

The Implementation of Problem-Based Learning to Improve Seventh-Grade Students' Descriptive Text Writing Skill

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Article Info :

Received:
22-04-2026
Revised:
31-05-2026
Accepted:
06-06-2026

ABSTRACT

This classroom action research examined the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in improving the descriptive-text writing skill of seventh-grade students and identified the factors contributing to that improvement. The participants were 32 students (16 male, 16 female) at SMP Negeri 2 Banguntapan Bantul, Indonesia. Data were collected across two cycles using writing tasks, tests, observation checklists, field notes, and interviews, and writing performance was scored with Brown's (2010) analytic writing rubric covering content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. The mean writing score increased from 58.88 in the pre-cycle test to 80.91 after the second cycle, and the proportion of students meeting the minimum mastery criterion (KKM = 72) rose accordingly. Qualitative data from observations, field notes, and interviews indicated that instructional materials grounded in students' real-life experiences, varied learning media, and collaborative classroom activities were the main factors supporting students' progress. The findings suggest that PBL is a promising strategy for teaching descriptive-text writing in junior high school; however, because the study used a single-group pre-test/post-test design without a comparison group or inferential statistical testing, the reported gains should be interpreted as preliminary evidence rather than confirmed causal effects.

Keywords : *Problem-Based Learning; Writing Skill; Descriptive Text; Classroom Action Research*



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PENDAHULUAN

Over the past decade, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has evolved into a widely adopted, student-centered pedagogical approach that emphasizes critical thinking, collaboration, and the application of knowledge to authentic, real-life problems. Its uptake has been driven by advances in educational technology, growing research evidence, and an increasing emphasis on the skills learners need for the twenty-first-century workforce. Writing is one of the most demanding language skills for junior high school learners, as it requires not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to organize and elaborate ideas drawn from reading and observation.

Among the text types required in the Indonesian junior high school curriculum narrative, recount, report, procedure, and descriptive descriptive text is considered foundational because it closely mirrors students' everyday experience of describing people, places, and objects. According to D'Angelo (1980), composing a descriptive text involves visualizing images and arranging them into a coherent structure, while Corbett (1983) situates descriptive writing within the broader category of expository writing.

Reflecting on classroom practice at the research site, the researchers observed a persistent gap between teachers' expectations and students' actual writing performance. Students frequently struggled to generate ideas, relied on a limited vocabulary, and depended heavily on teacher-led instruction rather than independent thinking. Consistent with Ismayanti and Kholiq (2020), such difficulties often stem from students' limited ability to organize sentences, insufficient background knowledge, and low motivation to write in English. Teaching approaches that keep students passive rather than actively engaged and imaginative compound this problem.

Problem-Based Learning offers one response to these difficulties. Boud and Feletti (1997) frame PBL as a central innovation in learning, while Margetson (1994) argues that PBL curricula

cultivate open-mindedness, reflective judgment, and active inquiry. By anchoring writing tasks in meaningful, contextual problems, PBL is expected to help students develop the organizational, argumentative, and revision skills that descriptive writing demands, while also strengthening interpersonal and collaborative competence. Building on this rationale, this study investigated (1) the extent to which PBL improves the descriptive-text writing skill of seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Banguntapan Bantul, and (2) the factors that contribute to students' improvement when PBL is implemented.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design following the Kemmis and McTaggart cyclical model of planning, action, observation, and reflection. CAR was chosen because it allows the teacher-researcher to iteratively refine instruction in response to evidence collected within the same classroom (Yasin, 2011).

1. Setting and Participants

The participants were 32 seventh-grade students (16 male, 16 female) at SMP Negeri 2 Banguntapan Bantul, Indonesia. The study was conducted over two cycles.

2. Data Collection

Data were collected using students' writing tasks and tests, an observation checklist, field notes, and semi-structured interviews. A collaborating teacher completed the observation checklist and field notes while the researcher conducted instruction; interviews with students were conducted after the completion of the writing test in each cycle.

3. Procedure and Data Analysis

The study followed the four-stage cyclical CAR model of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, as cited in Khan, Zaman, & Ghaffar, 2020). Quantitative data were obtained from group writing tasks administered at each meeting and individual writing tests administered at the end of each cycle. Scripts were scored using Brown's (2010) analytic writing rubric, which evaluates five components—organization, content, grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary—combined into a total score (TS):

$$TS = O + C + G + M + V$$

where O = Organization, C = Content, G = Grammar, M = Mechanics, and V = Vocabulary. Qualitative data from observation sheets, field notes, and interviews were analyzed thematically to identify factors associated with students' improvement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results should include the rationale or design of the experiment as well as the results of the Improvement in Students' Descriptive-Text Writing Skill

Table 1 summarizes students' pre-cycle (baseline) writing scores across the five rubric components.

Table 1. Pre-Cycle (Baseline) Writing Scores (N=32)

Component	N	Mean	SD	SE Mean
Content	32	17.53	3.341	0.591
Organization	32	12.97	3.605	0.637
Vocabulary	32	13.06	3.592	0.635
Language	32	13.00	4.725	0.835
Mechanics	32	2.94	0.878	0.155
Total	32	58.88	14.032	2.480

The baseline mean score was 58.88, below the minimum mastery criterion (KKM) of 72 set for English. Of the 32 students, 6 (18.8%) met the minimum mastery criterion (KKM = 72) at baseline, while 26 (81.3%) did not. Table 2 presents the group task scores during Cycle 1.

Table 2. Students' Average Group-Task Score, Cycle 1

Meeting	Average Score	Theme
1st	63.4	Lost pen
2nd	68.6	Lost bag

Students' performance improved across the first two meetings of Cycle 1 as they worked with progressively self-directed prompts, moving from a personally meaningful object (a lost pen) to a teacher-supplied object (a bag). Table 3 presents students' post-test scores after Cycle 2.

Table 3. Post-Cycle 2 Writing Scores (N = 32)

Component	N	Mean	SD	SE Mean
Content	32	20.19	3.440	0.608
Organization	32	15.53	3.162	0.559
Vocabulary	32	15.94	3.192	0.564
Language	32	17.69	4.314	0.763
Mechanics	32	3.66	0.902	0.159
Total	32	80.91	10.726	1.896

The mean score rose to 80.91, above the KKM of 72. Of the 32 students, 24 (75.0%) met the KKM after Cycle 2, while 8 (25.0%) did not a marked improvement over the baseline 18.8%.

Overall, the mean total score increased from 58.88 at baseline to 80.91 after Cycle 2, an observed gain of 22.03 points across all five rubric components, with the largest gains in language use and content. This pattern is consistent with prior CAR studies on PBL and descriptive writing (Mairani, 2022; Glean, 2022), which similarly reported score gains concentrated in content generation and organization following PBL intervention.

2. Factors Contributing to Students' Improvement

Thematic analysis of interviews, field notes, and observation checklists identified three recurring factors associated with students' progress. First, instructional materials that were contextualized to students' real-life experiences and interests helped students engage with and successfully address the problems posed in each PBL cycle. Second, the use of varied learning media images, photographs, a Know–Need–Do worksheet, and video supported students' information-gathering process and sustained their engagement across sessions. Third, classroom activities that required collaboration, such as group discussion and peer critique, gave students opportunities to share ideas, take responsibility for both individual and group outcomes, and practice mutual feedback.

These qualitative findings align with recent evidence that PBL's benefits for language learning are mediated by the problem-solving and collaborative processes it requires, rather than by direct instruction alone (Guo et al., 2024; Bashith & Amin, 2021). While students' engagement, confidence, and willingness to generate ideas appeared to increase over the two cycles consistent with descriptions of creative engagement in PBL classrooms this study did not administer a validated creativity instrument, and these observations should therefore be read as qualitative impressions rather than measured creativity gains.

This study has several limitations that should guide the interpretation of its findings and inform how the results are reported for international publication. First, the single-group pre-test/post-test design without a comparison or control group leaves the observed gains vulnerable to threats to internal validity such as maturation, testing effects, and history (e.g., concurrent English instruction outside the study); the improvement cannot be attributed to PBL alone. Second, no inferential statistical test was applied to the pre- and post-cycle scores, so the term 'significant' should not be used until a paired-sample t-test (or equivalent) and an effect size are reported. Third, the study does not report inter-rater reliability for the writing scores; because writing assessment is inherently judgment-based, at least two independent raters and an agreement statistic (e.g., Cohen's Kappa or ICC) are needed to support the validity of the scoring. Fourth, only 32 students from a single school and a single cycade context were studied, which limits generalizability. Future research should employ a quasi-experimental or randomized design with a comparison group, report inferential statistics and inter-rater reliability, and, if creativity is of interest, include a validated creativity assessment instrument.

CONCLUSION

This classroom action research indicates that Problem-Based Learning is a promising approach for improving seventh-grade students' descriptive-text writing skill. Across two cycles, the mean writing score rose from 58.88 to 80.91, and qualitative evidence suggests that contextualized materials, varied instructional media, and collaborative classroom activities were the main factors supporting this progress. By anchoring writing tasks in real-life problems, PBL appears to encourage students to generate and organize ideas more independently while also fostering collaboration, communication, and shared responsibility for learning outcomes. Given the study's single-group design, these findings should be treated as preliminary evidence motivating further research ideally with a comparison group and inferential statistical analysis rather than as confirmed causal effects. Teachers considering PBL for descriptive-text instruction may nonetheless find the reported instructional sequence (contextualized problem, guided inquiry via a Know–Need–Do worksheet, drafting, and collaborative critique) a practical starting point.

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