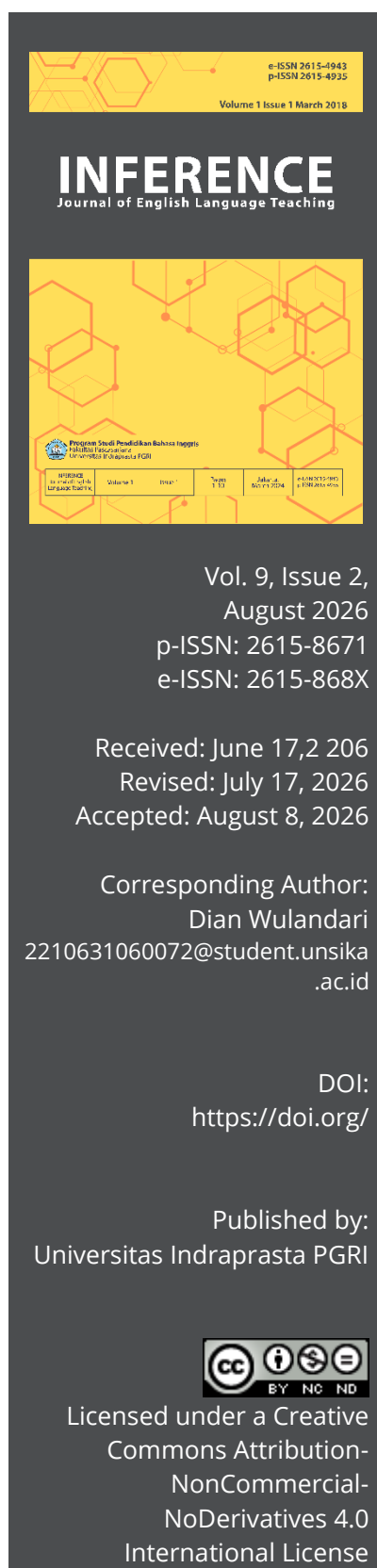




RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPLEMENTING COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN DESCRIPTIVE TEXT WRITING AT JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL: PROCESS, PERCEPTIONS, AND CHALLENGES

Dian Wulandari¹,
Fela Dafitri²

^{1,2}English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, Karawang, Indonesia

e-mail: 2210631060072@student.unsika.ac.id¹

e-mail: fela.dafitri@fkip.unsika.ac.id²

Abstract: Many Indonesian students experience difficulties in writing descriptive texts due to limited vocabulary, weak grammar, and low motivation. This study examined the contribution of Cooperative Learning (CL) to students' descriptive writing skills and the challenges of its implementation. A descriptive qualitative design was conducted at a junior high school in Karawang, Indonesia, involving one English teacher and seven ninth-grade student group leaders selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that CL improved writing through idea sharing, peer feedback, and vocabulary enrichment while increasing students' motivation, participation, and social skills. However, challenges such as unequal participation, language barriers, and classroom management issues remained. The study concluded that CL was an effective strategy for teaching descriptive writing when supported by balanced group participation and explicit language instruction.

Keywords: Cooperative Learning; descriptive text; writing skill

IMPLEMENTASI PEMBELAJARAN KOOPERATIF DALAM PEMBELAJARAN MENULIS TEKS DESKRIPTIF DI SMP: PROSES, PERSEPSI, DAN TANTANGAN

Abstrak: Banyak siswa Indonesia mengalami kesulitan dalam menulis teks deskriptif karena keterbatasan kosakata, lemahnya penguasaan tata bahasa, dan rendahnya motivasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kontribusi Cooperative Learning (CL) terhadap keterampilan menulis teks deskriptif siswa serta mengidentifikasi tantangan dalam penerapannya. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif di sebuah sekolah menengah pertama di Karawang, Indonesia, dengan melibatkan satu guru bahasa Inggris dan tujuh siswa kelas IX yang merupakan ketua kelompok belajar heterogen dan dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara semi-terstruktur, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa CL meningkatkan kemampuan menulis melalui berbagi ide, umpan balik antarteman, dan pengayaan kosakata, serta meningkatkan motivasi, partisipasi, dan keterampilan sosial

siswa. Namun, tantangan seperti partisipasi yang tidak merata, kendala bahasa, dan pengelolaan kelas masih ditemukan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa CL merupakan strategi yang efektif untuk pembelajaran menulis teks deskriptif apabila didukung oleh partisipasi kelompok yang seimbang dan pengajaran bahasa yang eksplisit.

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran kooperatif; menulis deskriptif; keterampilan menulis;

INTRODUCTION

Writing skills are important for students to learn because by writing students can express ideas, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and knowledge in a structured manner into writing (Syifa et al., 2022). Writing provides more time for students to think, organize ideas, and utilize various sources such as dictionaries or grammar books to support their writing (Harmer, 2004). Writing is a complex skill that is often difficult for students to master. It requires multiple competencies, including grammar mastery, vocabulary acquisition, and the effective use of punctuation (Amelia & Prystiananta, 2021). Writing poses a significant challenge for students in Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language. Consequently, appropriate learning strategies are required to help students overcome difficulties in the writing process (Ismayanti & Kholiq, 2020). In the process, writing needs language accuracy as well as the ability to develop and organize ideas so that readers can understand it so that it becomes a skill that is not easy.

Broadly speaking, writing has five types of writing which in practice are often combined with each other. There are five types of English texts including descriptive, narrative, procedure, recount, and report (Syifa et al., 2022). At school, one of the text types studied by students is descriptive text. In writing descriptive text, the writer must be able to visualize the object in detail so that readers can imagine it easily (Syifa et al., 2022). In descriptive texts, the tense that is often used is simple present tense because it describes things that are common and repetitive. Therefore, mastering vocabulary is important so that the writer does not repeat the same word (Johannes, 2021). Although descriptive text is fairly easy compared to other texts, in writing it students often experience difficulties and challenges, this is evidenced by several studies that have been conducted.

Students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts remain a persistent issue across various educational levels. At the junior secondary school level (SMP/MTs), the main obstacles stem from linguistic factors such as limited vocabulary, inadequate grammar mastery, and a poor understanding of the generic structure of descriptive texts (Nurfidoh & Kareviati, 2021; Syifa et al., 2022; Pratiwi et al., 2024). Similar difficulties have also been identified at the senior high school level, where they are further exacerbated by students' tendency to write hastily (Hafizah et al., 2024). In addition to linguistic challenges, affective factors such as low interest, lack of motivation, laziness, and boredom resulting from traditional teaching methods have also been recognized as major contributors to students' inability to produce coherent descriptive texts (Nurfidoh & Kareviati, 2021; Syifa et al., 2022).

To address these challenges, an English language teaching method that accommodates students' need for interaction is required, one of which is Cooperative Learning (CL). Cooperative Learning is an instructional approach in which students are organized into small groups and work collaboratively to achieve shared learning objectives (Slavin, 1980; Jacobs, Power, & Inn, 2002). Through collaborative activities, students can exchange ideas, provide feedback, and construct knowledge together, which may ultimately enhance their writing skills. Beyond facilitating academic achievement, CL has also been

theoretically proven to foster shared responsibility, strengthen critical thinking skills, and encourage active student participation throughout the writing process (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Empirically, the implementation of CL in English language teaching has been validated by numerous studies across different educational levels. At the elementary school level, this collaborative approach has been shown to reduce writing difficulties by stimulating students' interpersonal skills and learning motivation (Hardianty et al., 2023). Similar benefits have been reported at higher educational levels, where group interaction helps students reduce language anxiety and expand their vocabulary knowledge more naturally (Chen, 2021). More specifically, in descriptive text writing, peer idea-sharing and constructive feedback activities through the Jigsaw technique have been found to create a more engaging and interactive writing classroom environment (Rahmi et al., 2025). Despite its numerous advantages, practical implementation often presents several challenges, including limited instructional time, the dominance of certain students within groups, and difficulties in classroom management, particularly in large classes (Chen, 2021; Rahmi et al., 2025).

Although previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of CL, most of them have employed quantitative and experimental designs focusing primarily on students' writing outcomes, such as scores and achievement gains. Consequently, explanations regarding how social interaction and collaboration actually occur and contribute to students' construction of descriptive texts remain limited. Furthermore, in-depth exploration of the psychological and technical challenges experienced simultaneously by both teachers and students in junior secondary school classrooms has rarely been examined from a qualitative perspective. Therefore, a qualitative investigation is necessary to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive and in-depth description of the implementation of CL in authentic classroom settings.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore two main focuses. First, it seeks to investigate how Cooperative Learning contributes to facilitating students' descriptive writing skills. Second, it aims to provide an in-depth description of the challenges encountered by both teachers and students during the implementation of Cooperative Learning in descriptive text writing instruction.

This study is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the findings may enrich the existing body of knowledge regarding the implementation of Cooperative Learning in writing instruction from a qualitative perspective. Practically, the findings may serve as an alternative instructional strategy for teachers, help students improve their writing skills through collaborative learning, and assist schools in developing more innovative approaches to English language teaching.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design to investigate the implementation of Cooperative Learning (CL) in teaching descriptive text writing. The research was conducted at a private junior high school in Karawang, West Java, Indonesia. Participants included one English teacher and seven ninth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. The student participants were chosen because they represented the seven heterogeneous learning groups and served as group leaders during classroom activities.

Data were gathered through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews using observation field notes and an interview protocol as the primary research instruments. Classroom observations were conducted during two instructional sessions specifically scheduled for the descriptive text writing unit in accordance with the school curriculum.

Considering the limited observation period and the possibility of the Hawthorne effect, source triangulation was incorporated into the research design to strengthen the credibility of the findings. The observations documented students' cooperative interactions during writing activities, while the follow-up interviews with the English teacher and the seven group leaders were used to confirm whether the observed collaboration patterns reflected their regular classroom practices. The teacher's long-term experience with the class also provided additional contextual validation of the observed behaviors.

The entire data collection process was completed over one month across three meetings. To enhance trustworthiness, the observation data were systematically compared with the interview transcripts through source triangulation. The collected data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, including data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report production. Ethical principles were maintained by obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and securing official approval from the school before the study commenced.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Contributions of Cooperative Learning to Descriptive Writing Development

The observation and interview findings revealed that Cooperative Learning (CL) contributed positively to students' descriptive writing development. During implementation, the teacher organized students into groups, assigned descriptive writing topics, and facilitated discussions through guidance and feedback. Most students actively exchanged ideas, discussed writing content, and supported one another throughout the writing process.

Peer feedback emerged as a recurring practice during observation: students frequently corrected each other's sentences, suggested improvements, and added new ideas to make their descriptive texts more complete. This collaborative exchange allowed students to organize their ideas more effectively and develop richer content, a pattern one student from Group 4 captured simply by noting that working together let them give each other input.

Interview data reinforced this observation. The teacher, reflecting on students' progress, described visible changes in how their writing had developed work that had become more organized and marked by richer, more varied vocabulary. Students echoed this sense of growth, though with varying degrees of confidence: a student from Group 3 attributed their improvement directly to how their group supported one another, while students from Groups 2 and 5 similarly reported feeling their writing ability had improved, even if more cautiously in the case of the former. Taken together, these findings suggest that CL facilitated descriptive writing development through idea sharing, peer feedback, vocabulary enrichment, and collaborative knowledge construction.

Contributions of Cooperative Learning to Students' Motivation and Participation

Beyond writing skills, CL also appeared to shape students' motivation, participation, and engagement during descriptive writing activities. Observation indicated a generally active and collaborative classroom atmosphere, with most students participating in discussions, searching for vocabulary meanings, sharing ideas, and helping peers who encountered difficulties.

Both the teacher and students expressed positive perceptions of this dynamic. The teacher viewed the method favorably precisely because it encouraged more collaborative learning and reduced boredom sentiment echoed from the students' side in more experiential terms. A student from Group 4 explained that the arrangement was enjoyable because everyone in the group contributed, and when someone struggled, the others stepped in to help; a student from Group 5 described the experience in similar terms, framing group work as fun and exciting rather than stressful, since studying together made the process lighter.

Beyond these academic benefits, students also reported that collaborative learning fostered teamwork, responsibility, mutual respect, and empathy among group members, along with greater confidence in expressing ideas and participating in class. That said, this experience was not uniform: motivation and participation varied across groups, with students in active, supportive groups reporting more positive experiences than those placed in less cooperative ones. Overall, the findings indicate that CL enhanced students' participation, motivation, confidence, and social interaction throughout the descriptive writing process albeit unevenly, depending on group dynamics.

Challenges and Coping Strategies in Implementing Cooperative Learning

Despite these benefits, CL implementation was not without difficulty. Observation data pointed to unequal participation as one of the most significant obstacles: while some students actively contributed to discussions and writing tasks, others remained passive or relied heavily on their peers. Interviews confirmed the frustration this could cause. A student from Group 1 described having to complete the descriptive text alone because group members were absent, effectively negating the cooperative structure altogether; a student from Group 2 offered a blunter assessment, simply calling the experience ineffective; and a student from Group 5 attributed similar frustration to difficulty managing certain group members.

Language-related difficulties presented a second, related challenge. Several students struggled specifically with vocabulary and verb forms one from Group 1 described English writing itself as difficult, while students from Groups 2 and 3 both pointed to confusion between verb 1 and verb 2 forms as a persistent obstacle. Compounding these issues, observation also revealed classroom management challenges: group discussions occasionally grew noisy, making it difficult for the teacher to monitor all groups simultaneously.

In response, both teacher and students developed coping strategies. The teacher encouraged equal participation, provided direct guidance, and assigned responsibilities to group members, while students turned to collaborative problem-solving of their own discussing difficulties, consulting worksheets, using dictionaries, and searching online, a strategy one student from Group 4 described as checking the worksheet or searching on Google whenever the group hit a wall. Students also suggested improvements for future implementation, including strengthening group cooperation, increasing individual responsibility, and incorporating more engaging activities such as educational games and songs. Together, these findings suggest that while CL offers substantial benefits for descriptive writing instruction, its effectiveness depends on balanced participation, adequate language proficiency, and effective classroom management.

Discussion

The findings of this study directly address the two main objectives previously formulated: (1) to explore how Cooperative Learning (CL) contributes to facilitating students' descriptive writing skills, and (2) to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by both teachers and students during the implementation of CL in descriptive writing instruction. As this study employed a descriptive qualitative design without a comparison group, the discussion below interprets these results as patterns of perceived and observed change among the participants rather than as a measured causal effect. Within this scope, the findings suggest that CL was associated with positive developments in students' writing, motivation, and participation, although these developments were not experienced equally across all groups and were accompanied by several practical challenges in the classroom.

Regarding the first objective, the finding that CL appeared to facilitate descriptive writing skills through idea sharing, peer feedback, and vocabulary enrichment is consistent with the theory proposed by Johnson and Johnson (1999), which argues that CL promotes shared responsibility and active participation throughout the writing process. This finding also resonates with Slavin's (1980) argument concerning the importance of positive interdependence among group members in improving learning outcomes. The teacher's observation that students' writing became more organized and contained richer vocabulary echoes the findings of Hardianty et al. (2023) at the elementary school level, suggesting that the perceived benefits of collaborative correction and idea exchange in CL are not limited to a particular educational level but may also extend to junior high school students.

Concerning students' affective and emotional responses, group interaction was perceived by students to reduce language anxiety and create a more comfortable learning environment, echoing findings reported by Chen (2021). Students' reports that CL made learning more enjoyable and less stressful suggest that affective benefits such as increased self-confidence, reduced boredom, and greater willingness to participate were, from the participants' perspective, just as important as cognitive gains

in helping them complete writing tasks often perceived as difficult. This phenomenon is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which views learning as a social process. The sense of comfort and support experienced by students within their groups appeared to create opportunities for peer scaffolding, enabling them to construct understanding collaboratively rather than in isolation.

However, an important pattern emerged indicating that the benefits of CL were not distributed equally among all students. While students in active groups reported noticeable improvements in their writing skills, those in less active groups particularly students who were forced to complete tasks independently due to absent group members reported little or no improvement and perceived the activities as ineffective. This qualitative finding adds an important nuance to the existing literature. Whereas previous quantitative studies generally concluded that CL is effective based on improvements in overall class achievement, such as the study conducted by Hardianty et al. (2023), the present qualitative data reveal that such aggregate effectiveness often conceals substantial disparities at the group level. In other words, the success of CL depends not only on the instructional method itself but also on the social conditions particularly balanced participation and group cohesion in which the method is implemented. This may explain why some previous studies have reported inconsistent results; the unit of analysis that determines the effectiveness of CL appears to be group dynamics rather than the classroom as a whole.

The challenges encountered by both teachers and students in this study, including unequal participation, linguistic difficulties related to vocabulary and verb forms, and classroom management issues such as excessive noise, are broadly consistent with the findings of Chen (2021) and Rahmi et al. (2025). Nevertheless, a particularly interesting linguistic finding emerged when students reported confusion regarding the distinction between the use of Verb 1 and Verb 2 while composing descriptive texts. Theoretically, descriptive texts require the use of the simple present tense, or Verb 1, because they describe inherent characteristics or permanent features of an object or person. The emergence of complaints regarding Verb 2 suggests the existence of inter-textual grammatical interference: because students learn several text genres within a relatively short period, such as narrative and recount texts that require Verb 2, they may develop grammatical anxiety that leads them to incorrectly transfer past-tense structures into descriptive writing.

Notably, this confusion persisted despite the collaborative structure of CL, suggesting that group work alone was insufficient to resolve it when no member of a given group possessed grammatical knowledge confident enough to correct verb-form errors during peer review. Rather than treating this as a limitation of CL, this finding points to how CL's existing collaborative structures could be used more deliberately to target the problem. Assigning a designated "grammar checker" role within each group during the editing stage, or pairing students with stronger and weaker grammatical understanding specifically for tense-focused peer tutoring before broader content revision begins, would allow CL itself to address this gap rather than leaving it to be resolved outside the group. Brief, explicit teacher input on the present-tense/past-tense distinction could then serve as a foundation that groups actively apply and reinforce through structured peer correction, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) notion of peer scaffolding, provided that at least one member of each group holds the linguistic knowledge needed to scaffold others effectively. In this sense, CL and explicit grammar instruction are not competing solutions but complementary ones, with CL supplying the social structure through which explicit knowledge is distributed and reinforced among peers.

On the other hand, the fact that students were able to propose coping strategies such as strengthening teamwork and incorporating games into classroom activities indicates a relatively high level of metacognitive awareness regarding their own learning processes. This awareness suggests that future implementations of CL may benefit from involving students directly in designing group roles and accountability mechanisms, such as the grammar-checker role proposed above, rather than relying solely on teacher-assigned roles. Overall, these findings extend the existing literature, which has been dominated by quantitative approaches, by offering a rich qualitative account of how social interaction

and collaboration actually occur in dynamic and uneven ways within the classroom, and of how such collaboration can be more deliberately structured to address specific linguistic challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how Cooperative Learning (CL) contributes to facilitating students' descriptive writing skills and examined the challenges encountered by teachers and students during its implementation. The findings revealed that CL positively supported students' descriptive writing development through idea sharing, peer feedback, and vocabulary enrichment. In addition, CL enhanced students' motivation, participation, confidence, and social skills, including teamwork, responsibility, and empathy. However, the effectiveness of CL varied across groups, as students in active and cooperative groups experienced greater benefits than those in groups with low participation or absent members.

The study also identified several challenges in implementing CL, including unequal participation among group members, difficulties with vocabulary and grammar, and classroom management issues. These challenges were addressed through teacher guidance, role distribution, collaborative problem-solving, and the use of learning resources such as dictionaries and online materials. The findings suggest that the success of CL depends not only on the instructional method itself but also on effective group collaboration, balanced participation, and adequate teacher support.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of research on Cooperative Learning by providing qualitative evidence of how collaborative interactions support descriptive writing development in the EFL classroom. Practically, the findings indicate that CL can be an effective instructional strategy for teaching descriptive writing when accompanied by clear guidance, balanced group responsibilities, and sufficient language support.

This study was limited by its small sample size, involving one teacher and seven group leaders representing seven heterogeneous learning groups at a single school. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other educational contexts. Future research is recommended to (1) include non-leader group members alongside group leaders, and across multiple schools, to capture a wider range of student experiences; (2) test the effectiveness of structured peer roles, such as assigning a designated "grammar checker" within each group during the editing stage, in resolving the Verb 1/Verb 2 confusion identified in this study; (3) examine the long-term effects of CL on descriptive writing achievement by combining classroom observation with pre- and post-test writing measures; and (4) investigate mechanisms for equalizing participation across group members, such as rotating leadership roles or individual accountability systems, to address the uneven benefits of CL observed among groups in this study.

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