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MEASURES FOR DEVELOPING GRADE 4 STUDENTS' DESCRIPTIVE WRITING COMPETENCE THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Developing descriptive writing competence among Grade 4 students is an important requirement of Vietnamese language education under the competency- and character-oriented approach of Vietnam's 2018 General Education Curriculum. However, classroom practice shows that students still encounter difficulties in observation, idea generation and organization, vocabulary selection, emotional expression, and the development of an individual voice in their writing. Experiential learning provides students with opportunities to directly observe, perceive, and interact with objects and phenomena, thereby transforming real-life experiences into meaningful resources for writing. This study employs theoretical analysis, surveys, and analytical and synthetic methods to establish a theoretical and practical basis for proposing measures to develop Grade 4 students' descriptive writing competence. The study proposes three measures: organizing authentic experiential activities to enrich students' life experiences; guiding students to draw on their experiences to organize ideas systematically; and developing writing competence through collaborative learning and peer feedback. These measures are mutually supportive, connecting writing with real-life experiences and creating favorable conditions for the development of Grade 4 students' descriptive writing competence.

KEYWORDS: experiential learning; Grade 4 students; writing competence; descriptive writing; Vietnamese language.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 2018 General Education Curriculum, developing language competence is one of the core objectives of Vietnamese language education at the primary level. For Grade 4, students are expected to follow the stages of the writing process, including observing, gathering information, generating ideas, drafting, and revising. They are also required to write descriptive texts about animals and plants, using personification and words or expressions that highlight the salient features of the objects being described (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018).

However, classroom practice shows that students still encounter difficulties in observing, generating and organizing ideas, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and expressing emotions in descriptive writing. In particular, limited real-life experiences and insufficient emotional engagement with the objects being described constitute significant obstacles to students' text production. Organizing experiential activities can support students in observing, generating ideas, enriching their real-life experiences, and developing emotional connections with the objects of description; what students gain from these experiences can subsequently serve as meaningful material for constructing descriptive texts (Trinh Cam Ly, 2018).

Given both curriculum requirements and the realities of classroom instruction, it is necessary to develop pedagogical measures that integrate experiential activities into the process of text production. Therefore, this article proposes several measures for developing Grade 4 students' descriptive writing competence through experiential learning, thereby contributing to improving the effectiveness of Vietnamese language teaching in accordance with the competency- and quality-oriented approach to education.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Review of related studies

Developing descriptive writing competence among primary school students has received considerable attention in language education research. Studies in this area have focused on identifying the components of writing competence, examining the difficulties students encounter, and exploring instructional methods and organizational approaches to improve their ability to produce texts. In Vietnam, Vu Tu Nam et al. (2004) emphasized the role of observation and the selection of salient details in descriptive writing, while Nguyen Tri (2007) and Le Phuong Nga (2013) approached the issue from the perspectives of the characteristics of descriptive texts and methods of Vietnamese language instruction at the primary level. In addition, Le Ngoc Hoa (2013) investigated the use of mind maps to support students in developing outlines, whereas Phan Thi Huong Giang and Tran Thi Quynh Nga (2024) proposed a multisensory approach to teaching descriptive writing. Collectively, these studies indicate a shift from an emphasis on the written product toward supporting students throughout the processes of observation, idea generation, idea organization, and expression.

From the perspective of integrating experiential learning into writing instruction, Trinh Cam Ly (2018) proposed organizing experiential activities in teaching descriptive writing to Grade 4 and Grade 5 students, thereby providing opportunities for students to directly observe, generate ideas, and express their feelings about the objects being described. Nguyen Hong Hanh and Do Minh Ngoc (2024) examined experiential learning as an approach to developing paragraph-writing competence among Grade 3 students. These findings provide an important foundation for incorporating experiential learning into writing instruction. Nevertheless, further research is needed to specify pedagogical measures that systematically connect experiential activities with the different stages of descriptive text production for Grade 4 students.

Overall, the existing studies provide an important foundation for innovation in writing instruction. However, previous research remains relatively fragmented, often focusing on individual instructional techniques or particular grade levels. A systematic set of pedagogical measures that integrates experiential learning with the stages of descriptive text production for Grade 4 students has yet to be sufficiently developed. This research therefore seeks to address this gap by proposing measures for developing Grade 4 students' descriptive writing competence through experiential learning.

2.2. Theoretical framework

Descriptive writing is a type of writing that uses language to represent the salient characteristics, qualities, and states of objects, phenomena, people, or scenes, enabling readers to visualize what is being described. Therefore, descriptive writing is not merely a matter of listing characteristics; rather, it requires writers to observe carefully, select relevant and distinctive details, organize ideas, and use vivid and expressive language. According to Nguyen Tri (2007), the teaching of descriptive writing at the primary level should place particular emphasis on observation and the selection of details, as these provide the foundation for students to construct representations of the objects being described through language.

From a competency-based perspective, competence does not simply refer to the possession of discrete knowledge or skills but is reflected in an individual's ability to mobilize and integrate knowledge, skills, and personal attributes to accomplish tasks under specific conditions (Dang Thanh Hung, 2012). Accordingly, Grade 4 students' descriptive writing competence can be understood as their ability to mobilize linguistic knowledge, observation skills, idea generation and organization, vocabulary, the use of literary devices, emotions, and imagination to produce descriptive texts appropriate to communicative purposes. In this study, descriptive writing competence is therefore conceptualized as an integration of linguistic knowledge, observation skills, aesthetic sensitivity, and creative imagination.

Experiential learning provides an appropriate pedagogical foundation for developing these components. According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning is a process through which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Learners not only participate in concrete activities but also observe, reflect, conceptualize, and apply what they have learned to new situations. This perspective emphasizes learning as a continuous process grounded in personal experience and interaction between learners and their environment.

When applied to descriptive writing instruction, experiential learning can be understood as an instructional approach in which students actively engage in activities such as multisensory observation, exploration of the natural environment, direct interaction with objects, and sharing their perceptions and feelings. Through these activities, students transform what they have observed, experienced, and reflected upon into linguistic resources for their writing. Experience, therefore, is not an activity

separate from the writing process; rather, it serves as a source of real-life knowledge, descriptive details, vocabulary, and emotional engagement that students can draw upon in text production.

This approach is also consistent with the requirements of the 2018 General Education Curriculum. At Grade 4, students are expected to follow the writing process from observation, information gathering, and idea generation to drafting and revising. They are also required to produce descriptive texts about plants and animals and to use appropriate linguistic devices (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). Experiential learning can therefore be viewed as a bridge connecting real-life objects and phenomena – students’ experiences – writing resources – the process of text production. This conceptual relationship provides the direct theoretical foundation for developing pedagogical measures to enhance Grade 4 students’ descriptive writing competence.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a combination of theoretical and empirical research methods. Document analysis and synthesis were used to systematize the theoretical foundations of descriptive writing competence, experiential learning, and the requirements for writing instruction stipulated in the 2018 General Education Curriculum. In addition, a survey was conducted with 20 teachers and 100 Grade 4 students from several primary schools in Thai Nguyen Province to investigate the current implementation of experiential learning activities, students’ levels of interest, and the difficulties encountered in developing descriptive writing competence. The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, primarily frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. The findings provided an empirical basis for developing an appropriate system of pedagogical measures.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Current status of developing grade 4 students’ descriptive writing competence through experiential learning

The survey was conducted with 20 teachers and 100 Grade 4 students from four primary schools in Thai Nguyen Province between January and April 2026. It focused on the current implementation of experiential learning in descriptive writing instruction, students’ writing competence, and their attitudes toward and interest in experiential activities.

4.1.1. Teacher survey

The teacher survey results indicate that experiential activities have been incorporated into descriptive writing instruction, although their implementation remains neither frequent nor consistent.

Table 1. Current implementation of experiential learning activities in descriptive writing instruction

No.	Activity	Frequently (%)	Sometimes (%)	Not implemented (%)	Mean
1	Direct observation of the object being described	35	50	15	2.20
2	Outdoor activities and nature-based experiences	20	45	35	1.85
3	Use of multiple senses during observation	30	55	15	2.15
4	Games and hands-on activities before writing	25	50	25	2.00
5	Recording ideas during experiential activities	40	45	15	2.25
6	Integrating experiential activities with cultural and artistic activities	15	40	45	1.70

(Source: Survey data from the study.)

As shown in Table 1, the activity most frequently implemented by teachers was guiding students to record ideas during experiential activities (40%), followed by direct observation of the object being described (35%). In contrast, only 20% of teachers frequently organized outdoor activities, while experiential activities integrated with cultural and artistic activities were regularly implemented by only 15%. Mean scores ranged from 1.70 to 2.25, suggesting that experiential learning was generally limited to relatively simple activities that could be readily implemented in the classroom, whereas broader forms of experience requiring more complex organizational conditions remained limited.

A similar pattern was evident in teachers' choice of instructional methods. "Learning by doing" was frequently used by 40% of teachers, while "learning through play" and learning through interaction and collaboration were each frequently employed by 35%. By contrast, only 20% frequently used discovery- or inquiry-based learning, and 15% used small-scale project-based learning. The mean scores for all methods ranged from 1.70 to 2.25, corresponding overall to the "sometimes" level of implementation.

Notably, in writing instruction, teachers placed greater emphasis on text structure ($M = 2.50$) and the use of descriptive vocabulary ($M = 2.45$). By comparison, guidance on integrating personal emotions into descriptions achieved a mean score of only 2.20, while the use of figurative language scored 2.10. These findings suggest that current writing instruction gives considerable attention to the structural

framework and basic requirements of descriptive texts but does not yet fully develop emotional depth, imagery, or students' individual voice.

4.1.2. Student Survey

The survey of 100 students yielded the following results regarding Grade 4 students' descriptive writing competence.

Table 2. Current level of Grade 4 students' descriptive writing competence

No.	Criterion	Good (%)	Average (%)	Weak (%)	Mean
1	Observing and identifying characteristics of the object	24	55	21	2.03
2	Using varied descriptive vocabulary	18	51	31	1.87
3	Organizing the text logically and coherently	26	57	17	2.09
4	Expressing emotions in writing	22	53	25	1.97
5	Writing with specific and detailed descriptions	16	48	36	1.80
6	Using multiple senses in description	14	46	40	1.74

(Source: Survey data from the study).

The findings indicate that students' descriptive writing competence was predominantly at the average level. Logical and coherent text organization was the strongest criterion ($M = 2.09$), with 26% of students achieving a good level. In contrast, the components that directly contribute to the specificity and vividness of descriptive writing remained relatively weak. Only 16% of students performed well in producing specific and detailed descriptions, while only 14% demonstrated effective use of multiple senses. The proportions of students at the weak level for these two criteria were 36% and 40%, respectively. Descriptive vocabulary was also a notable area of difficulty, with 31% of students classified at the weak level.

These results reveal a noteworthy correspondence between teachers' instructional practices and students' demonstrated competence. Teachers' emphasis on text structure appears to be associated with students' relatively stronger performance in text organization. Conversely, the limited use of multisensory experiences, out-of-class activities, and activities designed to enrich language use corresponds with students' difficulties in observation, selection of relevant details, and use of descriptive vocabulary. This finding provides an important empirical basis for developing pedagogical measures that bring students into closer contact with the objects being described and help them transform their experiences into meaningful material for writing.

Despite their limitations in descriptive writing competence, students demonstrated a high level of interest in and readiness for experiential learning.

Table 3. Students' attitudes toward and interest in experiential learning in descriptive writing

No.	Item	Strongly like (%)	Like (%)	Dislike (%)	Mean
1	Observing real objects or situations before writing	56	35	9	2.47
2	Participating in games before writing	60	32	8	2.52
3	Engaging in hands-on experiences and then writing about them	48	40	12	2.36
4	Writing about what they have personally seen and done	53	37	10	2.43
5	Finding writing easier when experiential activities are provided	43	43	14	2.29

(Source: Survey data from the study)

As many as 92% of students reported that they liked or strongly liked participating in games before writing, 91% preferred opportunities for direct observation, and 90% enjoyed writing about what they had personally seen and done. In addition, 86% reported that writing became easier when experiential activities were incorporated. These findings provide favorable conditions for shifting from instruction centered primarily on teaching text structures and providing models toward a process in which students experience – observe – perceive and feel – generate writing material – produce texts.

Nevertheless, the implementation of experiential learning faces several constraints. According to the teachers, the most significant challenges included insufficient instructional time within the curriculum (75%; $M = 2.70$), a lack of specific instructional materials and guidelines (70%; $M = 2.65$), limitations in facilities and learning spaces (65%; $M = 2.55$), and students' limited ability to produce detailed descriptions and make effective use of multisensory observation (65%; $M = 2.55$).

Taken together, the findings reveal a clear gap between students' needs and current instructional practice. Although students demonstrate strong interest in experiential learning, opportunities to engage in meaningful experiential activities as part of writing instruction remain limited. Similarly, while students have developed a relatively adequate understanding of text organization, they continue to experience difficulties with multisensory observation, the selection of salient details, descriptive

vocabulary, and emotional expression. The proposed pedagogical measures should therefore focus on bridging this gap while remaining feasible within actual primary school teaching conditions.

4.2. Some measures for developing grade 4 students' descriptive writing competence through experiential learning

Based on the theoretical foundations of descriptive writing competence, the characteristics of experiential learning, and the results of the survey on the current situation, the study proposes five measures for developing Grade 4 students' descriptive writing competence. The measures are designed to connect experiential activities with the entire process of text production, from accumulating life experiences, observing, generating ideas, and organizing ideas to developing language, writing, providing feedback, and revising. These are also the contents implemented in Chapter 2 of the study.

4.2.1. Organizing real-life experiential activities to enrich life experiences for descriptive writing

- Objective: To create a source of "real-life material" for writing through direct experience, helping students conduct multisensory observation and accumulate specific details, vocabulary, and genuine emotions about the object being described.

- Implementation:

Select an appropriate object for experiential activities

→ Organize students to observe it directly using multiple senses

→ Record observations on observation sheets/notebooks

→ Share and discuss outstanding details

→ Select typical details

→ Transform them into material for writing

Example: Describing a flowering plant (Vietnamese 4, Volume 1, Lesson 11)

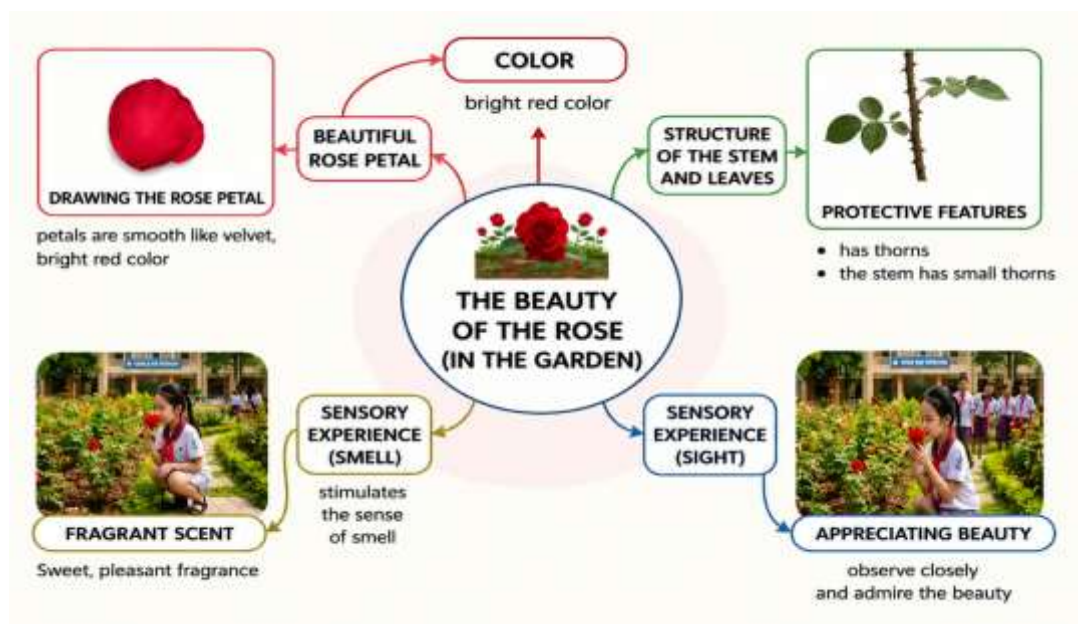
Activity: The teacher organizes an experiential activity in which students observe a rose garden on the school grounds or a potted rose placed in the classroom.

In-depth analysis: Instead of simply asking students to look at the flowering plant, the teacher models an observation sheet in the form of a mind map with "The Rose Plant" as the central branch. The main branches are designed to stimulate multiple senses:

Sight (Visual sense): Students do not simply write "red" but are required to observe carefully and record "the petals are smooth like velvet and deep red; the leaves have serrated edges; the stem has sharp thorns." This process requires students to use their eyes for careful and detailed observation.

Smell (Olfactory sense): Students have to lean closer to perceive "a strong, gentle fragrance" and distinguish the scent of roses from that of other flowers.

Touch (Tactile sense): The act of touching the petals and stem provides students with real sensations such as “soft and smooth” and “rough,” helping them use descriptive words more accurately.



Example: Students can use an actual photograph of a blooming flower to compare it with descriptive words and expressions in the reading text “The Voices of Plants” (p. 44, Volume 1). The text provides the model: “The rose bush softly said... your breath makes me feel so comfortable.” Through real-life experience, students will gain a deeper understanding of this personification because they have actually experienced the feeling of “comfort” when standing near the rose bush. As a result, the emotions expressed in their writing will be much more authentic than those produced merely by reading model texts.

4.2.2. Guiding students to utilize experiences to systematize ideas for descriptive writing

- Objective: To help students select, classify, and organize information obtained from their experiences into a logical system of ideas, thereby developing an outline and producing a coherent, focused, and personally distinctive piece of writing.

- Implementation:

Review materials obtained from experiences

- Select representative details and prominent emotions
- Classify and systematize ideas using a mind map
- Arrange ideas in a logical sequence
- Transform the mind map into an outline
- Complete the ideas for the writing task

After the experiential activity, the teacher guides students to review their observation sheets or notebooks and select the most distinctive details and clearly expressed emotions. Students use a mind

map with the object being described at the center; the main branches represent the introduction, body, and conclusion; from the body branch, smaller ideas are further developed, such as shape, color, parts, activities, memories, or emotions.

Based on the mind map, the teacher guides students to select and arrange details in an appropriate sequence, such as general → specific, outside → inside, or chronological order, and then transform them into an outline. This organization helps students turn fragmented information obtained from their experiences into a clear system of ideas, limiting listing-style writing and dependence on predetermined outlines or model texts.

Example: Systematizing ideas for the writing task “Describing Plants” (Vietnamese 4, Volume 2)

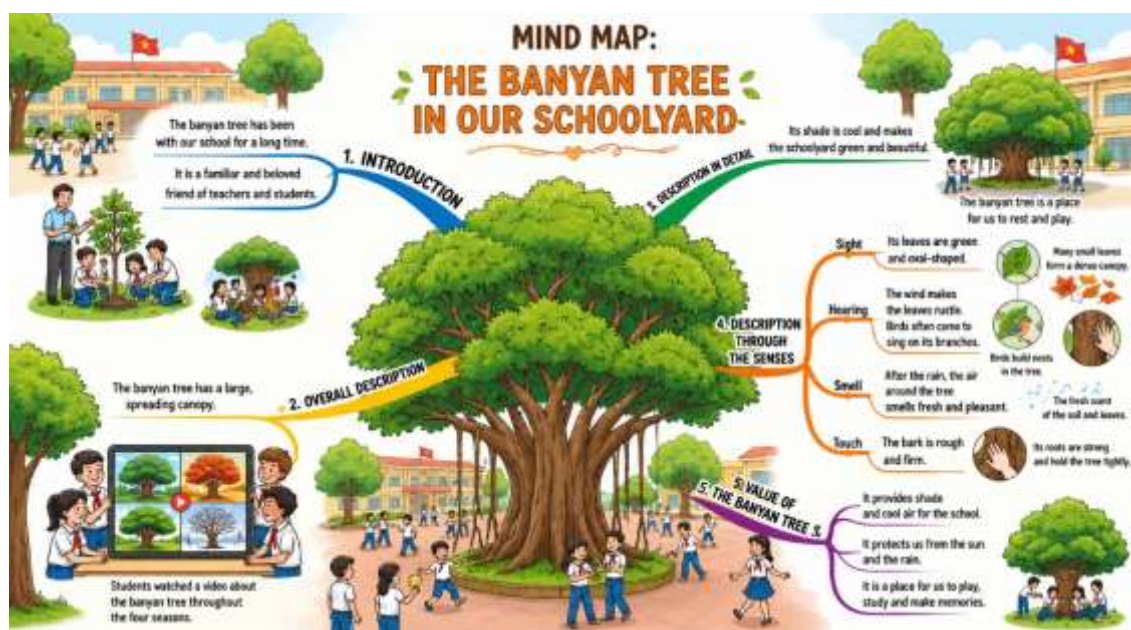
Step 1. Analyze the writing prompt: The teacher guides students to identify the object to be described, the type of writing, and the structural requirements in order to orient the content of the writing.

Step 2. Generate, select, and organize ideas: Students draw on the results of their observations, experiences, and suggested language materials to select representative details and then arrange them in an appropriate sequence.

Step 3. Develop the main idea branches: With the central keyword “The tropical almond tree in the schoolyard,” students develop the following branches: Introduction – General description – Detailed description – Description across the seasons – Conclusion.

Step 4. Develop detailed ideas: Students expand each branch with details obtained from multisensory experiences, such as the shape of the tree, the color and characteristics of its leaves; the rough feel of the trunk; the rustling sound of the leaves; changes in the tree across the seasons; and students’ feelings toward the tree.

Step 5. Complete the mind map: Students review, supplement, and arrange the branches in a logical sequence; they use keywords, images, and colors to clearly represent the relationships among the ideas.



Step 6. Applying the Mind Map to Paragraph Writing:

Based on the mind map that has been developed, students write a descriptive text about the tropical almond tree following the sequence of ideas identified: from the introduction of the tree, the general description, and the detailed multisensory description to the description of the tree across the seasons, and finally the conclusion expressing their feelings and a promise. Using the mind map helps students avoid omitting ideas while ensuring close connections among ideas and emotional depth in their writing.

4.2.3. Developing descriptive writing competence through collaborative and peer-feedback activities in experiential learning

- Objective: To help students broaden their perspectives and learn to share and receive feedback, thereby developing their communication, collaboration, self-assessment, revision, and writing improvement skills.

- Implementation:

Share the results of experiential activities

→ Collaboratively develop and select ideas

→ Write individually

→ Exchange feedback and provide peer comments using the 3–2–1 technique

→ Self-assess and revise

→ Complete the writing

The teacher organizes students into small groups to share their observation sheets and the notable details they have identified. Students discuss and supplement one another's ideas and may

collaboratively construct a mind map; afterwards, each student writes an individual text based on their own experiences and feelings.

At the feedback stage, the teacher organizes the “Little Critics” activity combined with the 3–2–1 technique: 3 things they like – 2 points that need revision – 1 piece of advice. Students comment on their peers’ writing based on criteria relating to organization, descriptive content, vocabulary, literary devices, and emotions; they then receive feedback, conduct self-assessment, and revise their writing.

Example: Collaboratively Developing an Extended Conclusion (Based on Vietnamese 4, Volume 2, p. 31)

Activity: The teacher has students observe a shade tree in the schoolyard as an experiential activity. Afterwards, groups of three discuss how to write the conclusion.

Modeling the peer-feedback process:

Student A writes: “I really love the tropical almond tree. I promise to take care of it.” (The sentences are simple and the emotions are general.)

Student B comments: “This is a little simple. We should use personification, as in the text “The Voices of Plants” (Volume 1), to make the conclusion more vivid.” (Specific feedback on the use of a literary device.)

Collaborative result: “Every morning when we arrive at school, the old tropical almond tree stretches out its arms to embrace us. I silently promise that I will always be its close little friend and take care of it so that it will remain lush and green.” (The sentences are much richer in imagery and emotion.)

5. CONCLUSION

Experiential learning provides opportunities for Grade 4 students to directly observe, perceive, and transform their real-life experiences into material for descriptive writing. The survey results show that students are interested in experiential activities but still have limitations in multisensory observation, the selection of details, and the use of descriptive language. On this basis, the article proposes measures focusing on enriching students’ life experiences, systematizing ideas, and developing writing competence through collaboration and peer feedback. These measures are mutually supportive, contributing to promoting students’ active role and enhancing the effectiveness of descriptive writing instruction in accordance with a competency-based approach.

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