

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.6.Issue.1.2019 (Jan-March)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

DESCRIPTIVE EFL WRITING DEVELOPMENT OF A TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL  
STUDENT: AN INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.6119.180>



ABSTRACT

This descriptive research aims at finding out how a student writer of a senior technical high school, Multimedia Department, develops in writing a descriptive piece of writing. Such a development is viewed along four major elements of a piece of writing, that is, writing content, organization, word choice and structures (sentence and paragraph structures), and writing mechanics. To get the data, the researchers asked 21 Grade X students of a Multimedia Department of a senior technical high school in the City of Kupang to write a piece of procedural text on any topic on 5 September, 2018. They wrote for 45 minutes in classroom where they were allowed to discuss their writings with their friends, open a dictionary, and asked for help from their teacher or friends when they needed some help in the process of writing the text. Two months after that, namely, 12 November, 2018, the students were asked to revise and/or edit their own writing within the same treatment/condition of writing. However, for analysis purposes, the researchers chose a piece of writing randomly to study how its particular writer, RS, developed as a student writer on aspects mentioned above. It is found that although the student developed well on such elements of writing, his writing is full of errors/mistakes concerning word choice, sentence structures, and mechanics of writing. To ensure that the student can develop well as a student writer, his teacher should focus on such issues in teaching him in his class, a phenomenon which is also true for other students as they are basically from the same background and, therefore, face, more or less, the same problems in learning English in general, EFL descriptive writing in particular.

**Keywords:** EFL, descriptive writing, technical high school students, and writing development

## INTRODUCTION

As a compulsory subject from grade VII to Grade XII in Indonesian school system, English as a foreign language (EFL) has been very popular among Indonesian secondary school students. It is, therefore, understandable that there have been a lot of studies and/or ideas on the teaching and learning of EFL in Indonesian context (see, for example, Nababan 1982/1986; Saukah & Murdibjono, 1996; Tans et al., 1996/1999a/b/2014). However, there has been no study on how technical high school students (i.e. from Grade X to Grade XII) develop as EFL student writers who also study English for specific purposes, that is, mastering technical terms/expressions within their field of study (civil, mechanical, and electric engineering) as they are prepared to be skillful workers ready for working on those fields after their formal education as indicated by the Instruction of Indonesian President No. 9, 2016, on *Revitalization of Technical High Schools*. It is hoped that in the future all technical high school graduates are competent and ready to work for industries as they suit the needs of the industries (*Kompas*, 8/3/2018, p. 11). This is why the researchers are interested in doing some research on the topic. We focus our study on how students of that level of education<sup>1</sup> develop as EFL student writers, particularly in descriptive writings related to technical sciences and skills.

Answering this question is important for several reasons. First, Indonesia is now trying its best to make sure that vocational high schools like the one as the focus of this study, that is, *SMKN 1*, Kupang, can produce graduates who are really skillful in their fields of study so that they will not be unemployed when they finish their study. One of the major issues to achieve within that line of thought is that the students are supposed to be more diligent in learning EFL so that they could be more competent to use it as it is commonly used in their learning processes in schools and in their working fields when they finish their study. Thus, this study is important since it could help the students improve their English.

Secondly, students of this kind of education usually describe, both orally and writtenly, what they should do with the equipment they use, be it related to civil engineering, mechanical engineering, and electrical engineering. In that sense, it is important that their English teachers, in particular, and their teachers, in general, who teach them content-related subjects know how their students develop as descriptive student writers since this kind of writing is usually practiced when they do their job as a future mechanic in schools and real mechanic later beyond school.

Thirdly, this study is also important in terms of using English as a means of learning. By improving their English mastery, particularly in descriptive writing, the students can then be more successful in learning other subjects in their schools since English is also a means of learning, particularly nowadays when many textbooks and instructions of using certain machines or tools of any kind are written in English.

Fourthly, Indonesian experience of “exporting” non-skilled workers like domestic helps that have faced a lot of problems when they work abroad leads the country to realize that it is important to send abroad more highly skilled workers so that they would not face the problems non-skilled workers usually face. To do so, they have to be able to use English as a means to enhance their competence and to be more competitive internationally. This study will do just that: helping the students master English (that is, speaking, listening, and reading since writing can also help the students to be good speakers, readers, and listeners) and, therefore, improve their competitive power.

Fifthly, being a good student writer in English can help them to be good writers in Indonesian or any language other than English because of language interdependence (Cummins, 1979). Mastering Indonesian is, of course, great because they live in Indonesia and it is important they are able to use the language in their daily lives. This study is to ensure that they can also use Indonesian well as the impact of their English

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<sup>1</sup>In this study we have purposively chosen Grade X students of a technical state secondary school in the City of Kupang, Timor, ENT, as our research subjects/school. Some of our reasons are as follows: the school is one of the best of its kind in the City of Kupang; it is in the same city where the researchers live; and, as for grade X, they are in the first grade of studying at such a school so that they may have more time to study EFL and, therefore, can be inspired to study the subject more intensively in the future. For this article, however, we chose randomly a student of this group since we wanted to know how he developed as student writer.

learning. This is also true for their learning to write in English. When they can write in English, they must be able to write in Indonesian as well (Tans, 1999b). In other words, it is a process of creating great Indonesian writers: how to help those who are both good and poor at writing so all can develop well as student writers in EFL or in Indonesian due to inter language dependence. This is also relevant for Indonesia which tries hard to move from an oral tradition to literacy culture with a very strong written tradition. This is seen, among other things, from the decision made by the Central Government of Indonesia that teachers and lecturers must be competent in writing as shown by their publication which is a prerequisite for their promotion (Cf. Alisjahbana, 1990; Sehandi, 1997; Navis, 1997; Aman, 2014; Nais, 2015).

In addition, knowing the students' strengths and weaknesses in EFL writing (and in Indonesian writing later) is important so that proper treatments can be done to help those students succeed in their school learning and beyond as Tans (2012/2014) has already suggested that understanding how the students learn to write is necessary to be able to properly help them in their processes to become good student writers.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since this research is related to writing development, this section focuses on two major issues, that is, what is meant by descriptive writing and writing development.

#### Descriptive Writing

Descriptive texts are usually classified into two major categories, that is, texts that describe a process and texts that describe a person/thing. The first is about doing/making something through some processes/steps; the latter is about having a picture of someone or something by using certain words so that its readers would have a picture of the person/thing in their mind, that is, they can imagine what that person or thing looks like by reading the description as such (see, for example, Tans, 2014: 63-68).

Laila (2011: 226-227) asserts that a descriptive text has certain social function, that is, it is "a text which portrays the image of a certain thing from which a writer wants to transfer it to readers. Mostly descriptive texts depict or describe the image of a certain person, animal, things, and location or place. The social function of description text is to inform the readers about the illustration of certain persons, places, or some things in specific ways."

Laila (2011: 227) adds that a descriptive text has the following generic structure, that is, identification followed by a description as in the following Table 1.

Table 1: Elements and an Example of a Descriptive Text

Text Elements	Content	An Example: My Pet
Identification	An introduction to the objects/things described which includes who or what, when, where.	I have a pet. It is a dog, and I call it Brownie. Brownie is a Chinese breed.
Description	A description of an object. For example the color, the size, the smell, the taste, etc. For persons: what they look like, what they do, how they act, what they like or dislike, what makes them special. For something: how it looks, sounds, feels, smells or tastes, where it is seen or found, what it does, how it is used, what makes it special.	It is small, fluffy, and cute. It has got thick brown fur. When I cuddle it, the fur feels soft. Brownie does not like bones. Every day it eats soft food like steamed rice, fish or bread. Every morning I give her milk and bread. When I am at school, Brownie plays with my cat. They get along well, and never fight maybe because Brownies does not bark a lot. It treats the other animals in our house gently, and it never eats shoes. Brownie is really a sweet and friendly animal.

She also says that a descriptive text has the following language features:

1. Certain nouns, such as teacher, house, my cat, bridge, etc.
2. Simple Present Tense.
3. Detailed noun phrases to give information about a subject, such as *It was a large open rowboat, a sweet young lady, the deaf person, etc.*
4. Various adjectives which are describing, numbering, classifying such as two strong legs, sharp white fangs, her curly hair, etc.
5. Relating verbs to give information about a subject, such as *My mum is really cool; It has very thick fur, the rest remains at home, etc.*
6. Thinking verbs and feeling verbs to reveal the writer's view, such as *The police believe the suspect is armed; I think it is a clever animal, etc.*
7. Action verbs, such as *Our new puppy bites our shoes; It eats soft food, etc.*
8. Adverbs to give additional information about manner, such as fast, gradually, at the tree house, etc.
9. Figurative language such as simile and metaphor, e.g. *John is white as chalk, sat tight, etc.* (Laila, 2011: 235).

Tans (2014: 46) gives an example of describing a process as in the following text.

#### Text 1

#### Making a Cup of Black Coffee

By Felix Tans

In this piece of writing, I want to describe several ways of making a cup of black coffee. First, you have to have a cup, a spoon full of coffee, a spoon, some sugar, and some hot water ready. Second, put some sugar in the cup. The amount of sugar you put in may be a spoonful, it may also be more or less depending on how you want your coffee. If you want to make it very sweet, then two spoons of sugar is enough. Yet if you want to make it just right, a spoon of sugar is perhaps excellent. Third, put some coffee in the cup. Like the sugar, the amount of coffee you put in depends on how you want your coffee: if you want to make it very strong, then two or three spoons of coffee will be enough, but if you simply want it to be not too strong, not too weak, just right, a spoon of coffee is enough. Fourth, pour some hot water into the cup until it is full. Fifth, stir the cup using your spoon until the sugar and the coffee are thoroughly mixed up. Sixth, wait for several minutes to cool it down before it is ready to consume. So, these are some steps that you should go through to make a cup of coffee without milk.

The first sentence, that is, "In this piece of writing, I want to describe several ways of making a cup of black coffee," is identification and the rest is the writer's description of making a glass of black coffee, except the last sentence which is a conclusion: "So, these are some steps that you should go through to make a cup of coffee without milk." As the text shows, its description uses such words as *first*, *second* and *third* describing the process of making something, *a glass of black coffee* in this context.

#### Writing Development

Britton et al. (in Tans, 1999b:12) define writing development as the growth of a person's ability to write through a period of time. During this period of growing ability, learners, under normal conditions, develop from being learner writers to becoming mature writers.

In that growing process, becoming a learner writer or a student writer means entering into the very first step of becoming a writer, that is, understanding that words can be written down. To write the them down on a piece of paper or whiteboard or a laptop screen or wherever, someone needs to know how to use some letters into syllables into words into sentences in paragraphs into a discourse.

According to Raison and Rivalland (1995), to achieve a status of being a great writer, there are more or less six stages, namely, in successive order: 1) role-play writing; 2) experimental writing; 3) early writing; 4) conventional writing; 5) proficient writing; and, 6) advanced writing (in Tans, 1999b: 12). They add that each

step of an individual's writing development has some characteristics which are unique. In the writing stage of role-play, for example, children start to "come to terms with a new aspect of language, that of written symbols. They experiment with marks on paper with the intention of communicating a message or emulating adult writing" (in Tans, 1999b: 12). In the later stages, however, when the students become more capable in writing, Raison & Rivalland add, the students "have developed a personal style of writing and are able to manipulate forms of writing to suit their purposes. They have control over spelling and punctuation. They choose from a large vocabulary and their writing is cohesive, coherent, and satisfying" (1995:i).

In summarizing such a development, Wilkinson et al. (1980:222) say:

We see this [writing development] as a movement from dependence to autonomy; from convention to uniqueness; from subjectivity to objectivity; from ignorance to understanding; from self to neighbor as self ... in our description, however, there is no "end products": maturity is not a state which finally attained to: one does not arrive, one is continually arriving.

This is also true for writing development in an L-2 like EFL writing as Odell (1977) and Peyton et al. (1990) say that writing development moves as follows: from something concrete to something abstract, from less focused ideas to more focused ideas, from less complex clauses to more complex clauses, from less varied sentences to more varied structures, from less cohesive ties to more cohesive ties (in Tans, 1999b: 20). This is supported by Shaw and Liu (1998: 225) who found that along one's writing development, main "changes were from features of spoken English to those more typical of formal writing, both in surface detail and in more fundamental characteristics." In some cases, however, such a development in writing seems to be stagnant as Shaw and Liu add, "There was less change in complexity of construction or variety of vocabulary improved correctness in the structures used was balanced by errors in new structures being attempted" (1998:225).

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This research aims at finding out: 1) how a Grade X research subject of a technical high school in the City of Kupang, develop his descriptive writing competences; 2) what his strengths are in descriptive writing development; and, 3) what his weaknesses are in descriptive writing development.

In addition to those aims, this research is to create a society with a strong literacy competence and to make the research subject and, through the research subject and this research, other students can also be more successful in their learning. It is our belief that when they are more successful within themselves, they can then make their social and physical environment better, including their families and Indonesia as a nation at large.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This study is classified as a descriptive research, namely, a research paradigm aiming at describing a phenomenon objectively (see, for example, Borg and Gall, 1989: 393; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007: 69-76). In this research, the phenomenon to be studied is how a student develops as a student writer in EFL descriptive writing.

The student was in Grade X, Multimedia Department, of a state technical vocational high school in the City of Kupang. In this research, the researchers used descriptive writing test as the only instrument to get the data, that is, by asking 21 Grade X students of the Multimedia Department of the technical school on 5 September, 2018 to write in class a descriptive text on any topic suggested by their teacher who was also in the class when his students write and/or revise their writings.

The very same text was then rewritten in class by its relevant student writer at the end of the research period, that is, 12 November, 2018, with the same treatment, i.e. they were allowed to discuss their writings with their teachers, their friends, and they were also allowed to open up any kind of dictionaries they want to use. The time used to write and/or to revise their writing was 45 minutes. One of those students, that is, RS, his name initials, was then randomly chosen for this research purpose.

RS'hand writings, namely written on 5 September and its revision/editing on 12 November, 2018, were then analysed in terms of their contents, word choice and structure (that is, sentence structure and paragraph structure), writing organization, and mechanics. To make it easier for the researchers in analyzing the student's writings, his handwritings were typed as they are written in the original texts and were given line numbers after each line of every single piece of writing by the students. When there were some doubts on what kinds of letter or punctuations were used, that is, when his handwritings were not clear, the researchers asked the writer for confirmation.

The data were classified and analyzed based on writing development and content analysis theories of Odell (1977), Ivanic (1995), Zamel (1982) and Dunbar et al. (1991) on the major elements of a descriptive piece of writing, that is, its content, organization, word choice and structure (that is, sentence and paragraph structures), and mechanics of writing (that is, spelling and punctuations).

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Since this research aims at finding out three major things, that is, research subject's descriptive writing development, strengths and weaknesses in descriptive writing development, this chapter is, therefore, divided into three major parts, that is, research subject's descriptive writing development, research subject's strengths in descriptive writing development, and research subject's weaknesses in descriptive writing development.

### Research Subject's Descriptive Writing Development

On September 5, 2018, our research subject wrote the following Text 2. It consists of 14 lines, 87 words, five sentences, and 87 words, three symbols, and two paragraphs.

#### Text 2

#### PROCEDUR TEXT (line 1)

(by RS)

How to make: shut down in windows 10 (line 2)

If someone finishes using the computer , (line 3)

He will definitely turn off the computer (line 4)

and this is steps to turn off the computer. (line 5)

Press the windows key on the Key board or click (line 6)

the start button. (line 7)

Click the power option and click shut down (line 8)

Or. (line 9)

Press **Ctrl + Alt + Del** and click the Power (line 10)

button In the bottom right – hand corner of the screen (line 11)

Or. (line 12)

From the windows **Desktop**, Press **Alt + F4** to get (line 13)

Shut down windows 10 Screen shown below. (line 14)

As seen above, Text 2 by RS, his name initials, on 5 September, 2018, is coherent, that is, the text is about shutting down Windows 10. In that sense, the content of RS' writing is well-constructed. Its organization, however, is not that well-constructed as it has its introduction (lines 2-4) and its thesis development (lines 6-14), but it has no conclusion.

Its word choice is generally good, except the use of *to make* (line 2), which should be deleted, preposition *in* (line 2), which should be deleted, article *the* (line 3), which should be *a*, and preposition *In* (line 11), which should be *at*. The phrase *to get* (line 13) is accurate, but it is confusing since the following phrase "shut down" is not in quotation marks which is also the case for the phrase "shut down" on line 8. The use of the word *below* (line 14) is also confusing as it is supposed to be followed by the word *it* referring to *Alt + F4*, but it is not used by RS.



Its sentence structure is generally good except, "... this is steps to ..." (line 5) that should be "... these are steps to ...". Its paragraph structure is also good as it is chronologically expressed. It could be better, however, if RS includes a concluding paragraph.

What seems to be poor is its mechanics. The word *Procedure* is written as *PROCEDUR* (line 1); keyboard as *Key board* (line 6), the use of colon (:) (line 2), comma (,) (lines 3 and 13), capital *H* for *He* (line 4), capital *K* for *Key* (line 6), the use of full stop after *Or* (lines 9 and 12), the use dash (–) for *right – hand* instead of *right-hand* (line 11) as well as the use of capital letters for *h* in *tHe* and *P* in *Power* (line 10) are also inaccurate. It is also the case for putting the word *Or* on a single line and the sentences following it on new lines, which is not common in English writing.

Text 2 should, therefore, be revised and reedited as the following Text 3. It is, of course, open for other versions which are relevant with both the topic of the text and its genre, that is, a procedural text, which is a part of descriptive text.

#### Text 3

##### PROCEDURAL TEXT (line 1)

(by RS)

How to shut down Windows 10 (line 2)

If someone finishes using a computer, (line 3)  
he/she will definitely turn off the computer (line 4)  
and these are some steps to turn off the computer. (line 5)  
Press the Windows key on the keyboard or click (line 6)  
the start button. (line 7)

Click the power option and click "shut down" (line 8)  
or press **Ctrl + Alt + Del** and click the "Power" (line 9)  
button at the bottom right-hand corner of the screen (line 10)  
or from the windows **Desktop**, press **Alt + F4** to get (line 11)  
"Shut down" Windows 10 Screen shown below it (line 12).

RS' version of revising and/or editing Text 2, however, can be seen in the following Text 4, which is more comprehensive, coherent and cohesive. It consists of 22 lines, 189 words, three symbols, and 9 sentences.

#### Text 4

##### How to shut down Windows 10 (line1)

(by RS)

Recently, most of us especially students and (line 2)  
workers both in offices , and companies and so on (line 3)  
are much assisted by the presence of computer or (line 4)  
laptops to complete tha tasks or Jobs faster and (line 5)  
easier . But , there are still many of us who do (line 6)  
not understand the procedures for using computer properly (line 7).  
The slightest mistakes that occurs can be a big problem (line 8)  
If it's no fixed in the first place . (line 9)

For examples, if someone finishes using the computer , (line 10)  
he / she will definitely turn off the computer . But , (line 11)  
we have to do it step by step . Firstly, we have to (line 12)  
make sure that no more files or document open. Besides, (line 13)  
that we must be sure that all the files or documents (line 14)

that we have just created are stored properly . Then, (line 15)  
 press the windows key on the keyboard or click the (line 16)  
 start button. Click the power option and click (line 17)  
 shut down or press “ Ctrl + Alt + De;” and click (line 18)  
 the Power button in the button right - hand corner (line 19)  
 at the screen or form the windows desktop , press (line 20)  
 “ Alt + F4” to get shut down windows 10 (line 21)  
 screen. (line 22)

As Text 4 shows, RS seems to be more successful in having four major elements of his writing, that is, its content, organization, word choice and English structure (i.e, sentence and paragraph structures) and its mechanics have been getting better compared to his Text 2. In other words, RS has developed better in such elements of his procedural text writing after around two months in his first year of secondary technical vocational experience.

It does not mean, however, that Text 4 is without some errors/mistakes. Its organization, for example, is not complete; it has its introduction (that is, paragraph one), but it is too long for such a short piece of essay. Its thesis development (paragraph two) even starts after the first sentence of that paragraph and it has no conclusion.

Its word choice is not that complete either. Such words/phrases like *both ... and ... and so on* (line 3), *no* instead of *not* (line 9), *examples* instead of *example* (line 10), and *the* instead of *a* (line 10), *that* (line 13), which is not necessary, *in* instead of *at* (line 19) show that RS' word choice is not tat perfect. His use of pronoun *we*(line 12) instead of *she/he* (line 12) is also another case of such poor word choice.

In addition, two sentence structures have been falsely-constructed, that is, “The slightest mistakes that occurs can be a big problem” (line 8) and “... that no more files or document open” (line 13) which should be “The slightest mistakes that occur can be a big problem” and “... that no more files or document is open” respectively.

This is also true for mechanics. RS fails to use such punctuations as comma(,) (line 2 and line 3), quotation marks for the phrase “Start” button (line 18), hyphen (line 19) for the word “right-hand” which is also spaced, and exclamatory marks after sentences 8 and 9. In general, however, Text 4 has been much better than Text 2 as has been stated above.

### Research Subject's Strengths in Descriptive Writing Development

Based on the analysis of his Text 4, it is found that RS has some strengths in his writing development. First, after two months of schooling, he is more competent to write a descriptive text whose content is more comprehensive, that is, more complete and more logically presented compared to his Text 2, written two months earlier.

Second, he is also more competent in constructing his writing organization. Although his Text 4 is without conclusion like Text 2, but in Text 4 his introduction and thesis development have been more complete than his Text 2, that is, his introduction is truly descriptive, and not just a series of lists as he did in Text 2.

Thirdly, RS is also more competent to use more relevant and various kinds of word choice, sentences structures, and paragraph structures. As a matter of fact, in Text 4, RS uses 189 words compared to 87 words in Text 2, 9 sentences compared to five in Text 2, and longer paragraphs in Text 3.

Finally, his mechanics are also generally excellent as he has been more capable to use such punctuations like comma, full stops, and quotation marks. It is acknowledged, however, that such punctuations like hyphen, slash, and exclamatory mark have not been well-used as described further below.



### Research Subject's Weaknesses in Descriptive Writing Development

Based on the analysis of his Text 4, it is found that RS has several weaknesses. First, his competence to have a good piece of writing organization is not that good. Text 4, for example, is still like Text 2, that is, it has not concluding session. It has its introduction and thesis development as stated above, but his introduction is not that clear and, therefore, it is hard to find his thesis statement in the introduction. It also has his thesis development (paragraph two), but it is not well-developed as the first part of his second paragraph still contains a kind of introduction.

Secondly, his word choice seems to be pretty weak in some cases as have been described above. So does his sentence structure and paragraph structure. RS seems to have no clear idea what is meant by having a main idea in a paragraph supported by some supporting ideas. His second paragraph, for example, starts with an example, which is a supporting idea to his statement in paragraph one, i.e. the last two sentence, "The slightest mistakes that occurs can be a big problem if it's not fixed in the first place" (line 8 and line 9). He supports this idea by giving an example, but it is given in paragraph two, that is, "For examples, if someone finishes using the computer, he / she will definitely turn off the computer" (lines 10 and 11).

Thirdly, RS is poor at using such punctuations as comma, slash, hyphen, and quotation marks as in, "... workers both in offices, and companies and so on..." (line 3), "... he / she will definitely turn off the computer. But ... (line 11), "... the Power button in the bottom right-hand corner ..." (line 19), and "... click the start button..." (lines 16-17) in which the phrase "the start" be put quotation marks.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Conclusions

In conclusion, it is important to restate here that RS, the research subject of this study, has developed well after two months of formal learning EFL descriptive writing in his schools, that is, from early September to early November 2018. His ability to have a good content of descriptive writing, good descriptive writing organization, better word choice and structure (that is, his sentence structure and paragraph structure) as well as better mechanics has improved a lot.

It is acknowledged, however, that such elements of writing are not without mistakes/errors in his descriptive writing. In other words, there are many things that he needs to improve in order to make sure that his writing has good content, writing organization, word choice and sentence/paragraph structure, and mechanics.

Along the process, a teacher's role and the role of his family and surroundings are indeed crucial. This is to say that to ensure that the student can develop well as a student writer, his teachers should focus on such issues in teaching him in their classrooms, a phenomenon which is also true for other students as they are, in general, from the same backgrounds and, therefore, face, more or less, the same problems in learning English in general, EFL descriptive writing in particular. In this sense, like their teachers, their parents and siblings should also be more active in helping those students along their journeys to becoming good student writers in and beyond schools and, through writing, becoming more successful/independent human beings in schools and beyond.

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