

IMPROVING STUDENTS' DESCRIPTIVE WRITING ABILITY AND MOTIVATION THROUGH GAME BASED LEARNING

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Abstract

This classroom action research (CAR) investigates the use of the Snakes and Ladders game in improving junior high school seventh grade students' ability to write descriptive texts and enhancing their learning motivation in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Writing, especially descriptive writing, remains a significant challenge for many EFL learners due to limited vocabulary, weak sentence structure, and low motivation. To address these issues, a game-based learning strategy was implemented over one CAR cycle, following the stages of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from pre-tests and post-tests with qualitative data from classroom observations, interview, and field notes. The results showed a substantial improvement in students' writing performance, with the average score increasing from 51.76 in the pre-test to 83.3 in the post-test. Additionally, student engagement in the classroom rose from 51.5% to 87%, indicating a notable increase in motivation and participation. The Snakes and Ladders game provided a fun, interactive platform for vocabulary reinforcement, idea generation, and collaborative writing practice, which positively influenced both cognitive and affective learning outcomes. These findings suggest that game-based learning can be an effective and motivating tool in writing instruction, particularly for descriptive text writing in junior high EFL classrooms.

Key Words: Descriptive Writing, Game-based Learning, Learning Motivation

Abstrak

Penelitian tindakan kelas (PTK) ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji penggunaan permainan Ular Tangga (Snakes and Ladders) dalam meningkatkan kemampuan menulis teks deskriptif serta motivasi belajar siswa kelas tujuh sekolah menengah pertama dalam konteks pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Keterampilan menulis, khususnya menulis teks deskriptif, merupakan salah satu tantangan utama bagi pembelajar EFL karena keterbatasan kosakata, struktur kalimat yang lemah, serta motivasi belajar yang rendah. Untuk mengatasi permasalahan tersebut, strategi pembelajaran berbasis permainan diterapkan selama satu siklus PTK, melalui tahapan perencanaan, pelaksanaan, observasi, dan refleksi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan campuran (mixed-methods), yaitu pengumpulan data kuantitatif melalui pre-test dan post-test, serta data kualitatif melalui observasi kelas, wawancara, dan catatan lapangan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya peningkatan signifikan dalam kemampuan menulis siswa, dengan nilai rata-rata yang meningkat dari 51,76 pada pre-test menjadi 83,3 pada post-test. Selain itu, partisipasi siswa dalam pembelajaran juga meningkat dari 51,5% menjadi 87%, menandakan adanya peningkatan motivasi dan keterlibatan aktif dalam kegiatan kelas. Permainan Ular Tangga memberikan pengalaman belajar yang menyenangkan dan interaktif, memperkuat penguasaan kosakata, membantu siswa dalam membangkitkan ide, serta mendorong praktik menulis secara kolaboratif. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran berbasis permainan dapat menjadi strategi yang efektif dan memotivasi dalam pembelajaran menulis, khususnya untuk meningkatkan keterampilan menulis teks deskriptif di kelas EFL tingkat SMP.

Kata Kunci: Menulis Deskriptif, Belajar Berbasis Permainan, Motivasi Belajar

INTRODUCTION

Language takes a crucial role in communication by constructing particular views of world, identities, and relationships through written or spoken whether verbal or non verbal language. Writing is widely regarded as one of the most demanding skills in language learning, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It requires learners to produce language actively, organize ideas coherently, and express meaning with accuracy, all of which demand significant cognitive and linguistic resources. Hyland (2004) emphasizes that writing is not merely a transcription of thoughts but a complex, recursive process that involves planning, drafting, revising, and editing. The challenge is even more pronounced in secondary education, where students are expected to develop proficiency in various genres including descriptive texts.

Descriptive writing plays a critical role in junior high school curriculum in Indonesia. As Shanti et al. (2018) explain, a descriptive text aims to describe a particular person, place, or object vividly and in detail, using specific language features such as descriptive adjectives, present tense verbs, and logical sequencing. However, many students struggle to compose coherent and well-developed descriptive texts due to limited vocabulary, poor grammar, and a lack of confidence or motivation (Widiastuti & Endahati, 2020). These challenges often result in underdeveloped compositions that fulfill the communicative purpose of the genre.

In addition to the cognitive demands of writing, affective factors such as motivation significantly influence students' success in writing text. Dornyei (2001) asserts that motivation is a key determinant of language learning behavior. When students are disengaged or view writing as tedious and difficult, their willingness to participate and produce written output decrease. This highlights the importance of implementing pedagogical strategies that not only improve writing proficiency but also enhance student motivation and engagement.

In response to these challenges, game-based learning has emerged as a promising approach in language education. According to Ahmed et al. (2022), games offer immersive, interactive experiences that promote engagement, reduce anxiety, and encourage collaboration. Those are the elements conducive to language learning. When these three elements are properly fulfilled, the learning process will proceed in a coherent and efficient manner. Wright et al. (2006) support this view, noting that educational games help learners retain language skills more effectively through enjoyable contexts.

Among various educational games, Snakes and Ladders stands out for its adaptability and has been recognized for its flexibility in language instruction. While traditionally used for vocabulary and speaking practice, recent studies have begun exploring its potential in developing writing skills. The game can be modified to include writing prompts, sentence-building tasks, or idea-generation exercises, offering a playful yet structured context for writing practice. For instance, Nurulhaq et al. (2023) demonstrated that integrating Snakes and Ladders improved students' writing of self-introduction text, while Widiastuti and Endahati (2020) found positive impacts on recount writing. These studies suggest that Snakes and Ladders can be adapted to include writing prompts, grammar-focused tasks, or idea-generation activities. Hidayati (2019) found that integrating Snakes and Ladders into EFL writing instruction improved students' vocabulary use and sentence construction. Similarly, Sari and Wahyuni (2020) observed enhanced student engagement and better organization of ideas in descriptive writing when the game was used as part of classroom activities. The game format not only facilitates pre-writing and idea generation but also encourages peer feedback and interaction, leading to richer and more varied written output.

Descriptive writing remains a complex and often daunting skill for EFL learners, integrating interactive, game-based strategies such as Snakes and Ladders can make the process more accessible and engaging. Further research, particularly in classroom context, is needed to assess the effectiveness of this approach in improving student writing outcomes and engagement. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the use of Snakes and Ladders game to improve students' descriptive writing ability and motivation in a seventh grade EFL classroom.

METHOD

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach, which is designed to address specific issues in classroom settings through systematic cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon, 2014). CAR is particularly suitable for language teachers aiming to improve instructional practices while simultaneously enhancing student learning outcomes. If the result of reflection have shown good improvement then the investigation can be concluded after the first cycle. Conversely, if the result of criteria is not met, the classroom research continues to the second cycle and subsequent cycles as necessary. In this research, CAR was utilized to investigate the use Snakes and Ladders game as a strategy to improve students' ability in writing descriptive text and to foster their motivation in learning English. The number of cycles has not been determined yet this study at least reaches 75% of students reaching the target.

Planning Stage

In the planning stage, the researcher identified students' dominant learning styles, which were primarily visual and kinesthetic. The researcher identified problems that occurred in teaching and learning process and determined problem solving. Based on this, lesson plan was designed by integrating cooperative learning and game-based strategies. In this stage, the preparation involved developing teaching material and media, compiling student worksheets, outlining research steps, and organizing research instruments, The instructional focus was on *Descriptive Text-My study Habits*, with activities tailored to support vocabulary enrichment, language features, text structure, and descriptive writing. Learning materials included the Snakes and Ladders game adapted with prompts and tasks relevant to the target topic.

Implementation Stage

The action was implemented over one cycle, consisting two meetings. During the implementation, the researcher facilitated interactive classroom activities using adapted games with Snakes and Ladders as the central tool to stimulate descriptive writing practice. Students worked in small groups to promote collaboration. The researcher also applied positive reinforcement strategies such as verbal praise and recognition to enhance students motivation and engagement.

Observation Stage

Throughout the implementation in teaching and learning process, the research conducted structured observations using observation sheets to monitor student writing ability, motivation, and engagement. Five indicators were used to assess motivation: 1) activeness, 2) ability to understand material, 3) cooperation and team work, 4) creativity, 5) discipline and responsibility. Observations were made for each group during each session. Five indicators

were used to assess writing ability: 1) content, 2) organization, 3) grammar, 4) vocabulary, 5) mechanics. Observations were made for each student during the writing session.

Reflection Stage

In the reflection stage, data from observation sheets and students worksheets were analyzed to evaluate the implemented strategies. The reflection focused on identifying whether students' motivation had improved and whether the game-based learning approach contributed to better engagement and understanding of descriptive writing. Findings from this stage informed revisions to instructional approach for the following cycle.

The research was conducted at SMPN 4 Surabaya during the second semester of 2024/2025. The participants of the study were 31 students of class VII C, selected based on the teacher's observation of their low writing performance and lack of engagement in English writing activities particularly in learning descriptive texts.

By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the research sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of both measurable outcomes and students' subjective experiences. The first method employed in this study involved administering a pre-test via Google Forms to measure students' foundational writing abilities, including their use of vocabulary, sentence construction, and the ability to describe their study habit. This preliminary assessment served as a benchmark to identify students' prior knowledge in descriptive writing before introducing the learning media, in this case, Snakes and Ladders. After the intervention, a writing worksheet was given to evaluate students' progress, focusing on improvements in descriptive detail, coherence, and language accuracy.

In addition to written assessments, the study incorporated structured classroom observations to gather qualitative insights into students' engagement, collaboration, and responses during the learning process. These observations were documented as field notes, with the observer adopting a participatory role by interacting with students and coordinating with the classroom teacher. This approach allowed for a richer, contextual understanding of how the game-based strategy influenced the classroom environment and learner motivation.

The use of both objective assessment tools and qualitative observation techniques enabled the researcher to capture a holistic view of the instructional impact. Quantitative data from the pre-test and writing worksheet were analyzed using descriptive statistics including mean score, percentages of task completion, and individual performance trends. The success criterion was defined as at least 75% of the students achieving a minimum score of 75 on the writing worksheet. Otherwise, qualitative data were analyzed by coding field notes to identify common patterns in students behavior such as increased participation, enjoyment, or willingness to take risks in writing. Interview was involved to show students' positive response to the game-based learning activities. The combination of these two methods provided a well-rounded evaluation of the intervention in improving descriptive writing and boosting learners' motivation.

The data from both forms of analysis were examined to determine whether the learning objectives had been achieved. If the target outcomes were reached, the research cycle was concluded. If not, revisions were made to the instructional strategy and a subsequent cycle was implemented to address the gaps.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study carried the data from both quantitative and qualitative data obtained through result of pre-test and writing assessment, and classroom observation from VII C. The students used Snack and Ladder as a media to know the result of students' writing descriptive text. The researcher carried out in two meeting in each class. The first meeting researcher gave a short explanation about general structure of descriptive text and language features. Then, the researcher gave a treatment to give the questions about Simple Presents Tense by using Snakes and Ladders as a media. The second meeting's activity was continuing the treatment and giving worksheet for measuring students' understanding. There is a significant different for the pre-test and writing worksheet.

Table 1. Learning Process

Meeting	Activities
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teacher shows an example of descriptive text• Teacher asks the students to make a group that divided based on their pre-test, each group consist of 5-6 members• Students discuss in their own group about question cards that they get from Snacks and Ladders game• Students rearrange structure of descriptive text• Students make a list of their study habit based on previous sentences answer sheet
Meeting 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students continue listing and drafting descriptive text• Students submit the full descriptive text• Teacher give a feedback

In the first meeting, cooperative learning was implemented through game-based activity, Snakes and Ladders. The learning goal was to enable students to understand the language features of descriptive text, simple present tense. Students were divided into 6 groups. Students motivation and engagement were monitored using five indicators: activeness, ability to understand material, cooperation and team work, creativity, discipline and responsibility. Observations were recorded using a 4-point Likert scale (1= very low, 2= low, 3= good, 4= very good).

Table 2. Average Score of Observation First Meeting

Aspect	Average Score	Interpretation
Activeness	3.5	Very good
Ability to understand material	3.83	Very good
Cooperation and team work	3.5	Very good
Creativity	3.83	Very good
Discipline and Responsibility	3.66	Very good
Interpretation Scale:		
3.26 – 4.00 = Very good	1.76 – 2.50 = Low	
2.51 – 3.25 = Good	1.00 – 1.75 = Very low	

Group 3 and 6 received a score of 4 (very good) in every aspects. While group 1,4, and 5 received score of 4 in 4 aspects and 3 in an aspect. Group one had less discipline and responsibility, group 4 had less cooperation and team work, and group 5 had less activeness. At the same time, group 2 received score of 3 in 3 aspects and 2 in two aspects. This group had low activeness, cooperation and team work, discipline and responsibility. Based on the findings, overall student engagement was relatively high. The majority of students demonstrated enthusiasm and discipline in completing tasks, with collaborative behavior evident across most groups. Only one group appeared less engaged and lacked effective teamwork.

Quantitative analysis of students' descriptive writing ability shows a significant improvement after the implementation of Snakes and Ladders game. The average pre-test score is 51.76, indicating that students initially struggled with basic elements of descriptive writing such as vocabulary usage, sentence structure, and organization of ideas. After the implementation of the game-based learning strategy, the writing worksheet average increased to 83.3, demonstrating a substantial enhancement in students' writing performance.

Table 3. Summary of Pre-test and Worksheet

Assessment	Average Score	Number of Students	Percentages of Mastery
Pre-test	51.76	16 students out of 31	51.6%
Writing worksheet	83.3	27 students out of 31	87%

This improvement suggests that the integration of Snakes and Ladders as a pre-writing activity successfully helped students activate relevant vocabulary, generate ideas more fluently, and construct more coherent and detailed descriptive texts. Many students demonstrated better control of grammar, more vivid vocabulary, and clearer paragraph structure in their post-test writing.

In addition to improvements in writing ability, the use of the Snakes and Ladders game had a positive impact on students motivation and classroom engagement. Based on observational data, the percentage of active student participation increased from 51.5% in the pre-intervention phase to 87% during and after the implementation of the game-based learning strategy.

During game-based sessions, students were more willing to collaborate with peers, asks questions, and participate in classroom discussions. The playful and interactive nature of the game appeared to reduce writing anxiety, create a more positive learning atmosphere, and encourage students to take greater initiative in writing tasks. This aligns with previous findings that games can foster a motivational learning environments by making tasks more engaging and less intimidating (Ahmed et al., 2022).

“What part of the learning process did you like the most? Why?”

“I like Snakes and Ladders because it is fun.” “Snakes and Ladders becasse fun and interesting.” “I enjoy during Snakes and Ladders session because it is fun and challenging.”

“Do you think the game-based learning helped you understand the material”

“Yes, I do.” “I understand the material well.”

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating Snakes and Ladders as a game-based learning strategy to improve both students' descriptive writing skills and classroom engagement in an EFL context. The research, conducted through one cycle of classroom action research (CAR), employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine changes in writing performance and learning motivation.

The improvement in students' descriptive writing ability, as evidenced by the increase in average test score from 51.76 to 83.3, confirms that game-based learning provides a meaningful context for language production. These findings are in line with Hyland (2004), who states that writing is a complex cognitive and social activity that requires continuous practice and motivation. The Snakes and Ladders game, when adapted for educational purposes, offered opportunities for students to practice vocabulary, develop sentence structure, and express ideas with greater clarity in a low-pressure and collaborative environment.

Furthermore, the structured nature of the game acted as a scaffold for the writing process. Students received writing prompts and vocabulary support during each game session, which helped reduce their cognitive load during writing tasks. Pre-writing activities such as brainstorming and guided vocabulary use are crucial to developing coherent written texts.

The increase in student engagement from 51.5% to 87% illustrates that motivation plays a critical role in learning outcomes. According to Dornyei (2001), motivation is a key determinant of language learning success, particularly in skill-based tasks such as writing. The game-based format introduced an element of fun, competition, and interaction, which created a more dynamic and student-centered learning atmosphere. Students who were previously passive became more active participants, suggesting that game-based learning strategies can positively affect not only cognitive but also affective domains of learning.

The classroom observations supported these quantitative findings by highlighting behavioral changes such as increased enthusiasm, improved peer collaboration, and greater willingness to write. These qualitative insights reinforce the idea that when learners are engaged emotionally and socially, their academic performance tends to improve. As supported by Ahmed et al. (2022), educational games promote active involvement, enhance retention, and foster a positive attitude toward language learning.

In sum, the combination of statistical data and classroom evidence reveals that Snakes and Ladders served not just as a motivational tool but also as an instructional technique that contributed meaningfully to writing development. The research process, guided by the four CAR stages which are planning, acting, observing, and reflecting enabled the continuous refinement of teaching strategies based on real-time feedback and results.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that incorporating the Snakes and Ladders game into writing instruction effectively enhances students' descriptive writing abilities and learning motivation. The results showed a substantial increase in both writing performance (from 51.76 to 83.3) and active classroom engagement (from 51.5% to 87%). These improvements validate the potential of game-based learning as a pedagogical strategy for EFL writing classes, particularly for junior

high school students who often struggle with descriptive language and lack interest in traditional writing instruction.

The use of Snakes and Ladders facilitated a shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered learning, providing a platform where students could generate ideas collaboratively, practice language in context, and build confidence in their writing skills. The game also fostered motivation by making the learning process more enjoyable and interactive.

The success of this classroom action research underscores the importance of using creative and engaging instructional techniques that address both the cognitive and affective needs of learners. Future research may explore how other game-based strategies or digital adaptations of Snakes and Ladders can further support language learning in diverse educational settings.

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