

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the background of the study, the research question, the purpose of the study, the scope and the significance of the study.

1.1 Background of the study

English has become one of the most influential global communication tools in modern society, playing a vital role in education, technology, economics, and diplomacy. In Indonesia, English has been recognized as a foreign language and has become a compulsory subject at various educational levels (Zein, 2016). In junior high school, students are required to master four language skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing (Anggraini, 2019). These skills are interconnected; reading and listening are classified as receptive skills, while speaking and writing are productive skills.

Among these four skills, writing holds particular complexity. Writing is not merely arranging words into sentences; it is a cognitive process that involves organizing ideas, applying linguistic rules, and expressing meaning logically. Sakkir (2018) states that writing skills include mastery of grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and appropriate vocabulary. Dalman (2015) as cited in Inggriyani & Pebrianti (2021) defines writing as a creative process of expressing ideas to inform, persuade, or entertain others. Therefore, writing reflects not only language proficiency

but also critical and creative thinking. In the Merdeka Curriculum, writing is considered essential for developing literacy and effective communication skills.

However, writing remains a significant challenge for many Indonesian students. Unlike speaking, writing requires learners to generate and organize ideas, select appropriate vocabulary, apply grammatical rules accurately, and produce coherent texts simultaneously. Because writing involves multiple cognitive and linguistic processes, it is often perceived as one of the most demanding language skills by both native and non-native speakers (Ulya & Srisudarso, 2023). Similarly, Sribagus (2018) describes writing as a complex activity because it requires writers to express ideas clearly while maintaining accuracy, coherence, and organization. Moreover, conventional writing instruction often emphasizes memorizing sentence patterns and grammatical structures, leaving limited opportunities for students to engage in the cognitive processes involved in writing, such as observing, interpreting, generating ideas, and organizing information. In contrast, Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is designed to engage students in observing visual images, discussing multiple interpretations, and providing evidence for their ideas before writing. Through these activities, VTS places greater emphasis on meaning construction than on memorization alone.

Given these challenges, it is important to focus on a specific type of text taught at the junior high school level, namely descriptive text. Descriptive text is introduced in Grade VIII as part of the curriculum and serves as a foundational genre for developing students' writing skills. A descriptive text aims to describe a particular object, person, or place clearly so that readers can visualize it (Winch, 2005; Panjaitan & Elga, 2020). Dirgeyesa (2016) explains that descriptive writing illustrates an object,

place, or person through specific physical and personal details. Nevertheless, students frequently struggle with generating and organizing ideas, as well as with grammar and vocabulary (Apriliana et al., 2020). Among these challenges, difficulties in generating and organizing ideas are particularly relevant to this study because VTS is designed to support students in developing ideas through observation, discussion, and evidence-based reasoning before writing.

In this context, teachers play a crucial role in implementing instructional approaches that support students throughout the writing process. Among the various challenges students encounter in descriptive writing, difficulties in generating and organizing ideas are particularly relevant to the implementation of VTS. Developed by Abigail Housen in the 1980s, VTS is a discussion-based approach that utilizes visual images to engage students in observing, interpreting, discussing, and justifying ideas before writing, thereby providing structured support during the pre-writing stage. In practice, the teacher presents an image and facilitates a structured discussion through open-ended questions that encourage students to observe visual details, express their interpretations, and support their ideas with visual evidence. Through this process, students actively construct and organize ideas before transforming them into written texts. Classroom discussion may also expose students to new vocabulary through interaction with the teacher and peers. However, the primary focus of VTS is to facilitate idea generation and meaning construction rather than provide direct instruction in grammar or mechanics. During this process, students are also encouraged to listen to others' perspectives and actively participate in constructing meaning before transforming their ideas into written form. This approach aligns with the principles of

the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the development of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills through the Pancasila Student Profile (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Specifically, in the English subject for Phase D (Grade 7–9), students are expected to communicate ideas, information, and experiences through various forms of texts, including written texts. Through VTS activities, students are engaged in interpreting visual information, expressing their ideas, and developing meaningful written responses, which support the achievement of these learning competencies

According to Abigail Housen (2001) and Philip Yenawine (2018), VTS encourages students to create meaning through meticulous visual analysis and group discussion, which improves their observational, interpretive, critical thinking, and expressive language skills. Beth Clark-Gareca and Tom Meyer (2023) elucidated that VTS offers significant opportunity for English learners to enhance language skills through visual observation, collaborative discourse, and evidence-based reasoning. VTS fosters language skills, literacy, critical thinking, and active classroom engagement by involving students in the interpretation of visual imagery through systematic questioning. Additional research has shown that VTS aids students in generating and organizing ideas prior to writing (Eun, 2018), facilitates vocabulary and grammar development (Hazem, 2018), and enhances students' writing performance through art-based learning activities.

The implementation of VTS in language learning has been widely reported to support students' writing development, classroom engagement, and critical thinking (Rosaida et al., 2022; Yeom, 2018; Connors & Piro, 2025). Previous studies have

shown that students who participate in VTS activities often demonstrate improved writing performance and more active classroom participation. However, while these studies provide evidence of the outcomes associated with VTS, they offer limited understanding of how these outcomes are developed throughout the instructional process.

In particular, little is known about how teachers facilitate each stage of VTS in English writing classrooms, how students construct ideas through visual observation and collaborative discussion, how classroom interactions evolve during the implementation process, and how these learning experiences are reflected in students' descriptive writing products. Furthermore, although previous studies have reported improvements in students' writing, limited attention has been given to examining the characteristics of students' descriptive writing in relation to the learning processes that occur during VTS activities, including content development, organization, vocabulary use, grammar, and mechanics. This process-oriented understanding remains particularly limited in the context of Indonesian junior high school English classrooms.

To address this gap, the present study employs a qualitative case study to explore the implementation of VTS in teaching descriptive writing to eighth-grade students. Rather than focusing solely on learning outcomes, this study examines how teachers implement each stage of VTS, how students respond during classroom discussions, what challenges and perceived benefits emerge throughout the implementation, and how these classroom experiences are reflected in students' descriptive writing products. The students' writing products are analyzed qualitatively based on five writing aspects—content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and

mechanics—to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the implementation of VTS supports students throughout the writing process.

Accordingly, this study seeks to provide a richer understanding of the implementation of VTS in authentic English language classrooms by explaining not only what students produce after participating in VTS activities, but also how the instructional process contributes to those writing products. In doing so, this study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the relationship between classroom interaction, teacher facilitation, students' learning experiences, and the characteristics of students' descriptive writing within the context of Indonesian junior high schools.

1.2 Research Questions

Regarding the problems that have been raised previously, this study addresses the following research questions

- a. How are Visual Thinking Strategies implemented in teaching descriptive writing to eighth-grade students?
- b. How do students respond to the implementation of Visual Thinking Strategies in learning descriptive writing?
- c. How are students' descriptive writing products characterized after the implementation of Visual Thinking Strategies?
- d. What challenges are encountered during the implementation of Visual Thinking Strategies in teaching descriptive writing to eighth-grade students?
- e. What benefits of Visual Thinking Strategies are perceived by students in learning descriptive writing?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the implementation of VTS in teaching descriptive writing to eighth-grade students. This study aims to describe how VTS are applied in classroom activities, examine students' responses to the use of VTS in learning descriptive writing, and identify challenges encountered during its implementation. In addition, this study seeks to explore students' perceived benefits of using Visual Thinking Strategies in writing descriptive texts.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study is limited to the implementation of VTS in teaching descriptive writing to eighth-grade students at a junior high school. The participants of this study consist of one eighth-grade classes. The focus of the study is on the teaching process, students' responses, and perceived benefits and challenges related to the use of VTS in descriptive writing instruction. This study does not compare teaching methods, does not measure causal relationships, and does not involve other language skills or text types beyond descriptive writing. The research is conducted within a specific classroom setting and instructional period.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to English language teaching. Theoretically, this study contributes to the existing literature on VTS by providing insights into their implementation in teaching descriptive writing at the junior high school level. The results may serve as a reference

for future researchers who are interested in qualitative studies related to visual-based instructional approaches in language learning.

Practically, this study is expected to benefit teachers, students, and schools. For teachers, the findings may offer insights into classroom practices involving VTS and how visual-based discussions can be integrated into writing instruction. For students, the use of VTS may support engagement and participation during descriptive writing activities. For schools, this study may provide information that supports the development of student-centered learning practices aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

