

Using Cue Cards to Improve EFL Students' Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT

Writing remains a significant challenge for EFL students, and the use of instructional media is a recognized strategy to address this issue. This study investigated the efficacy of cue cards in improving the writing skills of tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. Employing a quasi-experimental design, the study utilized a population of 366 students, with a sample of 63 students selected through purposive sampling: 31 students in class X-I (experimental group) and 32 students in class X-J (control group). The research instrument was a writing test focused on descriptive text. Because the data were not normally distributed, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was applied using SPSS. The results revealed a post-test p-value of 0.001, which is significantly lower than the 0.05 alpha level. This indicates a statistically significant difference between the two groups following the treatment, confirming that cue card media effectively improves EFL students' writing skills. Consequently, this media is recommended as a valuable tool for enhancing classroom instruction.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most essential skills in the English language. Writing skill is defined as the capacity to articulate viewpoints and convey specific messages to an audience [1]. With proficient writing skills, writers can present ideas in a logical sequence, ensuring that messages are communicated more effectively to readers. Furthermore, writers employ writing skills to acquire new knowledge, persuade others, provide entertainment, record personal experiences, and interpret the meaning of events and circumstances [2]. From this perspective, writing is not merely a method of transmitting messages; instead, over time, its functions have expanded to serve multiple purposes. Although writing is a challenging skill to teach and requires a considerable amount of time to develop, it remains

a teachable and learnable skill [3], underscoring its importance in English language learning for EFL students.

In accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum, senior high school students are encouraged to explore various English text types, including descriptive, procedural, recount, persuasive, narrative, and report texts. Although this curriculum emphasizes a flexible and personalized approach, the writing competencies expected of students remain demanding [4]. Regarding the challenges faced by EFL students, several common problems emerge. One of the most significant obstacles is the lack of sufficient content knowledge about assigned topics, which prevents students from producing well-developed texts [5]. Furthermore, insufficient content knowledge hinders their ability to organize their writing effectively. Preliminary research conducted at SMA Negeri 2 Palu revealed that many students struggled with unfamiliar topics, creating difficulties in generating relevant and insightful ideas. Consequently, their writing often lacked adequate supporting details, examples, or evidence to strengthen their arguments or narratives.

Indonesian EFL students continue to face challenges in developing their writing skills. This is largely because writing is considered a demanding undertaking in both L1 and L2 contexts due to the multifaceted competencies required [6]. Unlike speaking, which develops more naturally, writing requires a longer process because it involves mastering grammatical structures, patterns, and rules [7]. For this reason, both teachers and lecturers strive to find effective strategies and models to help students improve their writing skills.

Several studies have investigated the use of cue cards to enhance students' writing skills. Triani et al. [8] found an improvement in students' descriptive writing achievement when comparing test results between students taught using cue cards and those who were not. Similarly, Rohimajaya et al. [9] found that cue card media had a significant impact on the writing skills of tenth-grade students. Furthermore, Siagian et al. [10] concluded that the use of cue cards in teaching can significantly develop eighth-grade students' writing skills. Based on these findings, the present study aims to investigate whether similar results emerge when focusing specifically on writing components, such as content and organization.

To address these problems, the use of instructional media has proven to be an effective approach. Among the many types of instructional media, cue cards are a promising option. Cue cards are media containing both pictures and dialogues to help students by giving prompts or hints [11] [12]. Cue cards provide visual support that can assist students in generating content, making them especially useful for overcoming writing challenges [13], [14], [15]. This medium is considered appropriate in this study. In writing, there are five components assessed, content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanism [16]. The researchers observed that students' primary difficulties lie in content and organization [17]. This research aims to measure the improvement in students' writing skills, specifically in writing descriptive texts. Descriptive text describes a person, place, or thing based on the writer's senses [18], [19]. Through students' descriptive texts, the researchers can observe the improvement in students' writing components. The following question of the study is, "Can the use of cue cards improve the writing skills of the tenth-grade students of SMA Negeri 2 Palu?"

2. METHOD

This research employed a quasi-experimental design involving both experimental and control groups [20]. Both groups got a pre-test before the treatment and a post-test after the treatment. The treatment consists of practicing writing a descriptive text with the aid of cue cards and media. The treatment was only given to the experimental group; on the other hand, the control group was taught to write descriptive text in accordance with the school lesson plan. After the treatment, the results were evaluated by comparing the pre-test scores of both groups.

The population for this study consisted of all tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Palu during the 2024/2025 academic year. This population was substantial, comprising 366 students distributed across 11 classes (Class X-A to X-K), with each class containing approximately 31 to 36 students. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique. This non-probability method was chosen to ensure the research focused on groups that met specific, predefined criteria and would potentially benefit most from the intervention, thereby strengthening the validity of the study's findings. Specifically, Class X-I (the experimental group, $n = 31$) and Class X-J (the control group, $n = 32$) were selected. This particular selection was made because the two classes demonstrated only a slight, non-significant initial difference in their writing abilities. Selecting groups with near-equivalent baseline skills helps ensure that any eventual differences observed between the experimental and control groups can be more confidently attributed to the intervention rather than to pre-existing disparities.

This study had two variables: the dependent and independent variables. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between the two variables, and the relationship between these variables was a key factor in determining the success of this study [21]. The dependent variable of this research was the writing skill of tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. And the independent variable was the use of cue cards in learning.

This research utilized a writing test as the primary instrument, requiring students to select from provided topics and compose a descriptive text. The testing procedure involved two distinct assessments: a pre-test and a post-test. The pre-test was administered first to establish the students' initial writing abilities and baseline knowledge before the intervention. Following the treatment period, a post-test was administered to both the experimental and control groups. The primary purpose of the post-test was to generate results that could be statistically compared between the two groups, thereby gauging the improvement achieved and evaluating the overall effectiveness of the intervention. In both the pre-test and post-test, the researchers collected the data from the students' descriptive texts.

Following the pre-test, the researchers administered cue card media treatment to the experimental group over six sessions. Each session involved presenting teaching material, explaining the cue card method, and providing the media. For practical application, students were divided into groups, each assigned a different topic (e.g., animals, people, or places). They were required to write a descriptive text about their assigned topic. The cue cards served as an aid and a prompt for gathering necessary content information. Students were also permitted to collaborate and share information within their groups. The

descriptive texts were then peer-reviewed; students swapped papers to give comments and suggestions with the researchers' guidance. This repeated cycle of writing and preparation was designed to immerse students in the writing process and allow them to utilize the cue cards to maximize their content development time.

In analyzing the data, the researchers first planned to conduct a normality test to assess the data distribution and determine whether subsequent analysis would utilize parametric or non-parametric methods. Following this, the Mann-Whitney U-test was chosen as the primary non-parametric tool to assess the level of statistical significance between the groups [22], [23]. This U-test would be performed in two stages: first, on the pre-test results of the experimental and control groups to establish baseline equivalence; and second, on the post-test results to determine the significant difference achieved after the intervention [24]. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the findings regarding the improvement in students' writing skills, all data analysis would be carried out using the SPSS 27 statistical software package.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

This section presents the research findings aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of cue card media in improving the descriptive writing skills of the tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. The data, obtained from the pre-test and post-test conducted within a quasi-experimental design, were subsequently analyzed to identify any statistically significant improvements following the intervention.

The descriptive analysis revealed a significant increase in mean scores for both groups. The experimental group's mean score rose substantially from 51.69 to 78.1, indicating a marked improvement in their writing skills. In contrast, the control group's mean score showed a smaller increase, rising from 53.4 to 58.1. This notable difference in growth between the two groups suggests the positive impact of the intervention and highlights the efficacy of the cue card media in enhancing students' descriptive writing skills compared to traditional instruction.

Before conducting the hypothesis testing, assumption tests were performed using SPSS to determine the appropriate statistical analysis. In Figure 1, the normality test using the Shapiro-Wilk method revealed that the pre-test scores of both the experimental and control groups were not normally distributed ($\text{Sig} < .05$). For the post-test scores, the experimental group met the assumption of normality ($\text{Sig} = .169$), while the control group did not ($\text{Sig} = .007$). These results indicate that the assumption of normality was not fulfilled for all data sets.

Table 1. Normality Test

| Tests of Normality | | | | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|----|------|--------------|----|------|
| | Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a | | | Shapiro-Wilk | | |
| | Statistic | df | Sig. | Statistic | Df | Sig. |
| Experimental Pre-test | .155 | 31 | .056 | .897 | 31 | .006 |
| Control Pre-test | .146 | 31 | .093 | .898 | 31 | .007 |
| Experimental Post-test | .155 | 31 | .055 | .951 | 31 | .169 |
| Control Pre-test | .159 | 31 | .045 | .900 | 31 | .007 |

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Violations of the normality assumptions suggest that the data do not satisfy the conditions for parametric analysis. Therefore, a non-parametric test, specifically the Mann-Whitney U test, was chosen to analyze the differences between the two groups. This test is appropriate for comparing two independent samples when the assumptions of normal distribution are not met.

The results of the pre-test for both groups show that the total rank of the experimental group ($R1 = 1031.1$) is slightly lower than that of the control group ($R2 = 984.9$), indicating that the writing skills of the experimental group students are lower. To ensure that the experimental and control groups have equal knowledge or ability before treatment, the Mann-Whitney U-test was conducted using SPSS. With a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, Figure 2 shows that the p-value (0.923) is greater than α (0.05), indicating that the result is not statistically significant. This means that there is no significant difference between the two groups in the pre-test phase, indicating that the students' initial abilities were comparable before the treatment.

Table 2. Result of Mann-Whitney U-test for Pre-test Using SPSS
Test Statistics^a

| | Pre-test |
|------------------------|----------|
| Mann-Whitney U | 489.000 |
| Wilcoxon W | 985.000 |
| Z | -.096 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .923 |

a. Grouping Variable: Group

After obtaining the post-test results of both groups, it is evident that the total rank of the experimental group ($R1 = 1233.5$) is higher than that of the control group ($R2 = 782.5$), indicating that the writing skills of the experimental group students improved more than those of the control group.

After finding the wide difference in the pre-test result, a Mann-Whitney U-test was conducted using SPSS. In Figure 3, the U-test shows the p-value ($.001 < \alpha$ (.05)), indicating that the result is significant. This shows a significant difference between the two groups after treatment, suggesting that the treatment had an effect. In other words, the use of cue cards as a medium can improve students' writing at SMA Negeri 2 Palu.

Table 3. Result of the Mann-Whitney U-test for post-test using SPSS
Test Statistics^a

| | Post-test |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Mann-Whitney U | 254.500 |
| Wilcoxon W | 782.500 |
| Z | -3.322 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .001 |

a. Grouping Variable: Group

3.2. Discussion

After conducting and analyzing the numerical data of the research, the researchers found that the students' writing skills in the experimental group increased on the post-test. The mean score of the students improved by 26.41 points, rising from 51.69 on the pre-test to 78.10 on the post-test. Thus, using cue cards can improve the writing skills of tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. In other words, the results of this study have answered the research question and are directly proportional to the hypothesis.

As mentioned in the scope of this research, this study measured each writing component of the students' descriptive text. The researchers, however, focused more on content and organization. With this intention, the scoring rubric of Brown [25] was adapted, and 55.5% of the total score was used to measure content and organization. The remaining 44.5% was used to measure vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics of writing. This design was implemented to facilitate easier observation of the improvement after using cue cards.

In this research, cue cards can help students in generating information about a specific topic using words and pictures before the writing process, making it easier to organize that content into a descriptive text. During the treatment, the researchers asked students to choose a topic similar to their cue card. By using the cue card, students wrote keywords that emerged in their minds. Students then organized and wrote a descriptive text based on that information.

The research results showed that the use of this medium can increase students' writing skills, as evidenced by the comparison of score increases. The experimental group showed an increase of more than 50%, while the control group showed an increase of less than 10%. This increase was primarily attributed to the scoring rubric, which emphasized the content and organization of writing. This demonstrated a difference in improvement between the students who were taught using cue cards and those who were not, particularly in those writing components. Finally, the researchers may conclude that the use of cue cards can improve students' writing skills.

Based on the findings, the results are supported by previous studies. Triani et al. [8] concluded that cue cards can effectively improve students' descriptive writing performance. Similarly, Rohimajaya et al. [9] found a significant effect of cue card media on students' writing skills. Furthermore, Siagian et al. [10] reported that cue cards had a meaningful impact on teaching writing. Therefore, the results of these studies reinforce the conclusion that cue cards are a useful and effective medium for improving students' descriptive writing skills.

The findings of this study imply that incorporating cue cards as a medium in classroom instruction can significantly enhance students' writing abilities, particularly in descriptive writing. This medium provides a practical and engaging support tool that helps students focus on specific aspects of their topic and structure their ideas more clearly. Teachers and curriculum developers may consider adopting cue cards as a supplementary medium to assist students who face challenges in organizing content or maintaining focus during the writing process.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, statistical analysis demonstrates that the use of cue card media significantly improves students' writing skills at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. The results revealed a marked improvement in students who received the treatment compared to those who did not. Specifically, post-test data showed significant differences, with the experimental group's progress far exceeding that of the control group. These findings indicate that instructional media can enhance student writing within a school environment. However, this study is limited by its focus on descriptive texts and its reliance on a sample consisting solely of tenth-grade students.

For future research, it is recommended that alternative media types be explored that target specific writing components. Researchers may also apply cue card media to develop speaking skills or cater to different educational levels, using broader or more specialized topics. Additionally, employing different research designs, such as a pre-experimental approach, could allow for a more focused observation of effects within a single group. It is hoped that this research will inspire other investigators to explore innovative approaches to enhancing EFL students' writing skills and overall English proficiency.

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