

A Qualitative Study of Sensory, Schemata, and Stuctural Approaches in ESL Students' Descriptive Writing

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the implementation of sensory, schemata, and structural approaches to improve English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' descriptive writing at a Madrasah Tsanawiyah in Bogor Regency. The research addresses the challenges EFL learners face in producing vivid, coherent, and well-organized texts by exploring how the integrated use of sensory details, schemata activation, and structural frameworks influences writing quality. Data were collected through classroom observations, student writing samples, and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that the integration of these three approaches significantly enhances students' ability to create descriptive texts that are vivid, coherent, and well-organized. Students reported improved confidence and creativity in writing, while teachers highlighted better student engagement and text quality. This study provides practical insights for EFL educators to apply a combined instructional strategy that fosters student-centered and differentiated writing instruction aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: sensory approach; schemata approach; structural approach; descriptive writing; EFL students

Abstrak

Penelitian kualitatif ini mengeksplorasi penerapan pendekatan sensori, skemata, dan struktural dalam meningkatkan keterampilan menulis deskriptif siswa English as a Foreign Language (EFL) di salah satu Madrasah Tsanawiyah di Kabupaten Bogor. Fokus penelitian diarahkan pada upaya mengatasi tantangan yang dihadapi siswa dalam menghasilkan teks yang hidup, koheren, dan terorganisasi dengan baik. Data penelitian diperoleh melalui observasi kelas, analisis sampel tulisan siswa, serta wawancara semiterstruktur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa integrasi detail sensori, aktivasi skemata, dan kerangka struktural secara signifikan meningkatkan kualitas tulisan siswa. Peserta didik menunjukkan peningkatan kepercayaan diri, kreativitas, serta kemampuan dalam menyusun teks deskriptif yang lebih jelas dan terarah. Guru juga mengamati adanya keterlibatan yang lebih tinggi serta keluaran tulisan yang lebih berkualitas selama proses pembelajaran. Penelitian ini memberikan implikasi praktis bagi pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, yakni bahwa pendekatan terpadu mendukung pembelajaran berpusat pada siswa, diferensiasi pembelajaran, dan selaras dengan prinsip Kurikulum Merdeka.

Kata kunci: pendekatan sensori; pendekatan skemata; pendekatan structural; menulis deskriptif; siswa EFL



INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the essential language skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. As a productive skill, writing not only supports academic success but also reflects students' cognitive and linguistic competence. Among the various writing genres, descriptive writing holds a prominent place in junior high school curricula due to its ability to develop learners' capacity to observe, organize, and express ideas vividly and logically. However, despite its significance, many EFL students in Indonesian secondary schools, particularly at Madrasah Tsanawiyah (Islamic Junior High Schools), continue to struggle with writing descriptive texts effectively. Their writing often lacks vivid imagery, logical sequencing, and structural clarity, which results in texts that are disjointed, monotonous, and difficult to comprehend.

The challenges students face in descriptive writing are multifaceted. One major issue is the absence of rich sensory detail in students' texts. Sensory descriptions—those that appeal to the five senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste—are critical in making writing more immersive and engaging for readers. As noted by Tompkins and Jones (2019), the use of sensory experiences in writing enhances students' ability to create concrete and vivid imagery. However, many students resort to generic descriptions such as “the park was beautiful” without elaborating on what made it beautiful through sensory language. This lack of elaboration leads to vague and flat narratives that fail to capture readers' attention or evoke imagination. Without explicit instruction in sensory writing, students are often unaware of how to utilize this approach effectively in their work.

Another significant issue is the limited ability of students to activate their schemata, or background knowledge, when writing. According to Bartlett (1932) and later developed by Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), schemata serve as mental frameworks that assist in organizing and interpreting new information. In the context of writing, schemata activation helps students connect their prior experiences and knowledge to the writing task, resulting in more coherent and contextually rich compositions. However, when students are unable to activate relevant schemata, their writing often becomes fragmented and lacks coherence. For instance, when asked to describe a cultural event, students may merely list random elements without connecting them in a logical and meaningful sequence. This issue suggests a pedagogical gap in equipping students with strategies to draw upon their prior knowledge during the writing process.

Structural challenges also remain a critical obstacle in students' descriptive writing. Many learners demonstrate a limited understanding of how to organize their ideas within a clear and logical framework. As Hyland (2004) emphasizes, genre-based writing instruction highlights the importance of structure in producing effective texts. In descriptive writing, a typical structure involves an introduction, body paragraphs that elaborate on the object or scene being described, and a concluding statement that reinforces the writer's overall impression. Yet, numerous students write without such a structure, resulting in poorly organized paragraphs and confusing narratives. This lack of structural awareness not only undermines the clarity of students' writing but also hinders the development of more advanced

composition skills. The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture's recent implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum further reinforces the urgency of addressing these writing issues. The curriculum emphasizes differentiated and student-centered learning, which includes the use of creative and contextualized approaches to teaching writing. In this context, integrating sensory, schemata, and structural approaches represents a promising pedagogical direction that aligns with the goals of the curriculum. These approaches can serve as complementary strategies that support students in generating vivid descriptions, connecting ideas meaningfully, and organizing their thoughts systematically.

Despite the growing body of research on each of these approaches independently, there is still a lack of studies that explore their integrated application in the teaching of descriptive writing in EFL classrooms. Previous studies on the sensory approach (Acedo, 2020; Marpaung & Hambandima, 2019) have shown its effectiveness in enhancing students' use of vivid imagery, while research on schemata activation (Wang & Chen, 2022; Rahmaningsih et al., 2023) has demonstrated improved coherence and idea development. Similarly, structural approaches (Zahra et al., 2021; Maharani et al., 2024) have been linked to improvements in grammar, cohesion, and text organization. However, these studies tend to treat each approach in isolation and rarely address how they can be combined to create a holistic instructional framework for teaching descriptive writing, particularly at the junior secondary level.

In response to this gap, the present study investigates the integrated implementation of sensory, schemata, and structural approaches in descriptive writing instruction. It aims to explore how these strategies, when applied together, can address the various challenges that EFL students face in writing vivid, coherent, and well-structured descriptive texts. The study focuses on students at Madrasah Tsanawiyah in Bogor Regency, a context where descriptive writing is part of the curriculum and where students often require more support in developing advanced writing skills.

This study is grounded in qualitative research principles, particularly descriptive qualitative methods that seek to provide in-depth insights into the writing practices, instructional strategies, and student experiences. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, and document analysis of students' writing. The use of triangulated data sources ensures a comprehensive understanding of how each approach contributes to students' writing performance and how their integration enhances the overall writing process. The findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of EFL writing instruction. Theoretically, it provides new perspectives on the synergy between cognitive (schemata), affective (sensory), and structural (genre-based) strategies in writing pedagogy. Practically, it offers English language teacher's actionable insights into how to design and implement integrated writing lessons that are aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum and that foster students' descriptive writing proficiency. By focusing on junior high school students in a real educational setting, the study also provides contextualized recommendations that can be adapted by teachers in similar learning environments.

In conclusion, this study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How can the integration of sensory, schemata, and structural approaches be implemented to improve EFL students' descriptive writing? (2) What are the challenges students face in incorporating sensory details and activating prior knowledge in their writing? (3) How does structured writing instruction support students in achieving coherence and clarity in their descriptive texts? The answers to these questions will provide a foundation for future instructional models that emphasize integrated, student-centered approaches to writing development in EFL contexts.

METHOD

The study was conducted at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Daarul Mughni Al Maliki and Madrasah Tsanawiyah Al Muchtari, junior secondary Islamic schools located in Bogor Regency, West Java. This school was selected based on accessibility, the willingness of the administration and teacher to cooperate, and its implementation of the national curriculum which includes English as a core subject. The school serves students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and provides a typical representation of EFL learning environments at the junior secondary level in rural Indonesia. The participants consisted of six English teachers, who were purposively selected for this study. The teacher was chosen because of their experience in teaching English writing skills and their involvement in implementing descriptive writing lessons using varied approaches. The seventh-grade students represented a range of writing proficiencies, allowing for a rich and diverse data set. All participants had been introduced to descriptive writing and had completed basic writing tasks in previous semesters.

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to explore the implementation of sensory, schemata, and structural approaches in improving descriptive writing among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Daarul Mughni Al Maliki and Madrasah Tsanawiyah Al Muchtari, located in Bogor Regency, Indonesia. The qualitative approach was chosen to allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of students' writing processes, learning experiences, and the instructional strategies used by the teacher in the natural classroom setting. As stated by Creswell (2018), qualitative research is well-suited to capturing participants' perspectives and the meanings they assign to their experiences, particularly in educational contexts where human interaction and classroom dynamics play a vital role.

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method, which aims to describe, analyze, and interpret phenomena based on participants' experiences without manipulating the natural setting. This approach allowed the researcher to focus on how sensory, schemata, and structural approaches were applied during the learning process and how they affected the students' descriptive writing performance. The descriptive design is aligned with the objective of the study, which is to explore rather than quantify or generalize. Through classroom observations, interviews, and student writing samples, the researcher documented authentic instructional practices and student responses. The design supported the

triangulation of data sources, which contributed to the validity and credibility of the findings. The qualitative descriptive method enabled the researcher to present a detailed and nuanced account of the classroom phenomena observed.

Data Collection Techniques

To ensure rich and comprehensive data, the researcher employed three primary data collection methods: classroom observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. These methods were selected to allow for data triangulation and to ensure that findings were credible, valid, and grounded in real classroom practices.

1. Classroom Observation

Classroom observation was used to examine the instructional process in real time, focusing on how the teacher implemented sensory, schemata, and structural approaches during writing lessons. Observations were conducted over four meetings in a single instructional unit focused on descriptive writing. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer, taking detailed field notes using an observation protocol that captured classroom interaction, teacher instruction, student behaviour, and use of materials.

The observation protocol was organized around key indicators of the three approaches:

- For the sensory approach: the teacher's use of visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli and students' responses.
- For the schemata approach: activities that activated students' prior knowledge.
- For the structural approach: how writing tasks were organized based on text structure, such as introduction, body, and conclusion.

This method provided firsthand insights into the pedagogical strategies used and the extent of student engagement with each approach.

2. Document Analysis

Student writing products were collected and analyzed to assess the effectiveness of the integrated approaches in improving descriptive writing. Two sets of texts were used: a preliminary writing task completed before the intervention, and a final task written after the implementation of the approaches. These texts were evaluated based on three main dimensions:

- Vividness and use of sensory language,
- Coherence and connection of ideas based on schemata activation,
- Organization and text structure.

An analytical rubric was developed by the researcher to assess each dimension, drawing on established criteria for descriptive writing in EFL contexts. This document analysis allowed the researcher to observe developmental changes in students' writing performance.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews



Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both the English teacher and a subset of students (six students selected to represent low, medium, and high performers). The interviews aimed to explore participants' perceptions of the approaches used, their engagement with the writing tasks, and the challenges they encountered. Interview questions for the teacher focused on:

- The rationale for using sensory, schemata, and structural approaches,
- Observations of student responses and improvement,
- Challenges in implementation.

Student interview questions addressed:

- Their experiences and feelings during writing tasks,
- The usefulness of the activities,
- The ways the approaches helped them write better.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (2014) interactive model, which consists of three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

- **Data Reduction:** All observation notes, writing samples, and interview transcripts were read thoroughly and coded based on recurring themes related to the research questions. Codes included sensory description, prior knowledge, structure awareness, student engagement, and writing challenges.
- **Data Display:** The coded data were organized into matrices and charts to facilitate comparison across different data sources and participants.
- **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Patterns and relationships among the coded data were interpreted to answer the research questions. The findings were constantly reviewed and verified using triangulation and member checking to ensure validity.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the following strategies were applied:

- **Triangulation:** Multiple data sources (observation, documents, and interviews) were used to cross-validate findings.
- **Member Checking:** Interview summaries were returned to participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations.
- **Peer Debriefing:** The researcher discussed findings with fellow researchers and supervisors to ensure consistency and reduce bias.
- **Thick Description:** Detailed contextual information about the research setting, participants, and procedures was provided to enable transferability of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the study, the researcher obtained permission from the school principal and English teacher at MTs Daarul Mughni Al Maliki and MTs Al Muchtari. Informed consent was also obtained from all participants. Students and teachers were assured of their confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in the reporting of data. Participation was voluntary, and all individuals retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The research adhered to ethical standards for educational research as outlined by the institution's ethics committee.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of thematic analysis from interviews, classroom observations, and student writing samples at MTs Daarul Mughni Al Maliki and MTs Al Muchtari, the researcher identified three major themes that reflect how students experience and respond to the implementation of the Sensory Approach, Schemata Approach, and Structural Approach in descriptive writing activities. These themes include: (1) students' engagement and creativity through the Sensory Approach, (2) the activation of prior knowledge and cultural experience via the Schemata Approach, and (3) students' writing clarity and organization through the Structural Approach.

1. The Use of Sensory Approach Enhances Engagement and Detail

Students reported feeling more enthusiastic and connected to the descriptive writing activities when teachers guided them to use their five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) in describing topics such as their favourite food or personal experiences. This aligns with Tompkins (2011), who suggests that sensory language helps learners write with vividness and authenticity. Observations revealed that students used richer adjectives and more precise descriptions after being prompted to imagine or directly experience sensory elements of a topic.

For instance, during classroom activities, students at both schools demonstrated an increased ability to describe objects with specific sensory cues, such as "crispy texture," "spicy smell," or "bright red colour." This approach allowed them to go beyond general statements and write more vivid and concrete descriptions. Students' enthusiasm was also visible in their verbal participation and written outputs, which showed more varied vocabulary and expression.

2. Schemata Approach Activates Cultural and Personal Background Knowledge

The implementation of the schemata approach helped students link their personal and cultural experiences to the topics being written. Teachers initiated discussions and brainstorming sessions to recall personal memories or familiar situations before writing. Anderson (1984) emphasized the role of background knowledge (schemata) in constructing meaning in language tasks, and this was clearly reflected in how students connected classroom writing prompts to local traditions, family events, or daily activities.

At MTs Daarul Mughni Al Maliki, students described traditional food using both sensory details and personal anecdotes, showing how prior knowledge shaped their narrative structure. Similarly, at MTs Al Muchtari, students writing about local landmarks included cultural references and emotional experiences that enriched their texts. This demonstrates that activating schemata helped students not only to write more fluently but also to personalize their compositions.

3. Structural Approach Improves Organization and Coherence

The use of the structural approach provided a clear writing scaffold for students. Teachers emphasized the use of standard descriptive text structures—namely, the introduction, description, and conclusion. This corresponds with Hyland (2004), who argues that explicit genre instruction supports students in mastering text organization and coherence.

The findings showed that students who followed this structure produced more organized texts with logical progression. For example, in their descriptive essays, students consistently opened with a general introduction, followed by detailed body paragraphs focused on specific attributes, and ended with concluding remarks. The use of transition signals and topic sentences also increased after the introduction of structural modelling.

B. Discussion

This study reveals that the integrated application of sensory, schemata, and structural approaches positively impacts junior high school students' ability to write descriptive texts in English. The findings are consistent with prior research that emphasizes the value of experiential and structured writing instruction for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The sensory approach cultivated emotional and imaginative involvement, leading to richer descriptions. This supports Tompkins (2011) and Nation (2009), who advocate for multisensory strategies to stimulate descriptive writing. The schemata approach, on the other hand, empowered students to draw from their own experiences and cultural background, promoting contextual relevance and personal engagement—an insight supported by Anderson (1984) and Carrell and Eisterhold (1983).

Moreover, the structural approach facilitated student understanding of genre-specific organization. The progression from general to specific and the use of cohesive devices in student texts show that scaffolded instruction can significantly enhance writing competence. These results reflect the effectiveness of Hyland's (2004) genre-based instruction and Gibbons' (2002) scaffolding theory. Importantly, students from both schools reported feeling more confident and motivated to write after participating in activities that involved all three approaches. This aligns with the sociocognitive perspective of writing (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that writing develops through interaction, modelling, and guided practice. Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of how integrated writing approaches can enrich ESL writing instruction, particularly in the context of descriptive writing in Islamic junior high schools. The findings suggest that educators should consider combining sensory engagement, activation of

background knowledge, and explicit structural modelling to enhance student performance and enjoyment in writing.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the implementation and impact of sensory, schemata, and structural approaches in the descriptive writing of English as a Second Language (ESL) students at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Daarul Mughni Al Maliki and Al Muchtari in Bogor Regency. Using a qualitative research design that involved classroom observation, student writing analysis, and interviews, the study yielded several key conclusions.

First, the sensory approach was found to enhance students' ability to enrich their descriptive writing with vivid imagery by engaging their five senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Students became more expressive and precise in conveying details, which resulted in more engaging and concrete descriptions of people, places, or objects.

Second, the schemata approach effectively activated students' prior knowledge and personal experiences, enabling them to connect their background understanding with the writing task. This approach fostered higher motivation, idea generation, and content relevance. It also supported students in building coherent texts that were both personal and contextually meaningful.

Third, the structural approach, through the teaching of text organization (e.g., introduction, body, and conclusion), helped students understand the typical features and patterns of descriptive writing. The application of this approach improved students' control of text structure, coherence, and overall logical flow, leading to more systematic and reader-friendly compositions.

Collectively, these three approaches not only contributed to students' descriptive writing quality but also reflected positive learning outcomes in terms of creativity, organization, and clarity. The findings affirm that the integration of sensory, schemata, and structural strategies is a pedagogically sound method for supporting writing development in junior secondary EFL contexts. Future studies are encouraged to explore how these approaches interact over time and how teacher professional development can sustain their effective implementation.

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