



Improving Female Students' Descriptive Writing Skills Through the Microselection Learning Strategy: A Classroom Action Research Study

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 19 February 2026

Received in revised form 20 April 2026

Accepted 12 July 2026

Keywords:

Classroom Action Research
Cognitive Scaffolding
Descriptive Text Instruction
Efl Writing Pedagogy
Pesantren Education

Abstract

Writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) represents one of the most demanding competencies for Indonesian junior high school students, particularly those enrolled in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) where instructional time is constrained by dual academic and religious curricula. This study examined the effectiveness of the Microselection Learning Strategy in improving descriptive text writing skills among ninth-grade female students at Khoirotul Usroh Islamic Boarding School, Stabat, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. A Classroom Action Research (CAR) design based on the Kemmis and McTaggart cyclical model was employed across two cycles over five weeks, involving all 36 female students as participants through a saturated sampling technique. Data were collected using pre-tests and post-tests evaluated with a five-dimension rubric (title, identification, description, vocabulary, and closing), supplemented by observation sheets, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and documentation. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive percentage statistics; qualitative data followed Miles and Huberman's reduction–display–conclusion framework. Results showed a dramatic improvement in classical mastery: from 13.89% in the pre-test to 50.00% after Cycle I, and reaching 100.00% at the conclusion of Cycle II. The class mean score rose from approximately 46.9 to 87.1 points. Qualitative findings corroborated these gains, documenting improvements in vocabulary selection, sentence cohesion, paragraph organisation, and student confidence. The Microselection strategy proved highly effective as a scaffolded, cognitive-theory-grounded approach to EFL writing instruction in a boarding school context.

Introduction

Writing in a foreign language is widely regarded as the most cognitively demanding of the four core language skills (Devine et al., 1993; Abu-Rabiah, 2025; Boudouaia et al., 2024). Unlike receptive skills, writing requires learners to simultaneously manage vocabulary selection, grammatical accuracy, textual organisation, and communicative purpose tasks that place substantial demands on working memory and metacognitive awareness (Nghi & Nhan, 2023; Erbasan & Dedeoğlu, 2023). For Indonesian students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), these challenges are compounded by substantial typological differences between Indonesian and English, limited opportunities for authentic written English use outside the classroom, and curricula that frequently prioritise grammar instruction over sustained writing practice (Taufik & Cahyono, 2019; Andleeb et al., 2025; Marlina, 2024).

Within the Indonesian national curriculum, descriptive text writing is a mandatory competency at the junior high school level (Kusmiati et al., 2025; Syifa et al., 2022; Khoirunisya, 2025). Descriptive text requires students to represent an object, person, or place in sufficient detail

that a reader can form a clear mental image, drawing on specific vocabulary, coherent paragraph structure, and precise linguistic choices (Indriyastuti, 2021; Rahardiansyah, 2023). Despite its curricular centrality, descriptive writing consistently presents difficulties for EFL learners who lack the vocabulary range and structural awareness needed to produce well-organised text. Mantra and Widiastuti (2019) identified grammar errors, inappropriate vocabulary selection, and weak text organisation as the most prevalent weaknesses among Indonesian EFL writers, findings echoed in multiple subsequent studies (Widodo, 2021; Arochman et al., 2024; Taufiquilloh et al., 2025).

These challenges are particularly acute in Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*), educational institutions in which students follow a demanding dual curriculum combining formal academic study with intensive Qur'anic memorisation and religious practice (Santoso & Khaudli, 2025; Rohani et al., 2025; Sa'adah et al., 2026). The resulting time constraints and cognitive load significantly reduce the instructional attention available for English writing development, and students in these institutions frequently enter English writing tasks without the scaffolding or strategic tools needed to produce structured text (Somantri, 2023). Preliminary observations at Khoirotul Usroh Islamic Boarding School in Stabat, Langkat Regency, confirmed this pattern: a pre-intervention writing assessment found that only 5 of 36 ninth-grade female students (13.89%) achieved the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) of 70, with a class mean of approximately 46.9 points. Common difficulties included word-for-word translation from Indonesian, limited and repetitive vocabulary, absent or incomplete text structure, and inconsistent punctuation (Nugraha & Fiftinova, 2026; Yahrif et al., 2025; Muman & Rahayu, 2025).

The pedagogical conditions contributing to these outcomes were also clear (Türkmen, 2025; Shafik et al., 2025; Allison, 2026). Classroom writing instruction had relied predominantly on teacher-centred, unscaffolded approaches in which students were expected to produce complete paragraphs without systematic preparation of the component skills involved. Research consistently documents that such approaches yield passive, unmotivated learners and fail to address foundational vocabulary and sentence-level gaps (Andini & Fadly, 2024; Agustin, 2020; Asli-Badarneh et al., 2026). A strategy-based instructional approach capable of decomposing the writing task into manageable steps was therefore urgently needed.

The Microselection Learning Strategy, documented by Herrell and Jordan (2018) among fifty evidence-based strategies for English language learners, offers precisely such an approach. Microselection directs learners' attention to small, discrete elements of a text key vocabulary, individual sentences, structural components rather than requiring immediate full-text production. Grounded in cognitive learning theory's principle that complex skills are acquired most durably through systematic, sequenced practice of component elements (Adil, 2021), the strategy has demonstrated effectiveness in reading comprehension contexts: Jaber (2022) found that Iraqi college students taught via Microselection outperformed peers receiving conventional instruction on post-test reading measures (27.7 vs. 25.2). However, applications of Microselection to EFL writing instruction particularly in the distinctive context of Indonesian *pesantren* education remain absent from the published literature. This study was designed to fill that gap.

The broader strategy-based EFL writing literature provides supporting evidence (Hu & Zhang, 2026; Hardiyanto et al., 2026; Zare et al., 2026). Julianty et al. (2022) demonstrated that structured language learning strategies significantly improved descriptive writing across five dimensions among Indonesian senior high school students. Wonglakorn and Deerajviset (2023) showed that collaborative process-writing approaches, which share Microselection's emphasis

on staged practice and feedback, improved writing accuracy and communication skills. Arochman et al. (2024) documented meaningful pre-to-post gains following project-based learning intervention. Collectively, these studies establish that strategic, structured writing instruction outperforms conventional approaches in EFL contexts, providing a strong rationale for investigating Microselection specifically.

This study therefore aimed to investigate: (1) whether the Microselection Learning Strategy improves descriptive text writing skills among ninth-grade female students at Khoirotul Usroh Islamic Boarding School; and (2) how the strategy produces improvement across cycles of implementation. Employing a two-cycle Classroom Action Research design, the study provides both quantitative evidence of learning gains and qualitative insight into the mechanisms of improvement, contributing a novel empirical account of Microselection-based writing instruction in an Indonesian boarding school context.

Methods

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) following the Kemmis and McTaggart cyclical model, comprising four iterative stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection (Arif & Oktafiana, 2023). CAR was selected because it enables systematic, evidence-driven improvement of instructional practice within an authentic classroom context. The research was conducted over five weeks across two cycles, with three sessions per week (15 total meetings). Cycle I comprised eight meetings; Cycle II comprised five. The iterative design allowed findings from Cycle I to directly inform the instructional refinements implemented in Cycle II.

Participants and Setting

Participants were all 36 ninth-grade female students enrolled at Khoirotul Usroh Islamic Boarding School (Pondok Pesantren), Stabat Sub-district, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia, during the 2024/2025 academic year. A saturated sampling technique was applied, including all members of the accessible population. Male students were excluded because English instruction at this institution is provided exclusively to female students. Participants represented a range of English writing proficiency levels, from very low to moderate, as established by pre-test results. The study was conducted in a dedicated English learning classroom equipped with a whiteboard, projector, and writing materials.

Intervention

The instructional intervention was the Microselection Learning Strategy (Herrell & Jordan, 2018), which scaffolds writing by decomposing the process into sequentially introduced components grounded in cognitive learning theory (Adil, 2021). Implementation followed seven stages: identifying learning objectives; sequentially introducing vocabulary, sentence construction, paragraph organisation, and spelling; providing guided and independent practice through worksheets; facilitating peer review and group discussion; delivering formative rubric-aligned feedback; supporting student revision; and consolidating mastery through game-based vocabulary activities. This progression developed both micro-level skills (vocabulary, grammar, spelling) and macro-level skills (text organisation, coherence, cohesion).

Instruments and Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected via a pre-test and two post-tests (end of Cycle I and Cycle II), each requiring students to write a descriptive paragraph about a self-selected object. Writing quality was assessed using a five-dimension rubric adapted from Kecilnyaaku (2016), covering title, identification, description, vocabulary, and closing, with each dimension scored 1–4

(maximum total 20, converted to a 100-point scale). The rubric and test items were validated by a subject-matter expert. Qualitative data were gathered through structured teacher observation sheets completed at each session, semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher and three students, a post-Cycle II questionnaire administered to all 36 participants, and photographic documentation.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive percentage statistics. Individual mastery was defined as a score of ≥ 70 (KKM); classical mastery required $\geq 75\%$ of students achieving KKM, calculated as $P = (F/N) \times 100\%$. Qualitative data were analysed following Miles and Huberman's three-stage framework of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. Findings from both modes were triangulated to ensure comprehensive and credible interpretation. Trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility through methodological triangulation and member checking; transferability through rich contextual description; dependability through systematic documentation of all procedures; and confirmability through an organised audit trail of evidence.

Results and Discussion

Pre-Test Baseline

The pre-test established a critically low baseline of descriptive writing ability. Of 36 students, only five (13.89%) achieved the KKM of 70 or above, with a class mean of approximately 46.9 points. The remaining 31 students (86.11%) scored between 20 and 65. Classical mastery stood at 13.89%, far below the 75% threshold. Table 1 presents the distribution of pre-test scores.

Table 1. Pre-Test Score Distribution

Score Range	Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
≥ 70	Mastery	5	13.89
< 70	Not Mastery	31	86.11
Total		36	100.00

Qualitative observation confirmed the numerical picture. Students demonstrated stronger spoken comprehension than written production, frequently producing direct word-for-word translations from Indonesian that yielded grammatically incoherent English. Text structural elements an identification opening, a substantive description section, and a closing impression were rarely all present in the same text. These patterns established both the severity of the writing deficit and the need for a structured, scaffolded intervention.

Cycle I Outcomes

Cycle I was implemented across eight meetings (19 May – 4 June 2025). Instruction introduced the Microselection strategy in Meeting 2, then developed vocabulary enrichment (Meeting 4), cohesion and conjunctions (Meeting 5), sentence expansion with detail (Meeting 6), and a pre-test review (Meeting 7), before the post-test in Meeting 8.

The Cycle I post-test showed meaningful improvement relative to baseline. The proportion of students achieving individual KKM rose to 50.00% and the class mean increased to approximately 66.7 points. However, classical mastery remained at 50.00%, below the required 75% threshold, indicating that further intervention was necessary. Table 2 presents the Cycle I post-test distribution.

Table 2. Post-Test Score Distribution – Cycle I

Score Range	Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
≥ 70	Mastery	18	50.00
< 70	Not Mastery	18	50.00
Total		36	100.00

Observational field notes documented a progressive shift in student behaviour across Cycle I. Students who initially required vocabulary clarification in Indonesian were, by Meeting 6, engaging independently with sentence revision and applying learned conjunctions to their paragraphs. The vocabulary matching game in Meeting 4 produced particular engagement, with teams averaging 10 of 15 correct matches. Persistent weaknesses identified through reflection included limited vocabulary variety, grammatical errors in tense and subject-verb agreement, and inconsistent paragraph cohesion findings that directly shaped the Cycle II plan.

Cycle II Outcomes

Cycle II (10–18 June 2025) comprised five targeted meetings addressing the weaknesses identified in Cycle I reflection: vocabulary coherence and cohesion (Meetings 10–12), the Cycle II post-test (Meeting 13), results return and feedback (Meeting 14), and a final reflective session (Meeting 15). Meetings 10–12 included simple sentence-formation exercises, adjective identification using projected images, and structured paragraph-revision activities with peer feedback from higher-achieving classmates.

The Cycle II post-test produced a transformative result: all 36 students (100%) achieved individual KKM, with scores ranging from 80 to 95 and a class mean of approximately 87.1 points. Both individual and classical mastery reached 100%, far exceeding the 75% threshold. Table 3 presents the distribution.

Table 3. Post-Test Score Distribution – Cycle II

Score Range	Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
≥ 70	Mastery	36	100.00
< 70	Not Mastery	0	0.00
Total		36	100.00

Qualitative data confirmed the quantitative gains. Observation records from Cycle II described students as markedly more confident and independent in their writing, with all participants applying Microselection steps without prompting during the post-test. When results were returned in Meeting 14, students responded with visible pride and emotional satisfaction, reflecting the affective impact of the intervention alongside its academic outcomes.

Cross-Cycle Summary

Table 4 summarises the progression of mastery and class mean scores across all three assessment points, illustrating the consistent upward trajectory produced by the intervention.

Table 4. Comparative Mastery Data Across Assessment Points

Assessment Point	Class Mean	Students at KKM	Classical Mastery
Pre-Test	46.9	5 (13.89%)	Not achieved
Post-Test – Cycle I	66.7	18 (50.00%)	Not achieved
Post-Test – Cycle II	87.1	36 (100.00%)	Achieved ✓

Questionnaire responses from all 36 participants following Cycle II further corroborated the quantitative results: approximately 80% reported improved ability to select key descriptive vocabulary, and approximately 75% reported greater confidence in structuring their paragraphs. Semi-structured interviews with the supervising teacher and three students identified the strategy's gradual, component-by-component structure as the primary driver of improvement, with all interviewees noting increased confidence and a reduced sense of writing anxiety by the study's conclusion.

The results of this study provide clear and convergent evidence that the Microselection Learning Strategy significantly improved the descriptive writing skills of ninth-grade female students at Khoirotul Usroh Islamic Boarding School. Classical mastery increased by 86.11 percentage points from pre-test to Cycle II conclusion, and the class mean improved by over 40 points. The discussion below interprets these findings in relation to the study's two research questions, contextualises them within the existing literature, examines the mechanisms of improvement, considers contextual factors specific to the boarding school setting, and acknowledges the study's limitations.

Answering RQ1: Evidence of Writing Improvement

The quantitative progression from 13.89% to 100% classical mastery over two cycles constitutes strong evidence that the Microselection strategy produced meaningful improvement in descriptive writing. These findings are consistent with the broader strategy-based EFL writing literature. Julianty et al. (2022) reported significant gains across five writing dimensions following structured strategy instruction in an Indonesian senior high school context, while Arochman et al. (2024) documented an average gain of 8.06 points on descriptive writing tasks following project-based learning. The present study's gains substantially exceed these benchmarks, a difference attributable in part to the greater severity of the baseline deficit students beginning at a mean of 46.9 points had more room for measurable improvement and in part to the iterative CAR design, which enabled targeted instructional refinement between cycles.

The two-cycle structure itself deserves emphasis. Cycle I alone achieved 50% classical mastery, a meaningful gain but insufficient to meet the 75% threshold. The decision to proceed to Cycle II, driven by systematic reflection on specific observed weaknesses, was pedagogically decisive: the targeted remediation of vocabulary cohesion, sentence-level grammar, and punctuation in Cycle II resolved precisely those issues that had prevented half the class from achieving mastery. This exemplifies the self-correcting logic of CAR as described by Arif and Oktafiana (2023): the framework is not merely procedural but epistemically productive, generating instructionally actionable knowledge at each reflective stage.

Answering RQ2: Mechanisms of Improvement

Four interconnected mechanisms appear to account for the strategy's effectiveness. The first and most fundamental was cognitive scaffolding through task decomposition. By directing students to address vocabulary, sentence construction, and paragraph organisation as distinct sequential tasks rather than simultaneous demands, the Microselection strategy reduced the cognitive load associated with writing in a foreign language. This approach directly operationalises the principles of cognitive learning theory: complex competencies are acquired most durably when their component elements are mastered before integration (Adil, 2021). Interview data confirm this interpretation all three interviewed students cited the step-by-step

structure as the primary reason for their improvement, and the supervising teacher noted that students could absorb new writing techniques incrementally without feeling overwhelmed.

The second mechanism was deliberate vocabulary front-loading. The Microselection implementation allocated a full session in Cycle I to vocabulary enrichment before students attempted to write sentences or paragraphs. The provision of categorised word banks covering colours, shapes, textures, sizes, and feelings gave students the lexical resources needed to produce descriptive language and removed a critical barrier to written fluency. Mantra and Widiastuti (2019) established that EFL learners with stronger vocabulary knowledge demonstrate superior text organisation and coherence; the present findings are consistent with this relationship, as vocabulary gains in Cycle I were followed by improvements in sentence cohesion and paragraph structure in Cycle II.

The third mechanism was structured peer feedback and collaborative revision. Across Meetings 3, 6, and Cycle II, students exchanged paragraphs with partners, providing and receiving focused comments on clarity, grammar, and organisation. In Cycle II, the researcher productively paired lower-achieving students with peers who had already achieved KKM, creating a within-class mentoring structure that distributed instructional support without requiring one-to-one teacher intervention. Wonglakorn and Deerajviset (2023) identified collaborative revision as the stage at which cooperative writing approaches are most effective, attributing this to the motivational and cognitive benefits of teacher feedback combined with peer dialogue. The present findings corroborate this conclusion.

The fourth mechanism was formative assessment transparency. Sharing the descriptive text rubric with students before the intervention began transformed assessment from a terminal evaluative event into a forward-looking guide for revision. Students who understood the specific criteria for quality descriptive writing informative title, clear identification, varied vocabulary, coherent description, and concrete closing were able to direct their revision efforts purposefully. Widiastuti et al. (2022) argue that valid, transparent rubrics support learning as well as measurement; the dimension-specific improvements observed between Cycle I and Cycle II post-tests, particularly in the identification and closing dimensions, reflect exactly this rubric-guided self-regulatory process.

Contextual Considerations

The boarding school context shaped both the challenges the intervention addressed and the conditions of its success. Pesantren students face significant time pressure and cognitive load from their dual academic-religious curriculum, which can limit engagement with non-religious subjects (Somantri, 2023). Paradoxically, the disciplined learning culture cultivated through systematic Qur'anic memorisation may have prepared students to engage productively with the Microselection strategy's sequential, component-by-component structure, which resonates with the memorisation-based learning practices familiar to santri. The supervising teacher explicitly noted this alignment, observing that the strategy's gradual presentation enabled students to make progress within the constrained time available for English instruction without compromising their religious commitments. These contextual specificities suggest that strategy selection in pesantren EFL contexts should account for the cognitive and temporal demands of the dual curriculum, and that structured, time-efficient approaches may be particularly well suited to these settings.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The absence of a control group means that the contribution of the Microselection strategy specifically as distinct from increased instructional

exposure or the motivational effects of participation in a research study cannot be definitively established. The single-institution, single-class sample limits the direct generalisability of findings to other populations, text types, and educational levels. The dual role of researcher and classroom teacher introduced potential confirmation bias, partially mitigated through methodological triangulation and an independent teacher-observer but not fully eliminable. Finally, the study did not include a delayed post-test; whether the writing gains documented at the conclusion of Cycle II were retained over time remains an open question for future

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate whether the Microselection Learning Strategy could improve descriptive text writing skills among ninth-grade female students at an Islamic boarding school in North Sumatra, Indonesia, and to describe the mechanisms through which such improvement occurred. The findings provide a clear and affirmative answer to both research questions. Implemented across a two-cycle Classroom Action Research design, the Microselection strategy produced a dramatic and consistent improvement in writing performance: classical mastery progressed from 13.89% before the intervention to 100% at the study's conclusion, and the class mean rose from approximately 46.9 to 87.1 points. Qualitative evidence from observation, interviews, and questionnaires confirmed that these gains reflected genuine improvements in vocabulary selection, sentence cohesion, paragraph organisation, and punctuation accuracy, alongside meaningful increases in student confidence and motivation.

Four mechanisms drove this improvement: cognitive scaffolding through sequential task decomposition, deliberate vocabulary front-loading, structured peer feedback and collaborative revision, and transparent rubric-guided formative assessment. These mechanisms operated synergistically within the distinctive context of pesantren education, where the strategy's structured, incremental approach aligned productively with students' existing disciplined learning practices and accommodated the time constraints imposed by the dual academic-religious curriculum.

These findings carry important implications for EFL writing instruction in resource-constrained and time-pressured educational settings. For teachers, the Microselection strategy offers a replicable, low-resource framework applicable across text types and proficiency levels. For curriculum designers, the study provides evidence that explicit strategy instruction should be embedded systematically in junior high school EFL programmes, particularly in boarding school contexts. For future researchers, this study opens productive avenues: longitudinal investigation of retention, replication across different text genres and institutions, and controlled experimental designs that more precisely isolate the strategy's contribution to writing development. The Microselection strategy, originally documented for reading contexts, has demonstrated its potential as a powerful tool for EFL writing instruction a finding with relevance well beyond the context in which it was tested.

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