descriptive texts. They frequently confused the identification section, which serves to introduce and name the subject, with the description section, which elaborates on the subject's qualities or attributes. This confusion became more pronounced when the descriptive content was abstract or extended beyond simple, concrete details—suggesting that students may rely heavily on surface-level reading rather than structural understanding.

Additionally, widespread grammatical weaknesses further compounded students' difficulties. One of the most common issues was a lack of mastery of the simple present tense, which is essential for expressing timeless and factual information in descriptive writing. Students frequently substituted past tense forms such as "was" for "is," and displayed a limited grasp of subject-verb agreement, leading to incorrect verb conjugation. These errors reflect a lack of grammatical automatization, which hinders fluency in both comprehension and composition. Moreover, students showed inadequate understanding of linking verbs and auxiliary structures such as "is," "are," "has," and "have." These elements are vital for constructing relational and attributive sentences—key characteristics of descriptive texts. When students fail to recognize or use these linguistic tools accurately, their ability to construct coherent and meaningful descriptive statements is significantly diminished. This suggests that more focused instruction on grammatical functions within the context of text types is needed to bridge the gap between grammar knowledge and its practical application in writing.

These insights point to the importance of integrated instruction that connects grammatical accuracy with genre awareness. A scaffolded teaching model that combines explicit instruction, textual analysis, and guided writing exercises could offer a more effective pathway for helping students internalize the conventions of descriptive texts. Such an approach not only addresses the immediate learning gaps but also lays the groundwork for more advanced literacy skills in the future. Vocabulary limitations also hindered performance. Although the topic was familiar, students were unable to recognize key adjectives and descriptive expressions (Qian et al, 2019). This suggests a lack of contextual vocabulary practice and genre-specific language instruction. This vocabulary limitation suggests that students have not had sufficient exposure to rich, genre-specific language input, nor the opportunity to engage in repeated and meaningful practice with descriptive language. Vocabulary development in language learning is not only about memorizing word meanings but also about understanding how words function within textual patterns—such as how adjectives modify nouns or how noun phrases structure information within sentences. When learners are not explicitly taught how to use vocabulary in context, especially within genre-based instruction, they are less likely to transfer passive word knowledge into active comprehension or production.

Furthermore, these findings imply that the instructional strategies employed in the classroom may have been insufficiently supportive of students' vocabulary acquisition. While the topic may have been introduced in lessons, the lack of reinforcement through focused grammar instruction, contextualized examples, or interactive practice activities may have limited students' opportunity to internalize the descriptive language they need. Effective vocabulary

instruction should involve repeated exposure, use in meaningful contexts, and scaffolding that helps students connect new words to their functions within a genre. Without this, students are likely to encounter difficulty when engaging with tasks that require higher-level language analysis and use. The observed vocabulary gaps point to the need for more integrated vocabulary instruction within genre-based lessons. Teachers should consider adopting instructional strategies that combine explicit teaching of genre-specific vocabulary with guided practice in using those words meaningfully in reading and writing tasks. By doing so, students can develop not only word knowledge but also the ability to understand and use that vocabulary in ways that align with the communicative purpose of descriptive texts. Comparative insights drawn from earlier research further reinforce the conclusions of this study. For instance, identified patterns of student difficulty with grammar and vocabulary acquisition in the context of narrative texts, which closely mirrors the struggles observed among students at SMP Kristen Makale with descriptive texts (Ariwibowo, 2023). These parallels suggest that challenges related to understanding text structure and applying linguistic features are not isolated, but rather part of a broader trend in second language acquisition, particularly at the junior secondary level. Grammar and vocabulary, though often taught in isolation, prove to be critical when applied in genre-specific contexts, where students are expected to both interpret and produce texts according to particular conventions.

Similarly, Comparative insights confirm these results. found that communicative teaching strategies improve reading comprehension and grammatical accuracy (Akmalevna, 2023). The absence of such student-centered methods may contribute to low performance at SMP Kristen Makale. These findings underscore the urgent need for a more structured, interactive, and genre-aware pedagogical approach. Specifically, instruction should integrate explicit teaching of text structure and linguistic features with engaging classroom activities that allow students to practice using descriptive language in context. Approaches such as task-based learning, collaborative writing, scaffolded reading exercises, and interactive grammar tasks can provide meaningful opportunities for students to internalize genre conventions and grammatical forms through use rather than passive reception. Moreover, integrating form-focused instruction within communicative activities would enable students to see the relevance of grammar and vocabulary as tools for achieving communicative goals, rather than as isolated rules. Such a pedagogical shift could significantly enhance students' ability to both understand and construct descriptive texts, ultimately leading to improved reading comprehension, writing performance, and overall language proficiency.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the mastery level of seventh-grade students at SMP Kristen Makale in understanding and identifying the generic structure and language features of descriptive texts is still relatively low. Only a small portion of students demonstrated high competence, while the majority showed fair to very poor levels of understanding. This indicates that many students are struggling to grasp key elements such as the simple present tense, adjectives, linking verbs, and noun phrases commonly used in descriptive texts. The findings suggest that although descriptive texts are part of the curriculum, students require more focused instruction and support to fully comprehend and apply the concepts. The implication of this study is that English teachers need to adopt more interactive, contextualized, and student-centered teaching strategies to enhance students' understanding of descriptive texts. This includes the integration of visual aids, real-life examples, and grammar-focused activities that align with students' language proficiency levels. Additionally, formative

assessments should be used regularly to monitor students' progress and address learning gaps promptly. By strengthening instructional practices and providing consistent reinforcement, educators can help students achieve a deeper mastery of descriptive texts, which is essential for their broader language development. However, this study also has several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a limited sample size, involving only one class from a single school, which may not represent the broader population of seventh-grade students. Second, the study focused solely on students' ability to identify structure and language features without exploring deeper comprehension skills such as interpretation, critical thinking, or production of descriptive texts. Third, the instrument used primarily assessed recognition rather than application, which may not fully reflect students' actual communicative competence. Therefore, further research is recommended to expand the scope and depth of investigation. Future studies could involve larger and more diverse samples across different schools and regions to enhance generalizability. In addition, it is advisable to explore the effectiveness of various instructional interventions, such as the use of multimedia, project-based learning, or collaborative tasks, in improving students' descriptive writing skills. Lastly, subsequent research should consider incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' challenges and progress in learning descriptive texts.

Acknowledgment

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