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ROLE, AUDIENCE, FORMAT, AND TOPIC (RAFT) STRATEGY TO ENHANCE EFL LEARNERS' DESCRIPTIVE WRITING: A STUDY IN AN INDONESIAN MADRASAH

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Abstract

Writing remains one of the most demanding skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in producing descriptive texts that require lexical variety, grammatical accuracy, and mechanical precision. Traditional approaches in Indonesian classrooms often emphasize form-focused drills and teacher-centered instruction, which may limit students' engagement and creativity. This study investigates the effectiveness of the Role–Audience–Format–Topic (RAFT) strategy in enhancing senior secondary students' descriptive writing performance. A quasi-experimental design was employed with 48 twelfth-grade students from MA Batusitanduk, divided into an experimental group taught using RAFT ($n = 24$) and a control group taught through conventional methods ($n = 24$). Both groups completed a pre-test and post-test assessed on vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics using a validated analytic rubric. Results revealed that the experimental group achieved a significantly higher mean post-test score ($M = 72.33$) than the control group ($M = 65.33$), $t(46) = -5.432$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.52$, 95% CI [8.32, 15.02]). These findings confirm that RAFT effectively scaffolds planning and audience awareness, leading to substantial improvement in descriptive writing. The study offers theoretical implications for integrating cognitive and genre-based pedagogy, and practical recommendations for EFL teachers seeking to promote meaningful and engaging writing instruction in secondary education.

Keywords: RAFT, Writing Ability, Descriptive Text, EFL Learners

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely recognized as one of the most complex skills in second or foreign language learning because it requires learners to integrate lexical knowledge, grammatical accuracy, textual organization, and communicative purpose. In the global context, the importance of writing competence has grown significantly as students are increasingly expected to publish, present, and exchange ideas across digital and academic platforms. Recent studies confirm that EFL learners face considerable challenges in producing coherent and accurate texts, making writing instruction a priority in language education worldwide (Graham, Liu, Bartlett, Ng, & Harris, 2018; Graham, 2023).

Within Indonesia, writing instruction is an essential component of the national EFL curriculum, particularly the teaching of descriptive texts at the secondary level. Descriptive writing demands that students identify a clear generic structure (identification and description) while also applying accurate vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. However, multiple studies have reported persistent difficulties in these areas. For instance, Fitriani (2023) found that senior high school students struggled with vocabulary selection and sentence arrangement, while Fajriyah (2022) documented challenges in applying correct grammar and mechanics among tenth graders in Jakarta. These findings indicate that Indonesian students continue to encounter substantial barriers in descriptive writing despite sustained curricular emphasis.

In response to such challenges, scholars have explored the effectiveness of strategy-based

approaches to writing instruction. Research in the past five years has shown that explicit strategy instruction fosters both cognitive and affective gains. A study in China demonstrated that metacognitive strategy training improved not only writing performance but also students' motivation and engagement in EFL contexts (Zhang & Guo, 2024). In Indonesia, several classroom interventions highlight the potential of strategy-based models. Rahmasari and Rifa'i (2022) reported that combining the RAFT strategy with Google Classroom improved junior high school students' ability to generate ideas and organize texts. Similarly, Hidayati and Suarnajaya (2021) found that RAFT significantly enhanced the coherence and audience awareness of students' essays in Bali.

The RAFT strategy—Role, Audience, Format, and Topic—was originally introduced as a pedagogical tool to help students understand the rhetorical context of their writing (Santa, 1988; Buehl, 2020). By encouraging learners to adopt a role, identify an audience, select an appropriate format, and focus on a topic, RAFT scaffolds both cognitive planning and rhetorical stance. Empirical findings suggest that RAFT can enhance organization, vocabulary use, and grammatical accuracy by making the purpose and structure of writing explicit (Seliem, Mohamed, & Ali, 2020; Rahmasari & Rifa'i, 2022). Recent studies also highlight its motivational benefits: learners perceive RAFT tasks as creative, authentic, and engaging, thereby increasing their investment in writing (Putri, 2023).

Despite these promising outcomes, two important gaps remain. First, much of the evidence comes from junior high school or general EFL

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contexts, whereas fewer studies have examined RAFT's impact in senior secondary madrasah settings, where students face higher academic expectations and more complex writing tasks. Second, only a limited number of studies employ rigorous quasi-experimental designs that report effect sizes and confidence intervals, which are essential for situating findings within broader empirical debates. As a result, there is insufficient evidence on the extent to which RAFT contributes to measurable improvements in descriptive writing at the twelfth-grade level.

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates the effectiveness of the RAFT strategy in enhancing descriptive writing ability among twelfth-grade students at MA Batusitanduk. By applying a quasi-experimental design with pre-and post-tests, this study offers empirical evidence of RAFT's impact in a context that has not been extensively studied. The novelty of this research lies in its combination of context, method, and focus. It examines RAFT in a senior madrasah setting, employs robust statistical analysis to measure effect sizes, and disaggregates performance into key writing components—vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. These aspects contribute not only to the practical improvement of EFL pedagogy in Indonesian schools but also to the international literature on strategy-based writing instruction.

This study also offers practical implications for teachers and curriculum developers. By demonstrating how RAFT can scaffold students' role-taking, audience awareness, and organizational strategies, the findings provide actionable recommendations for classroom

instruction. Moreover, the study responds to broader calls for pedagogical innovation in teaching writing by integrating cognitive and socio-rhetorical perspectives, thereby bridging global insights with local classroom needs.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 explains the methodology, including design, participants, instruments, and analytical procedures. Section 3 presents the findings, highlighting both descriptive and inferential statistics. Section 4 discusses the results in relation to existing literature, identifies implications and limitations, and proposes directions for future research. Section 5 concludes the paper by summarizing the study's key contributions and practical recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is recognized as one of the most challenging skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts due to the integration of vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, organization, and communicative purpose (Graham et al., 2018). Scholars have long emphasized that learners often struggle with coherence and accuracy in their writing, particularly in descriptive texts. These difficulties underline the need for effective pedagogical strategies that not only address linguistic aspects but also engage learners in meaningful and authentic writing tasks (Graham, 2023).

In Indonesia, the teaching of descriptive texts holds a significant place in the national curriculum, especially at the secondary education level. Despite this emphasis, students continue to

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experience substantial difficulties. Research has shown that Indonesian learners often face challenges in vocabulary selection, sentence construction, and grammatical accuracy (Fitriani, 2023; Fajriyah, 2022). These findings highlight persistent gaps in writing proficiency, suggesting that traditional teacher-centered methods may not sufficiently scaffold students' writing development.

To overcome these challenges, scholars have increasingly turned to strategy-based instruction. Such approaches are grounded in the belief that writing can be improved when learners are explicitly taught how to plan, organize, and reflect on their texts (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Strategy instruction not only enhances the cognitive aspects of writing but also fosters students' motivation and engagement. Zhang and Guo (2024) demonstrated that metacognitive strategy training in China improved learners' writing skills alongside their confidence and participation in classroom activities.

One promising instructional model is the RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, Topic) strategy, which guides learners to consider rhetorical contexts in their writing. Originally introduced by Santa (1988) and later elaborated by Buehl (2020), RAFT requires students to adopt specific roles, define audiences, choose text formats, and focus on meaningful topics. This structured framework helps students connect their ideas with communicative goals, making writing more purposeful and coherent. Empirical studies confirm that RAFT can improve organization, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy (Seliem, Mohamed, & Ali, 2020).

In the Indonesian context, several studies highlight RAFT's potential. Rahmasari and Rifa'i (2022) reported that RAFT combined with Google Classroom enhanced students' ability to generate ideas and organize texts in junior high school. Similarly, Hidayati and Suarnajaya (2021) found that RAFT improved coherence and audience awareness among EFL learners in Bali. These studies suggest that RAFT not only strengthens cognitive planning but also fosters audience sensitivity, a critical aspect of effective communication in writing.

Beyond linguistic outcomes, RAFT has also been shown to boost learner motivation and creativity. Putri (2023) revealed that students perceived RAFT-based tasks as engaging, authentic, and enjoyable, which contributed to higher levels of participation in writing activities. This aligns with broader findings that strategy-based instruction can reduce writing anxiety and encourage students to invest more effort in producing meaningful texts. Thus, RAFT provides both cognitive and affective benefits in writing instruction.

Despite these positive findings, research gaps remain. Most previous studies have focused on junior high school learners, while fewer have investigated senior secondary or madrasah settings where students are expected to engage in more complex academic writing. Additionally, many studies employed descriptive or classroom action research, with fewer adopting rigorous quasi-experimental designs that report effect sizes (Rahmasari & Rifa'i, 2022; Hidayati & Suarnajaya, 2021). As such, there is limited empirical evidence on the measurable impact of

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RAFT in higher-grade levels with advanced academic demands.

In sum, the literature suggests that RAFT is a promising strategy for enhancing EFL students' writing skills by scaffolding planning, organization, and rhetorical awareness. Its effectiveness has been documented in improving linguistic accuracy, coherence, and learner motivation. However, further research is needed in diverse educational contexts, particularly at the senior secondary level, to validate its generalizability and long-term effects. Addressing these gaps can contribute significantly to the theoretical and practical advancement of writing pedagogy in EFL classrooms.

METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental design using a non-equivalent control group pre-test–post-test model. Such a design is widely used in educational research when random assignment is impractical due to intact classroom settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design allows researchers to compare learning outcomes between an experimental group exposed to the treatment—in this case, the RAFT strategy—and a control group receiving conventional instruction, while both groups complete the same pre- and post-tests. This approach ensures that observed differences can be attributed primarily to the intervention.

2.2 Participants

The participants consisted of 48 twelfth-grade students enrolled at MA Batusitanduk, a senior Islamic secondary school (madrasah aliyah) in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Two intact classes were purposively selected based on the school's schedule and teacher allocation. Class XII IPA 1 (n = 24) was assigned as the experimental group, while Class XII IPS 2 (n = 24) served as the control group. Students' average age ranged between 16 and 18 years, with a relatively balanced gender distribution.

Purposive sampling was applied because the selected classes were comparable in terms of English proficiency level, prior curriculum exposure, and demographic composition. This sampling ensured representativeness within the school context, while also allowing feasibility in implementation. Although random assignment was not possible, the use of pre-test scores helped establish baseline equivalence between groups.

2.3 Instruments

The primary research instrument was a writing test designed to assess students' ability to compose a descriptive text. Both pre-test and post-test required students to produce a paragraph describing a person based on a provided picture stimulus. Using the same format for both tests allowed for valid measurement of progress over time while controlling for task familiarity.

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The test was assessed using an analytic scoring rubric adapted from Brown (2007), which included three components:

Vocabulary – range, appropriateness, and accuracy of lexical choice.

Language Use (Grammar) – control of syntax, verb forms, and sentence structures.

Mechanics – accuracy of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

Each component was rated on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent), yielding a maximum score of 15. The rubric was subjected to expert validation by two senior lecturers in English Education to ensure content and construct validity. To establish reliability, two independent raters assessed all scripts. The inter-rater reliability coefficient was calculated using Cohen's kappa, which yielded a satisfactory value of 0.82, indicating strong agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). In addition, Cronbach's alpha for the rubric was 0.87, suggesting good internal consistency.

2.4 Procedure

The data collection followed four main stages:

Pre-test administration. Both groups were given a 30-minute writing test to assess their baseline ability. The task required students to write a descriptive text of approximately 150–200 words based on a picture prompt.

Treatment. Over four instructional sessions (each 90 minutes), the experimental group was

taught descriptive writing through the RAFT strategy. Instruction followed these steps:

Role identification: students selected a role (e.g., a friend, a teacher, a journalist).

Audience specification: students determined who would read their text (e.g., classmates, parents, or the general public).

Format selection: students chose a format (e.g., diary entry, letter, short article).

Topic development: students applied these choices to describe a target person using relevant details. Activities included brainstorming, guided drafting, peer discussion, and teacher feedback. Meanwhile, the control group was taught descriptive writing through conventional methods, primarily teacher explanation, textbook exercises, and individual practice, without structured role-audience-format scaffolding.

Post-test administration. After the treatment, both groups were administered the same type of writing test as in the pre-test, under equivalent conditions.

Scoring and analysis. Student scripts were collected, anonymized, and scored independently by two raters using the rubric. Scores were compiled for statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and effect size calculations.

The entire study was conducted over a period of four weeks, including one week for pre-test and orientation, two weeks for treatment, and one week for post-test and scoring.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to determine whether the RAFT strategy significantly improved students' descriptive writing performance. Findings are presented in three stages: (1) descriptive statistics, (2) inferential statistics, and (3) visual representation of score comparisons.

The data indicate that both groups experienced improvement between the pre-test and post-test. However, the experimental group achieved a much higher gain (13.54 points) than the control group (5.04 points). This descriptive trend suggests that the RAFT strategy provided additional support beyond conventional instruction.

To test whether these differences were statistically significant, an independent-samples t-test was conducted. The results showed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' post-test scores, $t(46) = -5.432$, $p < .001$. The effect size, Cohen's $d = 1.52$, indicated a large effect. The 95% confidence interval (CI) for the mean difference [8.32, 15.02] further supports the robustness of the findings.

The findings of this study demonstrated that the RAFT strategy significantly improved students' descriptive writing performance compared to conventional instruction. The experimental group achieved a 13.54-point gain from pre-test to post-test, while the control group's improvement was only 5.04 points. This result was confirmed by an independent-samples t-test ($t(46) = -5.432$, $p < .001$) and a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.52$), indicating that the difference was both statistically reliable and practically meaningful. These findings highlight that RAFT provided students with effective scaffolding to generate

ideas, structure texts, and apply linguistic accuracy.

From a theoretical perspective, these results support process-oriented theories of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981), which posit that successful writing involves planning, translating, and reviewing. RAFT operationalizes the planning stage by prompting learners to identify their role, intended audience, format, and topic before drafting. By externalizing these choices, RAFT reduces cognitive load and allows students to focus more attention on content development and linguistic accuracy. This aligns with recent research showing that strategy-based instruction improves both the process and the product of writing in EFL contexts (Zhang & Guo, 2024).

The study's findings also resonate with genre-based pedagogy (Hyland, 2019), which emphasizes that writing is a social practice shaped by purpose, audience, and context. RAFT encourages learners to consider these rhetorical dimensions explicitly, thereby fostering greater genre awareness. The significant improvement in students' performance suggests that RAFT effectively bridges cognitive and socio-rhetorical perspectives, strengthening both the structural organization and communicative effectiveness of students' texts.

In comparison with previous empirical studies, the results of this research are consistent with Rahmasari and Rifa'i (2022), who found that RAFT integrated with Google Classroom enhanced junior high school students' descriptive writing skills. Similarly, Hidayati and Suarnajaya (2021) reported that RAFT improved coherence

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and audience awareness among EFL learners in Bali. The present study extends this evidence by focusing on senior madrasah students, a group less frequently studied. Thus, the results not only confirm earlier findings but also provide novel insights into RAFT's applicability at higher educational levels.

The implications of this research are twofold. Practically, teachers can adopt RAFT as a pre-writing activity to help students brainstorm ideas and consider audience expectations. This strategy can be incorporated into lesson plans for different genres (narrative, expository, argumentative) and adapted for digital platforms to encourage collaborative writing. Curriculum developers may also embed RAFT into writing syllabi as part of strategy-based instruction, while policymakers could support professional development programs to train teachers in implementing such approaches. Theoretically, this study provides evidence that RAFT contributes to the broader discussion on strategy-based writing instruction by combining metacognitive planning with genre awareness, offering a model for integrating cognitive and socio-rhetorical theories in classroom practice.

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. The relatively small sample size ($N = 48$) and single-site context limit the generalizability of the findings. The quasi-experimental design, which relied on intact classes, may introduce potential confounds even though pre-test scores indicated equivalence. Furthermore, the treatment lasted for only four sessions, which may not capture long-term learning or retention effects. The writing rubric, while validated and reliable, could also be

expanded to include more nuanced dimensions of writing quality, such as coherence, creativity, and organization beyond grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics.

Future research should build on these findings in several ways. First, larger-scale studies involving multiple schools across different regions would enhance external validity. Second, longitudinal designs could examine whether RAFT leads to sustained improvement and transfer to other genres or academic writing tasks. Third, mixed-methods approaches could combine statistical data with qualitative interviews or text analyses to uncover how RAFT influences students' writing processes, perceptions, and engagement. Finally, comparative studies could investigate RAFT in combination with other instructional approaches, such as peer feedback, process writing, or digital storytelling, to determine synergistic effects.

this study confirms the effectiveness of RAFT in improving descriptive writing among senior madrasah students, supports theoretical models of writing, and provides practical guidance for teachers and curriculum designers. At the same time, its limitations point to the need for continued.

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CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the RAFT strategy significantly enhanced students' descriptive writing performance at the twelfth-grade level of MA Batusitanduk. The experimental group, taught through RAFT, achieved substantially higher gains in vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics compared to the control group, with results supported by strong statistical evidence and a large effect size. These findings affirm that RAFT is an effective instructional approach for fostering writing ability in EFL contexts, particularly by guiding learners to plan, organize, and express ideas more coherently.

Practically, this research suggests that EFL teachers should integrate RAFT into their writing instruction to stimulate creativity, audience awareness, and engagement. Beyond classroom practice, the study contributes theoretically by linking cognitive process models and genre-based pedagogy, offering insights into how strategy-based instruction supports writing development. While the study was limited in scale and duration, it provides a foundation for further research that explores RAFT's long-term impact, its adaptation to other text genres, and its integration with digital learning platforms

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