



## High Functioning Autistic Students' Learning Strategies in Writing Texts in Inclusive Schools

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### Abstract:

The aims of this study were to: 1) describe the process of how HFA students learn descriptive texts in inclusive classes, 2) disclose the influencing factors of HFA students' success in writing descriptive texts in inclusive classes, 3) examine the learning strategies used by the HFA students in writing descriptive texts in inclusive classes.

A qualitative study was used as a method of this study. The participants of this study were four HFA students at the seventh grade of inclusive schools. This study was conducted in two schools in Junior High School of Yogyakarta and Purwokerto, Central Java. Interview, observation, and documentation were used to collect the data. Moreover, this study used data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, or verification to analyze the data.

The results generally showed that the pictures were employed by HFA students as inspiration to enhance their ability in writing descriptive texts. Involving them into fun activities could enhance social skill dealing with their social impairments. HFA students choose particular strategies to accomplish particular task. There are some crucial factors that determine the success of autistic students in writing English descriptive texts. They are internal factors and external factors. Internal factors cover: motivation 1) autistic students' perception on learning strategies used, 3) learning experiences. Internal factors consist of: 1) environment; 2) teacher's strategies; 4) role of special guidance teachers. In addition, two dominant strategies are used when learning English. They are memory strategies and cognitive strategies. The last, one of the factors that influence the students' choice of learning strategies is teacher's teaching strategies.

**Keywords:** Learning Strategies, English Learning Strategies, Memory strategies, Cognitive Strategies, Autistic Students, HFA Students.

## INTRODUCTION

The term ASD is used to describe a group of neurodevelopmental disorders characterized by (1) deficits in understanding and using social skills; (2) limited communication; and (3) restricted interests or repetitive behaviors (APA, 2013). William and Wright (2004: 13) affirmed that autism is a developmental disorder that normally becomes evident in the first three years of a child's life. Symptoms of autism vary widely and include (1) repetitive use of objects, inability to communicate clearly, (2) resistance to changes in routine, and (3) difficulty with social interaction. To sum up, the individual with autism, basically show the characteristics in some areas such as deficits in social development and communication and a range of repetitive behaviors or restricted interests.

Children with high functioning autism (HFA) basically show similar characteristics of autism but display average to above average cognitive abilities and normal language abilities, at least superficially (Sansoti et al: 2010). These "less impaired" children

may demonstrate odd social mannerisms, a long-winded, pedantic, communication style, and rare or unique special interests (e.g., deep-fry cookers, trains, vacuums, tractors, engines). In sum, HFA is characterized by deficits in social interactions and a restricted range of behaviors and/or interests, yet it is not associated with clinically significant delays in cognitive or language development. Considering the needs of social skills and behavior, and communication style of HFA, they need the school which probably accommodates their uniqueness and special needs.

In fact, inclusive education may create other problems. The ability of receiving knowledge from the teacher between common students and autistic students is so different, especially in writing English texts. English is also one of the subjects in inclusive school for all students. There are four language skills in English, namely; (1) listening, (2) speaking, (3) reading, and (4) writing.

Related to this study, writing process requires concentration is in the

interpretation of the written symbols and this is what the research attempts to investigate. As everybody knows that autism is a life-long developmental disability that prevents people from understanding what they see. This condition will be a problem for autistic children. The characteristic of autism was also found in HFA students but not severe. Bartak and Ruter (1976) differentiated HFA from lower functioning autism which had significant differences. The HFA children had: 1) less impaired responsiveness in infancy, 2) better cooperative play and emotional expressiveness, 3) fewer unusual social interactions 4) more rituals but less resistance to change and attachment to odd objects, 5) less self-injurious behavior, and 6) fewer hand stereotypies. Meanwhile, Landa(2000) argued that children with HFA generally display average to above average cognitive abilities and sometimes demonstrate superior intellectual skills. Moreover, children with HFA often develop good structural language skills. That is, individuals with HFA may speak in syntactically and grammatically

correct structures. In this sense, the content and form of language appear to be intact. However, it is the use of language for communicative purposes (pragmatics) that is significantly impaired. Considering the findings, observing high functioning autistic students' learning strategies in learning English will be very interesting especially in writing descriptive texts.

The researcher believes that high functioning autistic students will use another or different learning strategies compared with typical students. The author also believes that every single student has their own learning strategies to receive and understand knowledge generally and English texts particularly including HFA students.

Based on information gained from the teachers of inclusive schools, children with autism have a rare ability possessed by their age peers. But not all children are autistic. So the researcher needs to find the factors that affect autistic students successful in writing.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research focuses was to explore the phenomenon of autistic students learning strategies in learning writing particularly writing English text. Therefore, the appropriate type of research of this case study is in line as declared by Merriam (1998: 6-10) defines case study as an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community aimed to describe the phenomenon in depth. The statement was in line with Yin (2013; 41), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

To study and understand the phenomenon the researcher needs to dig up information and gathering data from participants in the form of statement, the behavior, and related particular documents.

The Research Methodology section describes in detail how the study was conducted. A complete description of

the methods used enables the reader to evaluate the appropriateness of the research methodology.

Regarding to this case, the researcher used three sources of evidences which consist of documents, interviews, and direct observations. The explanation of each sources are as follows.

In this context of the research, the documents collected by the researcher were: (1) inclusive curriculum; to gain valuable information about the inclusive curriculum, the similarities and differences from the curriculum which is applied in the non-inclusive school, (2) English language lesson plan; to know the strategies used in the lesson plan, and whether or not the implementation is suitable with the lesson plan, (3) autistic students report; to know the students achievement based on the implemented strategies, (4) writing English text materials; to explore whether the materials are suitable for autistic students or not, and (5) autistic students' English written texts; to know the written products made by the autistic students in learning process.

In this context, the researcher conducted interview with: (1) the English teachers; to explore the teaching strategies used to teach English writing materials to the inclusive class, (2) HFA students; to know whether the strategies used by the English teacher are effective or not, (3) teachers' aides; to know the role of guidance teacher in assisting the autistic students in learning process, (3) principals or directors of the inclusive schools; to explore whether the teaching strategies used by the English teachers are suitable with the curriculum or not.

Through observation on behaviors, events or activities, the researcher got information more accurately about how something happens, since the researcher witnessed it by himself. Related to the objective of this research, the researcher observed the case which happened in the inclusive classes. It was aimed to know the learning strategies used by the autistic students in learning writing of descriptive texts.

## Participants

This research was conducted at SMP T Yogyakarta and SMP A Purwokerto and SMP T. They are inclusive schools which run the inclusive school since academic year 2003/2004. The schools provide the services for students with impairments consist of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), learning disabilities (dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and dyslexia), slow learners, and autism. The subjects of this research were selected purposively.

**Table 1. Participants' Basic Information**

No	Participants	Age	Class	School
1.	YMPR	12 years old	VII B	SMP T
2.	AAH	13 years old	VII A	SMP T
3.	MRG	13 years old	VII A	SMP A
4.	DW	12 years old	VII A	SMP A

## Data Analysis

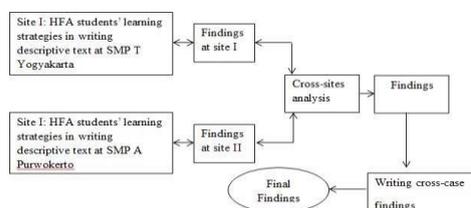
### 1. Single Site Data Analysis

Single site analysis starts with examining all data obtained from various techniques implemented namely observation, interviews, and related documents.

The data are analyzed through several stages, as stated by Miles & Huberman (1994); the activities in the data analysis consist of data reduction, data display, and conclusion (drawing / verification).

## 2. Cross-site Data Analysis

Cross-site analysis aims to compare the findings obtained from each site. The cross-case analysis was conducted through several steps as shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1. Cross-Site Analysis Methods Suggested by Miles and Huberman: 1994)**

At first, the findings obtained from SMP T Yogyakarta were arranged based on their categories, analyzed conceptually inductively (compared to theories), and made narrative explanations so that the certain propositions were arranged. The researcher also carried out the same

analysis with the findings obtained from SMP A Purwokerto. The propositions (findings from SMP T Yogyakarta) were then analyzed by comparing to the propositions (Findings from SMP A Purwokerto) to find differences in the characteristics of each case as theoretical conception based on differences. At the last stage, simultaneous analysis was carried out to construct and compile the concept of the similarities of case I and case II systematically. This final analysis was intended to compile systematic conceptions based on the results of data analysis and narrative theoretical interpretations in the form of cross-cases propositions.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. The process of HFA Student's Learning Strategies in Inclusive Schools

The first finding of current study is that students employ the pictures as inspiration to enhance their ability in writing descriptive texts. Both HFA students in SMP T and SMP A showed their interest in using pictures provided by the teachers. In the process of writing, HFA students in

both schools had similarity in drafting activities. The use of visual aids in learning is absolutely helpful for HFA students because of the characteristic they have; good at memorizing the object in the form of visual. To sum up, the visual aids help them how to develop sentences into paragraphs.

Thus, the process of writing can be completed effectively and efficiently.

The second finding of the current study is that enriching fun activities to enhance their social strategies is beneficial for HFA students to deal with social impairments. The similar activities were shown by both teachers in those two schools. The techniques applied by the two teachers in both schools are considered successful to attract the HFA students to study. Fun activities such as quiz and games stimulate HFA students to reduce their difficulties in social interactions especially with their peers in the classroom and also encourage them to leave their unusual behavior.

The third finding is that HFA students choose particular strategies to accomplish particular problems. These strategies are used to solve the

problems, do task given by teacher or meet particular goals.

## 2. Factors Affecting Autistic Students' Success in Writing English Texts in Schools

The factors which affect the successful of HFA students in learning writing

No	The factors	Y M PR	A A H	D W	M R G
1	Motivation	√	√	√	√
2	Perception on certain strategies	√	√	√	√
3	Learning experience	√	-	√	-
4	Family's role	√	-	√	√
5	Teacher's strategies	√	√	√	√
6	Guidance teacher's role	√	√	√	√

descriptive texts are divided into two parts; they are internal and external factors.

The first factors influenced HFA students in both schools in learning English and writing text particularly was motivation. From the findings, the motivation might affect them in learning English. The motivation makes them able to complete the tasks given by their teacher. To sum up, this circumstance indicates that motivation can promote valued impact to learn English and writing

All students from both schools used the certain strategies when learning English. Their perception of using learning strategies may affect the HFA students in learning texts. The students believe that certain strategies are helpful in solving their problems in learning English such as how to memorize particular words or the tenses. Therefore, the teacher's role in assisting the students to recognize the learning strategies is essential. The conclusion, the students' perception on their learning strategies in learning strategies can assist them to learn English more effective.

Teachers' strategies in teaching English possibly have important effects on the HFA students' success in learning English and particularly in writing texts. Related to teachers' role in learning writing text, students of both schools seemed to have positive attitude during the lesson.

Students living with supportive parents might employ more variety of strategies to learn new language than those living with unsupported environment that tended to lack the

motivation in learning language. The students of both schools were revealed that they have family who truly cared of their learning. Their families support their children by assisting them to achieve in the schools. The family support influenced their motivations to study. Autistic students in both schools need special guidance teachers. Each student showed their own unusual behavior from mild to medium level. The impaired behavior varied consisting of verbal and non-verbal communication in the case of lack of eye contact, lack of attention, and initiating or maintaining a topic of conversation with his peers, social interaction in the case of her reluctance to have social relationship with his/her peers because they are usually busy with their own, dominated the conversation.

### 3. Learning Strategies Employed by HFA students

This following table summarize what learning strategies employed by HFA students Table 2. The List of Learning Strategies Used by HFA Students in both Schools.

No	Strategies	Group of Strategies	YMPR	AAH	DW	MRG
1	Placing new words in to a context	Memory Strategies	√	√	√	√
2	Using imagery		√	√	√	√
3	Representing sounds in memory		-	√	√	√
4	Reviewing well		√	-	√	√
5	Using physical response or sensation		-	√	√	√
6	Practicing naturalistically	Cognitive Strategies	√	√	√	√
7	Using resources for receiving and sending messages		√	√	√	√
8	Translating		-	√	√	√
9	Taking notes		-	-	-	√
10	Seeking practice opportunities	Metacognitive strategies	√	-	√	√
11	Setting the goals		-	-	√	√
12	Overcoming limitation in writing	Compensation Strategies	√	-	-	√
13	Lowering anxiety and depression	Affective Strategies	-	√	√	-

Student YMPR used cognitive strategies in learning writing text. These cognitive strategies were found to be one of the most popular strategies employed by HFA learners. YMPR used cognitive strategies to translate the sentences on the passage. Then, she used resources such as printed and digital dictionary to find the meaning of unfamiliar words. The second strategy employed by YMPR was memory strategies. The activities can be shown such as creating mental linkage and reviewing. She tended to use her knowledge in order to remember more effectively the material given by learning the notes she taken during the lesson.

Student AAH used cognitive strategies to say or do something over and over to practice sounds as pronunciation. The memory strategies applied by AAH also helped him to cope with the difficulty of remembering the new vocabulary by employing strategies such as applying images and sounds and employing action. The other way

he used is listening music. He repeated the lyric of the music to increase the numbers of vocabulary. He used music to refresh his brain when experiencing boredom and made his body more relaxed and comfortable as known as affective strategies. Related to writing, according to him, having sufficient vocabulary helped him in understanding the text and made him easier in writing text.

Student DW, as other students, AAH also employed cognitive strategies. This student also used metacognitive strategies in learning English which provide the learner to coordinate their own learning process. DW enjoyed watching movies with double subtitles to improve his vocabulary. Through this strategy the learner was also facilitated the use of words in the sentences. These strategies helped him in writing text to choose appropriate diction.

The last student, MRG is a diligent student. He employed cognitive strategies. He was active in taking notes such as unfamiliar vocabulary, pattern, and important points using colorful sticky notes in the corner of

the book. This strategy helped him to remember the material and compose texts. He also enjoyed playing game. Related to writing text, the notes he wrote helped him in memorizing the unfamiliar vocabulary and pattern like grammar and tenses.

In the previous sub-section, a cross-sectional study has been implemented and the data collected from both schools were analyzed. The current sub-section discusses major issues dealing with the research findings in the light of existing theories and relevant literature. This section also discusses the key factors supporting the success of autistic students in learning writing on descriptive texts.

The study shows that the pictures were employed by HFA students as inspiration to enhance their ability in writing descriptive texts. Both HFA students in SMP T and SMP A show their interest in using pictures provided by the teachers. In the process of writing, HFA students in both schools have similarity indrafting activities. The use of visual aids in learning is absolutely helpful

for HFA students because of the characteristic they have; good at memorizing the object in the form of visual. They get so much help in generating ideas for their pre-writing. The visual aids can also help them to develop sentences and paragraphs. Therefore, they do not waste their time for thinking what to write but they can start the process of writing immediately. As explained by Brown (2004: 226), one of the effective ways to testing the writing skills is by assigning the students to write a composition based on the ideas they gather from ideas they gather from pictures. The statement is in line with Oxford (1990), many learners use visual images, and some find it easy to connect words and phrases with sound, motion or touch.

Neviyanti (2013) found pictures are effective for teaching vocabulary to autistic students. Further, She explains autism children can be taught abstract words and ideas through visual concepts, like pictures and objects. In conjunction with writing skills, Andreevski (2013) revealed there is significant development of words written; total words and

sentences correctly written, and improvement in their writing quality after the students were evaluated with assigned topics. According to him, pictures considered beneficial for ASD students in learning writing.

The previous research only revealed the benefits of pictures in general. They missed the essential findings related to the use of pictures as media. This research reveals that the use of pictures affects the way of HFA students in writing. The researcher found that the complex pictures with many elements can cause the YMPR and AAH difficult to describe. They tend to give the odd, detailed and irrelevant descriptions although they wrote it with good structural language. The use of simple picture is suggested meaning that the composition of the image should be clear and representative as learning objectives. The use of picture in autistic students must be selective compared to the common students.

Enriching fun activities to enhance their social strategies benefit HFA students to deal with social impairments. The similar activities are

shown by both teachers in those two schools. The techniques applied by the two teachers in both schools are considered successful to attract the HFA students to study. Sopia (2010) believes that games are valuable activity for language learning, especially for young learners. Children enjoy game and thus participate without any anxiety. Games can motivate children greatly and they are activities which are usually familiar to children as regards structure, rule, etc. due to the familiarity. In addition, Sansosti et al. (2010: 14) compare the condition to individuals with classic autism; students with HFA demonstrate significant difficulties in social interactions, behavioral rigidity, and communication. Despite their desire to seek friendships and share emotions, individuals with HFA exhibit numerous impairments in their ability to initiate and maintain social relationships. Most often, the difficulties that children with HFA exhibit when interacting socially are the result of an inability to understand and appropriately respond to social information. In this case, teachers should assist the autistic students to

develop the communication skill that commonly impaired by involving them in group activities.

Saskatchewan (1999: 21) explains that the involvement of peers may provide opportunities for meaningful contact with peers who have appropriate social behavior. Definitely, fun activities such as quiz and games can stimulate HFA students to reduce their difficulties in social interactions especially with their peers in the classroom and also encourage them to leave their unusual behavior.

The previous research revealed benefits of games and other fun activities. What becomes my finding is that the autistic children are at risk of being bullied when working on group activities in the classroom. Their peer may not realize that they are bullying their friend. DW's inability in teacher's instruction when playing game spontaneously provoked laughter and teasing from his peers. Even though DW only laughed in responding his friends, the researcher believed he was sad and embarrassed. The treatment he got from the surrounding was never expected

before but he preferred to be strong to complain facing this circumstance. This is what Burkhart (2005: 46) argued that students with autism may have difficulty in comprehending oral information as like following directions. Therefore, the teacher's instruction and rules of the game need to be clearly stated. Then, the role of teacher's aide is needed to make sure the autistic students understand what to do in each activity during learning process.

#### **4. Determinants of Success in English Descriptive Texts among Autistic Students.**

Dealing with the factors which affected the successful autistic students in writing descriptive text, there are six factors. They are internal and external factors.

The first factor is language learners' motivation. Learners in both schools were affected by internal and external motivation. As stated by Ryan and Deci (2000: 56), when intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external product, pressures or reward.

Related to language learning, according to Sadeghi (2013: 206), motivation is known as one of the influential factor in language learning. Meanwhile, Chang (2014: 162-163) stated that the high-motivated students can stimulate them to show willingness and interest to participate in the class activities and have willingness to do homework and give teacher feedback on their learning progress. The statement is similar to Clinkenbeard (2012: 623) who argued that high-motivated students are willing to engage in any work that is assigned to achieve their learning goal. Further, he explained that students who possess high motivation tend to be easier in expressing their idea through in right words.

Dealing with the students' perception on discovery of learning strategies, it affects HFA students in learning English. Related to the writing strategies choices, they were influenced by their perception. From the cases above, the learners may become more reliant to learn independently and gain success in EFL learning. Hammer (1997, p. 485) also considered that discovery learning is a

process of learning which encourages the students to arrive at a conclusion based upon their own activities and observations. This claim is also in line with Brown (2001) who stated that one of the factors contributing to the success of foreign language learning is the role of the learner in the process that is recognizing and using good language learning strategies.

Mahmoud (2014) had conducted discovery learning strategy to improve students' English skill. He believed that this strategy is a good way to improve language skill. Those who play their role well by using good learning strategies may gain success while those who do not use them may gain less success. When language learners have recognized the good language learning strategies, they can implement the strategies either in or outside classroom. All in all, those arguments emphasizing the urgency of learning strategies that learning strategies have to be recognized and, especially, used. Thus, students who recognize and use effective strategies are better able to work outside the classroom by themselves, once the teacher is not around to direct them

with input. Perception on learning strategies employed is essential for students to be able to work outside the classroom when they are on their own.

Then the next three factors which include as the external factors are environment, teacher strategies, and the existence of guidance teacher. Regarding the environment as the factor which affects the successful language learners in learning, in this case, they got support from their surroundings. Regarding to this factor, Harmer (2001) stated that students' motivation in learning English can be influenced and affected by people surround them. The attitude of parents, sibling, and friends is also important for learning-do they approve of language learning or otherwise. As stated by Mesibov et al (2014: 74), socially, although the person with HFA might be interested in having friends and participating in social interactions, friendships are hard to form when social convention does not come easily, empathy is difficult to express, and emotional cues are hard to recognize. Thus, positive attitude toward learning and encouragements from parents, sibling, family, friends

or former teacher is very influential for students learning motivation. In conclusion, students living with supportive parents might employ more variety of strategies to learn new language than those living with unsupported environment that tended to lack the motivation in learning language.

The next factor that affects the successful HFA students in learning writing is teacher's strategies. The teacher created an atmosphere that was open and positive by encouraging them with wise motivation and always ensured opportunities for students' success by assigning task that are neither too easy nor too difficult. Regarding to this factor, Orlich, Harder, et al (2010) stated that teaching strategies helped all prospective teachers to acquire the basis of professional knowledge that are so necessary for learning. Meanwhile, Eggen and Kauchak (2012) argued that strategies for teacher were general approach in teaching which was applied in many material fields and used to fulfill any learning objectives. For example, strategies to involve students in the

learning process by asking them, reviewing the topic, giving feedback are common strategies applied in any level of class, major, material, and topic.

The last factor can affect the success of autistic students is the existence of special guidance teachers. In this case, the findings show that autistic students from both schools, YMPR, AAH, MRG, and DW deserved special guidance teachers because of some deficit features such as: 1) verbal and non-verbal communication in the case of lack of eye contact, lack of attention, and initiating or maintaining a topic of conversation with his peers (AAH/DW), 2) social interaction in the case of her reluctance to have social relationship with his/her peers because they are usually busy with their own world (YMPR), dominated the conversation (AAH); 3) inappropriate behavior in the case of laughing and playing objects he desired in the classroom (AAH). Even though it didn't occur frequently, those inappropriate behaviors mentioned above sometimes could affect the learning activities. Based on those characteristics, they need to be

handled to support them in joining the inclusive school. According to Koegel (1995: 20), autistic students usually showed difficulties in learning and often showed unusual behavior, patterns of attention, and responses to sensory stimuli. Considering this condition, the autistics students require particular treatment in teaching learning process.

In this case, the form of assistance of special guidance teachers from both schools seemed no difference between two schools in treating of autistic students. The treatment were in the form of : 1) helping the needs of autistic students during teaching and learning process, 2) helping them focus to understand the teacher's instruction, 3) facilitating and supervising them if they have got any troubles and problem, and also 3) repeating the lesson if they do not understand the certain topic. Principally, students with special needs can have special guidance teachers if their condition requires particular treatments.

## CONCLUSION

Dealing with the findings of this research, there are several major points related to the autistic students' learning strategies in writing English descriptive texts in Inclusive schools that can be summarized based on the problem statements as follows.

There are several important points in the process of writing. First, HFA students are attractive to use visualaids in writing descriptive texts. The use of pictures are considered as one of good ways to enhance the ability of HFA students; second, the involvement of HFA students in fun activities which benefit them to enhance their social strategies dealing with social impairments; third, HFA students choose particular strategies to accomplish particular problems.

There are some crucial factors that determine the success of HFA students in writing English descriptive texts. They are internal factors and external factors. Internal factors cover: 1) motivation, 2) autistic students' perception on learning strategies employed, 3) learning experiences. Meanwhile, internal factors consist of:

1) environment role; 2) teacher's strategies; 4) role of guidance teacher.

The most learning strategies often used by HFA students were memory strategies and cognitive strategies. Memory strategies are based on simple principles like laying things out in order, making association, and reviewing. Besides, cognitive strategies are the strategies in which the target language is manipulated or transformed by repeating, analyzing or summarizing. The four sets in this group are: practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output.

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