

Status of teaching and learning descriptive writing in Zanzibar secondary schools: a case of Wete District

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated the status of teaching and learning descriptive writing among Secondary Schools in Zanzibar. The paper focused on (i) Identifying the types of errors made by secondary school students in their descriptive writing skills and (ii) exploring teaching and learning materials in descriptive writing for secondary schools. A mixed method approach was used, and a case study design employed. Simple random sampling was used to select 140 form four students and they have given a test. Also, eight English language subject teachers and two quality assurers were purposively selected. Data were collected using students' test, interview, and documentary reviews. The results depict that students had different errors such as grammatical errors, punctuation marks, coherence and content problems. Also, the findings show that many topics prosed using non-digital materials such as textbooks, and written text for teaching and learning descriptive writing in secondary schools. These materials were also not sufficient to give students ability and competence in descriptive writing in ordinary secondary schools. This indicates that there is a need for designing digital lessons for supporting teaching and learning descriptive writing for F1 students. The study concludes that proper teaching and learning digital contents lessons is needed to support teachers and motivate students in the teaching and learning of descriptive writing to secondary school students. To achieve effective descriptive writing to secondary school students, curriculum developers, teachers and other education stakeholders should emphasize on digital materials to motivate students in teaching and learning process.

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INTRODUCTION

Descriptive writing component has been part of the English language syllabus in secondary schools in Zanzibar, and the learning of descriptive writing is complex concept. To improve the quality of teaching and learning descriptive writing, the integration of digital lesson contents in the teaching of descriptive writing is seen as catalyst aspect (Pateşan et al., 2018; Salehi et al., 2013). Descriptive writing gives students ability to express their feelings, ideas, emotions as well as organizing critical thinking which makes them write clearly in

everyday life (Fareed et al., 2016). In Zanzibar, descriptive writing featured in various topics (such as essay composition, letter writing, minutes, speech, writing curriculum vitae, etc) and they are used in schools and in everyday life (United Republic of Tanzania (URT), 2010). Due to the improvement of science and technology language teachers tend to use digital lesson contents through electronic boards, projectors, audio and video devices in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning descriptive writing (Deal et al., 2017). Some secondary schools teachers use inappropriate and irrelevant materials and causes insufficient descriptive writing ability (Gabriel & Swaibu, 2017). This indicates that, there is a need to investigate errors made by students in descriptive writing and factors that affect teaching and learning materials in descriptive writing to secondary schools

An overview of current situation on teaching descriptive writing

Descriptive writing has been acknowledged as vital skills of communicative language because it gives students a chance to express his/her views, suggestions and ideas towards intended audience (Fareed et al., 2016). However, it is noted that descriptive writing is the most complex part of language because it involves important components such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, diction and coherence (Suriyanti & Yaacob, 2016). Usually, effective teaching and learning process determines teaching and learning materials. Effective teaching and learning materials is inevitable in the effective teaching and learning of descriptive writing because the teaching materials facilitate, and increase active participation (Shanti et al., 2018). Moreover, teaching and learning materials increase students' attention and motivation to the subject matter during teaching and learning (Namasivayam et al., 2017; Ongoro & Mwangoka, 2019).

There are various studies that have discussed the issue of errors in writing to shed light on the ways the errors occur and find the reasons behind them. For example, in Europe, Ethiopia and Pakistan, Graham (2019), Nyamis (2014), and Wondimtegegn (2020) respectively observed that inadequate and irrelevant teaching and learning materials bores students during teaching and learning, and it causes poor descriptive writing ability to secondary school students. A study conducted by Hassan et al. (2014) found that lack of learning digital devices and out dated digital learning materials are among the factors that facilitate poor descriptive writing to secondary school students. Also, a study conducted by Auliya (2017) observed that inadequate facilities such as computers and digital lesson contents are among the factors that hinder students' ability in descriptive writing. This situation has implication that teaching and learning descriptive writing is still an issue and high consideration is needed in secondary schools. Therefore, the study interested to know the challenges that facing teaching and learning descriptive writing in Zanzibar context.

Furthermore, some studies reported that, lack of teaching and learning modern materials and poor readiness affect ordinary secondary schools students' ability in descriptive writing (Kaminski et al., 2018; Sahin et al., 2016). In Malaysia, teachers' attitude and readiness towards using digital lesson materials on teaching descriptive writing is one among the factors that leads poor descriptive writing to secondary school students (Noraddin, 2021; Veramuthu & Md Shah, 2020). This implies digital lesson contents needed for supporting teaching and learning descriptive writing because existing teaching and learning materials such as text books and manila sheets are not enough for students to achieve effective knowledge and skills in descriptive writing.

Various studies show that inadequate teaching and learning materials leads to low ability in descriptive writing to students. For instance, a study conducted in Malaysia by Nair and Hui (2018) found that students make errors in spelling, mechanics, grammar, coherence, structure and lexical items in descriptive essay writing. Also, a study conducted by Tihenea (2019) shows that inadequate teaching and learning materials affect students' competence in grammar, choice of words and coherence among secondary school students. This indicates that the issue of errors in writing skills is essential and needs an urgent discussion especially in the context of secondary schools in order to find out how students make errors in their writing and factors of the cause such errors.

Due to the improvement of science and technology, language curriculum adapts change from local materials to modern one, and it allows teachers to use digital lesson materials for teaching and learning particularly descriptive writing (Walan, 2020). Also, it has been acknowledged that using digital lesson contents as a pedagogical tool in descriptive writing is crucial because they involve different senses in the learning process (Botirovich et al., 2020; Faizah & Novita, 2021; Salihi & Umar, 2020). Various countries use digital lesson materials for enhancing teaching and learning descriptive writing to secondary school students. For example, in Latin America, digital lessons are taken as a key components in improving teaching and learning style in descriptive writing for the young learners because they make them see and hear simultaneously (Scriveener, 2011). In Indonesia, digital lesson materials increase students enjoyment and active participation during teaching and learning (Safitri et al., 2021; Silvani, 2020). In Pakistan, digital lesson materials are helpful in teaching and learning descriptive writing for both teachers and students because they make the lesson effective, save time and increase classroom interaction (Pateşan et al., 2018; Salasiah et al., 2018). Thus, there is a need to adapt change by using digital lesson materials for supporting teaching and learning descriptive writing in secondary schools. The rationale for teaching and learning digital lesson as pedagogical tools encourage the study to assess teaching and learning descriptive writing in secondary schools' level in Zanzibar.

Research objectives

This paper was guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify the types of errors made by secondary school students in their descriptive writing
2. To investigate teaching and learning materials used for teaching and learning descriptive writing in secondary schools in Zanzibar

Roles of Social Constructivist Theory (SCT)

Social constructivist theory of learning was useful for this study because it helps both teachers and students in the curriculum implementation. It emphasizes students to learn more, enjoy and actively participate in the group discussions. Moreover, it gives students chances to use their curiosity in learning by considering social, political, and economic as well as environment contexts he/she lives in. In addition, this theory supports teachers' role as facilitator, guide and less talkative in teaching and learning process.

METHODS

Research approach and Research design

The study used mixed research approach embedded with case study design. The case study design applied because it needs in-depth information about barriers that face students and teachers in the teaching and learning descriptive writing in secondary schools in Zanzibar. Moreover, the case study allowed the researcher to investigate the issue in natural setting (Creswell, 2018).

Participants

One hundred and fifty (150) participants were involved in this study. Simple random sampling technique from four secondary schools was used to select One hundred and forty students (thirty-five students from each selected school). While purposive sampling technique was used to select two quality assurers, as well as eight teachers (two who teach form four from each selected school). The study had chosen all participants from four respected schools in Wete District in Pemba-Zanzibar because Wete is one among the district whereby students get poor performance in descriptive writing questions rather than short answer questions (Zanzibar Examinations Council (ZEC), 2020; ZEC, 2021).

Research instruments and measures

Students were given test which consists three questions namely; letter writing, essay and speech. Students achievement test were measured to investigate errors done by students in descriptive writing. Then, they were interviewed with group to seek their view and reflections towards factors that leads them difficulties in descriptive writing. While teachers were interviewed individually in order to get their idea about the factors that leads difficulties for teaching and learning descriptive writing to secondary schools in Zanzibar.

Validity and reliability

To ensure validity, test and questionnaires were evaluated in terms of the language, quality and clearness for checking any contributions or duplications. To maintain validity, the test and questionnaires were created and shared with four other experts (two from University of Dodoma and two from The State University of Zanzibar (SUZA) to measure contents before going to the field. The experts' opinions and suggestions were regarded to improve validity before administered the participants. In order to maintain reliability, the instruments (test and questionnaires) were tested (as pilot) from two schools (Madungu and Fidel Castro secondary school). The researcher ensured the adherence to research ethics throughout the process including getting clearance from the responsible authorities, respectful treatment to the participants, ensured their rights, freedom of participation and confidentiality.

Data analysis procedure

The data from interviews and documentary reviews were analyzed using thematic analysis through five stages, namely; transcription, coding, categorization into themes, descriptions and interpretation in relation to the research questions. Also, tables, frequencies and percentages were used for more elaboration. Furthermore, inferential statistical analysis was computed through mean, percentage and standard deviation using SPSS version 25.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings about descriptive writing revealed that students were facing problems in descriptive writing (Tabel 1). Seventy-five students (51.4%) out of 140 had grammatical errors; (they fail to use tense appropriately), 35 students (25%) had failed in punctuation marks (they mixed place of comma), 21 students (15%) had problems with coherence (they fail to arrange in logical sequence), and 12 students equivalent to (8.6 %, mean = 6.1) had content problem (they fail to know key word of the question). Besides, teachers, through interview reported that majority of students were committing grammatical errors particularly in tenses and subject-verb agreement. The current findings concur with study conducted by Amalia et al., (2021) who observed poor grammatical competence and in adequate English vocabulary knowledge caused by demotivation to learn, limited sources and facilities to teach descriptive writing. This indicate that, there is a need to motivate students in the teaching and learning for changing from traditional to digital lesson contents as pedagogical tools for supporting them in descriptive writing.

Table 1. Common errors made by F4 students in descriptive writing

ITEM	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Grammar: They fail to use tense appropriately	75	51.4
Punctuation marks: They mixed place of comma	35	25
Coherence: They fail to arrange logical sequence	21	15
Content problem: They fail to know the key word of the question	12	8.6
Total	140	100

Source: Field data (2022)

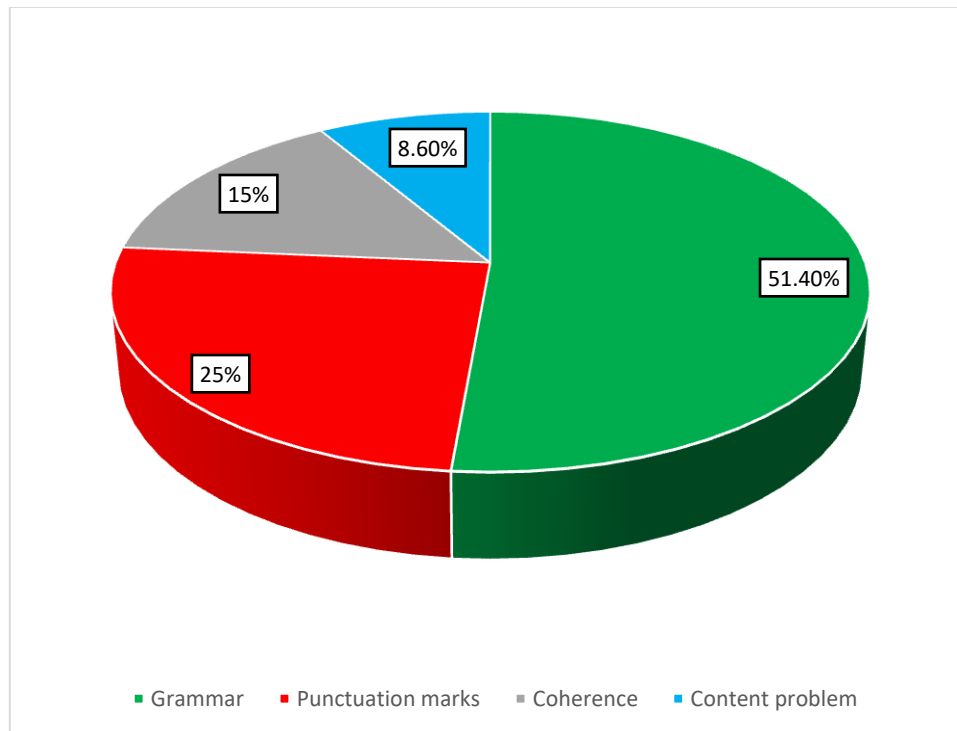


Figure1. Students' results on different categories

The findings of the current study revealed that students make errors in grammar, punctuation, coherence, cohesion and content of question in descriptive essay writing. These types of errors have been identified in the ESL essay writing in several studies such as those by (Ismail, (2018); Shigini, (2020) who identified grammatical errors; Afrin, (2016); Mehdi, (2018) who identified errors in punctuation; Afrin, (2016); Fareed, et al., (2016) who identified coherence; Muhamed, (2019); Nyamis, (2014) who identified poor understanding of the content and Banda, (2017); Mehdi, (2018) who identified errors in sentence structure. However, study conducted in Indonesia by Noer Sita Pramoedya et al. (2022) found that punctuation, incorrect sentence structure, misspelling, misplacement of conjunction, as well miss subject verbs are the majors errors made by the students. This indicates that there are various errors students faces in the descriptive writing such as grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary. Therefore, English subject teachers and government should be serious to support secondary school students because this problem possible may affect them at schools and everyday life.

Teaching and learning materials used for teaching descriptive writing

Informants were asked on the materials used for teaching and learning descriptive writing in secondary schools in Zanzibar. The question was: What are challenges that students face as far as teaching and learning materials are concerned in descriptive writing in secondary schools in Zanzibar? The findings show that majority of participants agreed teaching and learning materials for teaching descriptive writing is a challenge for ordinary secondary schools caused by the following reasons:

Inappropriate materials for teaching and learning

The findings show that majority of participants agree d that teaching and learning materials for teaching descriptive writing still is not appropriate to use because some are too expensive. One of the teachers commended that:

In my side, existing teaching and learning materials such as manila cards, sheets, maps sample of invitation cards are not appropriate for giving students enough knowledge and skills in descriptive writing (*interview with teacher 2 from school A/ April, 2022*).

Based on the above comments, it is possible to conclude that the non-digital materials are not appropriate and friendly to students to acquire sufficient ability in descriptive writing. The current findings are in line with study in Nigeria by Ugwu (2022) who observed that quality education depends on availability of basic teaching and learning materials. However, shortage of and in appropriate teaching and learning materials leads students fail in English literature. This has implication that non-digital lesson materials (textbooks, manila cards and dictionary) that teachers use for teaching and learning descriptive writing are not sufficient to make students competent enough in descriptive writing. Therefore, the authors suggest that there is a need to use digital lesson contents to support teaching and learning in descriptive writing in secondary schools.

However, study conducted by Abidoye et al. (2023) found that effective teaching and learning materials are among the factors that facilitate academic performance among secondary school students. This indicates that, effective and appropriate teaching and learning materials is significant important for supporting teaching and learning in secondary schools, therefore, the government and other education stakeholders like private sectors should emphasis to cope on designing digital lesson contents for motivate students and support teachers in the teaching and learning descriptive writing in secondary schools.

Lack of digital lesson content for teaching and learning descriptive writing

The data explains that inadequate digital lessons for teaching and learning descriptive writing is a challenge because many school students use traditional materials of teaching such as manila sheets and textbooks. This is not sufficient to facilitate teaching and learning descriptive writing to ordinary school students. One teacher said that

I noted in our school, we have only one projector used for teaching and learning process, but also, we have no digital lesson contents for teaching and learning descriptive writing (*interview with teacher 2 from school A/ April, 2022*).

In the similar view, quality assurer added that:

Using digital devices such as projectors, smart TVs and computers are still a challenge in our public ordinary secondary schools, and it makes it difficult for teachers to use for teaching and learning (*interview with quality assurer 1/ April, 2022*).

The texts above give evidence of the participants' view that using digital lesson contents is challenge for third world countries like Zanzibar. The current study is align with study conducted by (Kristiana et al., 2021) who observed that inadequate resources, heavy workload and lack of motivation are among the factors that hinders student to achieve the intended goals. This indicates that lack of digital lesson contents is among the factors that lead to difficulties for students in descriptive writing. This is because the existing materials bored students during teaching and learning. The current results concur with data from Gabriel and Elisa, 2017; Gabriel and Swaibu, (2017) who said that existing teaching and learning materials such as textbooks and manila cards bored and made students anxious. This implies that lack of digital lesson contents leads poor descriptive writing ability of students and it leads them to write in poor grammar and miss correct punctuation. Therefore, this paper suggests that there is a need to motivate students and make them active during teaching and learning to improve their descriptive writing ability.

Teachers and students' needs using digital lesson in descriptive writing

The findings show that, majority teachers and students' needs using digital lesson contents for teaching descriptive writing to ordinary secondary school students. The informants agree that, using digital lesson contents increase student's achievement, enough knowledge and skills in descriptive writing. One teacher quoted that

The digital lesson has greater influence on student achievement knowledge and skills because it motivates students and increases students' attention in the teaching and learning process (interview with teacher 2 from school A/ April, 2022).

The above statement indicates that using modern materials such as digital lesson contents through projectors/smart TV increases students' motivation, attention and long-term understanding. The current findings are in line with study conducted in Tanzania by Rajab (2020) who recommends that there is a need to design digital lesson contents for enhancing teaching and learning. It implies that teaching descriptive writing through digital lesson contents may encourage students' ability in the descriptive writing. Moreover, these findings support the findings by Deane (2018) and Nyamis (2014) who emphasized prior-topic knowledge, writing practice, motivation and use technological materials for teaching and learning descriptive writing. Syam (2021) stressed that, modeling materials motivate students and facilitate teachers during teaching and learning descriptive writing. This means that there is a need to design digital lessons for supporting teaching and learning descriptive writing to secondary school students. Digital lessons should be given high priority due to improvement of science and technology to reduce high energy from teachers and motivate students in the learning process.

Furthermore, these findings support Zanzibar education policy, ICT policy as well as, English language syllabus emphasize on using modern materials (digital lessons) for teaching and learning (Ministry of Infrastructure and Communications, 2013; MoEVT, 2006; United Republic of Tanzania (URT), 2010). This indicates that Zanzibar government expects to use modern materials (digital lesson contents) for teaching and learning process. However, the current findings show that, there is a lack of appropriate and effective digital lesson contents for teaching and learning descriptive writing in secondary schools. Therefore, this paper suggests that there is need to invest in education for designing digital lesson contents for supporting teachers and motivate students in descriptive writing.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the current study have indicated that teachers were relying more on textbooks, newspapers, and written text pictures, pictures of daily routine, maps and manila cards for teaching writing description topic. In the similar views, traditional materials were making students bored in the classroom. Despite the initiative taken in Zanzibar to train teachers and distribute Smart TVs and Projectors in different schools in Pemba and Unguja, many teachers were still using local materials (textbooks, and manila sheets) instead of using the technological ones. The findings show that, some teachers were not giving importance in using modern materials for teaching and learning descriptive writing.

The results show that many topics were planned to be taught through traditional materials such as textbooks, manila sheets, diagrams, figures, newspapers, written texts, models, dictionaries, and encyclopedia. However, these materials cause boredom and monotony to secondary school students when they are used for teaching descriptive writing. Therefore, new materials are needed to enhance teaching and learning descriptive writing in ordinary secondary schools. This paper recommends that there is a need to design digital lesson materials that support students and teachers in descriptive writing. After designing the materials, governments should train secondary school teachers on how to use the designed digital materials in order to get quality education as identified by Zanzibar Education Policy 2006.

The findings show that descriptive writing is a problem among secondary school students while grammatical errors, poor punctuation and coherence are major aspects that many students face in the writing. English subject inspectors and teachers suggested that, new digital lessons are needed to support teaching descriptive writing in the classroom situation as well as to motivate students more in the descriptive writing. Finally, 106 students (75.7%) out of 140 responded positively and they were motivated to learn

through new materials of digital lessons for descriptive writing, but they need materials that are cheap and simple for them to use in the classroom situation according to the number of students in public schools.

Due to the importance of descriptive writing in school life and after school, this study recommends that there is a need to find means which address that problem in order to get better achievement at school, work place as well as in everyday life. In terms of theoretical implications, the findings indicated that students made most errors in grammar, followed by punctuation, sentence structure, coherence and content. These findings support the model of Errors by James (1998) in which he highlighted the same types of errors (spellings, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, coherence and lexis. However, the current study categorized errors into five different groups like grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, coherence and contents. Therefore, there is a need to develop digital lesson contents for supporting teaching and learning descriptive writing to ordinary secondary school in Zanzibar. Moreover, in order to achieve effective descriptive writing to secondary school students, curriculum developers, teachers and other education stakeholders should emphasize digital materials to motivate students in teaching and learning. The scope of this study is limited to four secondary schools (eight (8) English language subject teachers and one hundred and forty (140) students in Wete District. Further study could involve a larger sample size and other educational stakeholders such as academic master/mistress, headmasters/mistress/ curriculum developers etc. to seek their views towards challenges of teaching and learning descriptive writing in secondary schools.

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