



Enhancing Vocational High School Students' Descriptive Writing through Personal Journal Writing: An Experimental Study in an Indonesian Efl Classroom

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Abstract. Writing ability is a crucial skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning; however, many vocational high school students still experience difficulties in developing ideas, organizing texts, using appropriate vocabulary, and applying grammatical structures in descriptive writing. This study aimed to investigate the effect of Personal Journal Writing on vocational high school students' descriptive writing achievement and to examine its contribution to students' ability to organize ideas, use vocabulary, and apply grammatical structures. This research employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test control group design. The participants were 50 eleventh-grade students at SMK Al Azmi Seidadap, North Sumatra, Indonesia, consisting of an experimental group and a control group, each comprising 25 students. Data were collected through descriptive writing tests and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Shapiro-Wilk normality test, Levene's test, and an independent-samples t-test using IBM SPSS Statistics. The results revealed that the experimental group showed a higher improvement in writing achievement, with the mean score increasing from 59.88 in the pre-test to 81.96 in the post-test, while the control group improved from 59.84 to 66.84. The independent-samples t-test indicated a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($t(48) = 9.376$, $p < .001$). These findings demonstrate that Personal Journal Writing significantly improves students' descriptive writing ability by supporting idea development, vocabulary enrichment, text organization, and grammatical accuracy. Therefore, Personal Journal Writing is recommended as an effective learner-centered strategy for enhancing EFL writing instruction in vocational high schools.

Keywords: Descriptive Writing; EFL Learners; Personal Journal Writing; Vocational High School Students; Writing Achievement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is recognized as one of the most cognitively demanding skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it requires learners to integrate linguistic knowledge, rhetorical awareness, and higher-order thinking to communicate ideas effectively. Unlike receptive skills, writing demands that students generate ideas, organize information coherently, select appropriate vocabulary, and apply grammatical conventions accurately to produce meaningful texts. Consequently, writing competence has become an essential learning outcome in English language education, particularly for secondary school students who are expected to communicate academic and practical information through written language. In vocational education, writing proficiency is even more important because students are prepared to meet workplace communication demands that require clear, accurate, and well-organized written communication.

Among various genres taught in Indonesian secondary schools, descriptive text serves as one of the fundamental writing genres that enables students to describe people, places, objects, and phenomena systematically. Producing an effective descriptive text requires students to organize ideas logically, employ appropriate lexical choices, maintain coherence among sentences, and apply grammatical structures, particularly the simple present tense. Therefore, descriptive writing not only develops students' linguistic competence but also strengthens their ability to observe, organize, and communicate information in both academic and professional contexts.

Despite its importance, descriptive writing remains one of the most challenging language skills for many Indonesian EFL learners. Numerous studies have reported that students often experience difficulties generating ideas, developing supporting details, organizing paragraphs, applying grammatical rules, and using varied vocabulary in descriptive compositions. These challenges frequently result in short, repetitive, and grammatically inaccurate texts that fail to communicate ideas effectively. Limited opportunities for continuous writing practice further contribute to students' low confidence and writing achievement, as classroom instruction often emphasizes the final product rather than the writing process itself.

Similar problems were identified during the preliminary observation conducted at SMK Al Azmi Seidadap. Many eleventh-grade students experienced difficulty composing descriptive texts independently. Their writing generally contained limited supporting details, repetitive vocabulary, weak paragraph organization, and frequent grammatical errors, particularly in the use of the simple present tense and subject–verb agreement. Furthermore, students tended to rely heavily on teacher-provided examples and demonstrated hesitation when expressing their own ideas in English. These findings indicate that students require an instructional strategy that promotes continuous writing practice while simultaneously reducing writing anxiety and encouraging greater learner autonomy.

One instructional approach that has gained increasing attention in EFL writing instruction is Personal Journal Writing. Unlike conventional writing exercises that primarily emphasize grammatical accuracy and product evaluation, Personal Journal Writing encourages learners to express personal experiences, reflections, and opinions through continuous writing activities. Because students write regularly without excessive concern about making mistakes during the initial drafting process, they gradually become more confident in generating ideas, expanding vocabulary, organizing paragraphs, and applying grammatical structures.

Continuous journal writing also enables teachers to provide constructive feedback that supports students' writing development over time rather than evaluating isolated writing products.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the pedagogical benefits of journal writing in English language learning. Research has shown that journal-based writing activities contribute positively to students' writing fluency, reflective thinking, learner autonomy, motivation, and overall writing performance. Moreover, reflective journal writing has been found to facilitate idea development and improve learners' ability to organize written texts through continuous practice and reflection. Collectively, these findings suggest that journal writing provides a meaningful learning environment in which students gradually develop writing competence while building confidence in written communication.

Nevertheless, several important issues remain insufficiently explored in the existing literature. First, previous studies have predominantly investigated journal writing in higher education settings, while empirical evidence involving vocational high school students remains relatively limited. Second, most studies have examined journal writing as a strategy for improving general writing ability without specifically focusing on descriptive writing, which possesses distinctive linguistic and organizational characteristics. Third, although journal writing has been widely acknowledged as a process-oriented instructional strategy, relatively few studies have examined how continuous journal-writing practice contributes to specific components of descriptive writing, including idea development, vocabulary enrichment, grammatical accuracy, and text organization within Indonesian vocational EFL classrooms.

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating the implementation of Personal Journal Writing in the context of descriptive writing instruction for vocational high school students. Unlike previous studies that primarily evaluated overall writing achievement, this research specifically examines the effect of continuous journal-writing practice on students' ability to produce descriptive texts by improving idea organization, vocabulary use, coherence, and grammatical accuracy. By focusing on vocational secondary education, this study extends the existing body of knowledge on journal-based writing instruction and provides empirical evidence that may assist English teachers in designing more effective writing instruction for EFL learners.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of Personal Journal Writing on EFL students' descriptive writing achievement at SMK Al Azmi Seidadap. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing literature on process-oriented writing instruction while providing practical recommendations for English teachers seeking to improve students' descriptive writing competence through meaningful and continuous writing practice.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test control group design to examine the effect of Personal Journal Writing on students' descriptive writing achievement. Two intact eleventh-grade classes at SMK Al Azmi Seidadap, North Sumatra, Indonesia, were selected through purposive sampling. The participants consisted of 50 students, with 25 students assigned to the experimental group and 25 students to the control group. The experimental group received instruction through Personal Journal Writing, while the control group was taught using the conventional writing instruction. Before the treatment, both groups completed a pre-test to measure their initial descriptive writing ability. After the treatment sessions, a post-test was administered to evaluate students' writing achievement.

The research instrument was a descriptive writing test. Students' writing was assessed using an analytical scoring rubric covering four aspects: organization, vocabulary, coherence and cohesion, and grammatical accuracy. The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were first calculated to summarize students' writing performance. Prior to hypothesis testing, the Shapiro–Wilk test and Levene's test were conducted to examine data normality and homogeneity. An independent-samples *t*-test was then performed to determine whether Personal Journal Writing had a significant effect on students' descriptive writing achievement at the 0.05 significance level.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the effect of Personal Journal Writing on students' descriptive writing ability at SMKS Al Azmi Seidadap Tanjung Asri. To achieve this objective, students in both the experimental and control groups completed a pre-test before the treatment and a post-test after the treatment. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, including the Shapiro–Wilk normality test, Levene's test of homogeneity, and the Independent Samples *t*-test.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Writing Scores.

Group	N	Pre-test ± SD	Pre-test ± SD	Mean Gain
Experimental	25	59.88 ± 5.92	81.96 ± 5.88	22.8
Group	25	59.84 ± 5.70	66.84 ± 5.52	7.00

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of students' writing achievement in both groups before and after the implementation of the instructional treatment. Prior to the treatment, the experimental group obtained a mean pre-test score of 59.88 (SD = 5.92), while the control group achieved a mean score of 59.84 (SD = 5.70). The negligible difference between the two

groups indicates that the participants had comparable initial writing proficiency, suggesting that both groups were academically equivalent before the intervention.

Following the treatment, the experimental group demonstrated a substantial improvement in writing achievement. The mean post-test score increased to 81.96 (SD = 5.88), whereas the control group obtained a mean score of 66.84 (SD = 5.52). The experimental group achieved a mean gain of 22.08 points, which was considerably higher than the control group's gain of 7.00 points. These findings indicate that students who participated in Personal Journal Writing experienced greater improvement in descriptive writing performance than those who received conventional writing instruction.

Although the descriptive statistics suggest the positive effect of Personal Journal Writing, inferential statistical analyses were conducted to determine whether the observed difference between the two groups was statistically significant.

Table 2. Summary of Statistical Analysis.

Analysis	Result	Decision
Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test (experimental)	$p = .809$	Normal Distribution
Shapiro-Wilk Normality (control)	$p = .417$	Normal Distribution
Levene's Test of Homogeneity	$p = .739$	Homogeneous Variance
Independent Samples t -test	$t(48) = 9.376, p < .001$	H_0 Rejected

Prior to hypothesis testing, the assumptions required for parametric analysis were examined. The results of the Shapiro–Wilk test showed significance values of .809 for the experimental group and .417 for the control group. Since both values were greater than the significance level of .05, the post-test scores were considered normally distributed. Furthermore, Levene's test produced a significance value of .739, indicating that the variances of the two groups were homogeneous. Therefore, the assumptions for conducting the Independent Samples t -test were satisfied.

The Independent Samples t -test revealed a statistically significant difference between the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups, $t(48) = 9.376, p < .001$. Because the probability value was lower than .05, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was accepted. This finding indicates that the use of Personal Journal Writing had a statistically significant positive effect on students' descriptive writing ability.

Overall, the statistical findings consistently demonstrate that students who were taught through Personal Journal Writing achieved significantly better writing performance than those who received conventional instruction. The considerably higher post-test mean score and learning gain obtained by the experimental group provide empirical evidence that regular journal-writing activities effectively enhance students' ability to produce descriptive texts.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Personal Journal Writing had a significant positive effect on students' descriptive writing ability. Students who received the treatment demonstrated better writing performance than those who learned through conventional instruction. These findings suggest that engaging students in regular journal-writing activities provides meaningful opportunities to practice writing, develop ideas, and improve their ability to produce descriptive texts.

One possible explanation for this improvement is that Personal Journal Writing creates a learner-centered writing environment in which students are encouraged to express personal experiences and opinions without excessive concern about making grammatical mistakes during the initial stage of writing. This process allows students to focus on generating and organizing ideas before refining language accuracy. Such continuous practice is consistent with the process approach to writing, which emphasizes that writing proficiency develops through drafting, revising, reflection, and feedback rather than through grammar instruction alone (Hyland, 2019). Likewise, Harmer (2004) argues that effective writing instruction should provide learners with repeated opportunities to plan, draft, revise, and edit their work, enabling gradual improvement in both linguistic accuracy and text organization.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on journal writing in English language learning. Sudirman et al. (2021) reported that reflective journal writing promotes idea generation, learner autonomy, and writing fluency by encouraging students to reflect on their learning experiences. Similarly, Amalia et al. (2024) found that reflective journaling significantly improved EFL students' writing skills because students became more confident in expressing ideas and were more actively engaged throughout the writing process. In addition, Reswari et al. (2024) reported that reflective journal activities supported students in producing more acceptable descriptive texts by improving organization, vocabulary use, and coherence. The consistency between the present findings and these previous studies strengthens the evidence that journal-writing activities constitute an effective instructional strategy for improving writing performance in EFL classrooms.

An important contribution of the present study lies in its educational context. While previous studies have primarily examined reflective journal writing among university students or in general EFL settings, this study demonstrates its effectiveness in improving descriptive writing among vocational high school students in Indonesia. This finding extends the existing literature by providing empirical evidence that Personal Journal Writing can be successfully implemented in vocational secondary education, where students often experience difficulties

in generating ideas, organizing paragraphs, and developing confidence in English writing. Therefore, the study contributes contextual evidence supporting the integration of learner-centered writing practices into vocational EFL instruction.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that English teachers should consider integrating Personal Journal Writing into regular classroom activities. Rather than emphasizing grammatical accuracy from the beginning, teachers may first encourage students to express ideas freely through journal entries and subsequently provide constructive feedback to improve language use. Such an approach not only enhances students' descriptive writing ability but also promotes writing confidence, learner autonomy, and active participation throughout the learning process.

Despite these positive findings, the study has several limitations. The participants were drawn from only one vocational high school, and the duration of the treatment was relatively short. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the context of this study. Future research is recommended to involve larger samples, longer intervention periods, and different educational settings to examine the effectiveness of Personal Journal Writing across various writing genres and levels of education.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study investigated the effect of Personal Journal Writing on vocational high school students' descriptive writing achievement at SMK Al Azmi Seidadap. The findings demonstrate that students who participated in Personal Journal Writing significantly outperformed those who received conventional writing instruction. Regular journal-writing activities enabled students to develop ideas more effectively, organize descriptive texts more coherently, enrich their vocabulary, and apply grammatical structures with greater accuracy. These findings confirm that continuous writing practice through Personal Journal Writing provides meaningful opportunities for students to improve both the quality of their written products and their confidence in expressing ideas in English.

The present study also contributes to the growing body of research on process-oriented writing instruction by providing empirical evidence from the context of Indonesian vocational high school education, which has received relatively limited attention in previous studies. Unlike many earlier studies that focused on university students or general writing ability, this research specifically demonstrates the effectiveness of Personal Journal Writing in enhancing descriptive writing among vocational EFL learners. Therefore, Personal Journal Writing can

be considered an effective learner-cantered instructional strategy that supports students' writing development through authentic, continuous, and reflective writing practice.

Overall, the findings suggest that integrating Personal Journal Writing into English writing instruction may serve as a practical alternative to conventional teaching approaches. By creating a supportive learning environment that encourages students to express ideas freely before focusing on linguistic accuracy, teachers can facilitate more meaningful writing experiences and promote sustained improvement in students' descriptive writing ability.

Based on the findings of this study, English teachers are encouraged to integrate Personal Journal Writing into regular writing instruction, particularly when teaching descriptive texts. Providing students with continuous opportunities to write about meaningful personal experiences may help improve idea development, writing fluency, vocabulary use, and grammatical accuracy while fostering greater confidence and learner autonomy. Future researchers are recommended to investigate the effectiveness of Personal Journal Writing with larger and more diverse participant groups, longer intervention periods, and different educational contexts or writing genres. In addition, further studies may employ mixed-method or qualitative approaches to explore students' perceptions, learning experiences, and writing processes in greater depth, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the role of journal writing in EFL instruction.

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