

# **SOME MEASURES TO DEVELOP THE ABILITY TO WRITE DESCRIPTIVE ESSAYS ABOUT TREES FOR GRADE 4 STUDENTS THROUGH ACTIVE LEARNING METHODS: A CASE STUDY AT DONG THANH PRIMARY SCHOOL, BAC GIANG WARD, BAC NINH PROVINCE, VIET NAM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article presents the theoretical background, current situation, and proposes specific solutions. The author discusses a number of teaching strategies to develop grade 4 students' ability to write descriptive essays about trees, focusing on active learning. The study was conducted with class 4A1 at Dong Thanh Primary School (Bac Giang Ward, Bac Ninh Province). Based on practical research, a set of solutions was proposed, including organizing real-life observations, educational games, and innovation in assessment methods. The experimental results show that these measures are effective in improving students' writing quality and increasing their interest in learning Vietnamese writing. This article serves as a useful reference for primary school teachers in organizing writing lessons that focus on developing students' competencies.*

**Keyword:** *Descriptive Writing; Primary Students; Language Competence; Active Learning; Experiential Teaching.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the primary education program, the Vietnamese subject plays a foundational role in forming and developing language and thinking skills for students. It not only helps students practice using their mother tongue but also enables them to communicate in daily life and learn other subjects better. Within this subject, the writing component is an opportunity for students to apply learned skills and express their thinking and emotions through written language. Among writing types, descriptive essays—especially those describing trees—are introduced early and take up a significant amount of time in grade 4. They are important in helping students develop observation skills, expressive abilities, and appreciation for language.

Although tree description is a familiar writing type in grade 4, teaching practice shows that many students still face difficulties. Many students have a limited vocabulary and lack the skills to observe objects purposefully. Their sentences are often fragmented, repetitive, or mechanically copied from textbooks. The main causes stem from both

students and teaching methods. Students often lack real-life experiences, and the teaching approach still focuses too much on delivering content rather than encouraging students' active participation and creativity.

Therefore, renewing the teaching methods to strengthen experiential activities and organize student-centered, active learning is essential to truly and sustainably develop students' descriptive writing skills.

Based on teaching practice, this article proposes a set of pedagogical measures to help grade 4 students improve their descriptive writing about trees. This contributes to the goal of innovating primary education by developing students' competencies, encouraging their initiative, creativity, and learning interest.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### ***2.1. The concept of descriptive writing ability***

Descriptive writing is a type of writing that uses vivid and emotional words to help the listener or reader imagine a person, scene, or event.

In primary school, the ability to write descriptive texts means students can use written language to describe the specific characteristics of objects they observe or imagine. This ability includes observation skills, vocabulary acquisition and use, logical structuring, use of simple rhetorical techniques, and clear, emotional expression.

## **2.2. The role of descriptive writing in the primary curriculum**

Descriptive writing plays an important role in developing students' language, aesthetic sense, and thinking. By describing trees—familiar and relatable objects—students enhance their observation and concrete thinking skills, expressive ability, and love of nature. This helps them build communication skills and express their emotions in a positive way.

## **2.3. Competency-based teaching orientation in primary education**

The 2018 General Education Program emphasizes the goal of developing both moral qualities and competencies for students, in which language competence is considered a core competency. Writing lessons should not stop at teaching writing skills, but also aim to foster thinking, communication, self-learning, and creativity. Organizing active learning activities such as experiences, exploration, cooperation, and self-assessment is a suitable direction for sustainably developing writing competence.

## **2.4. Psychological foundations and characteristics of grade 4 students**

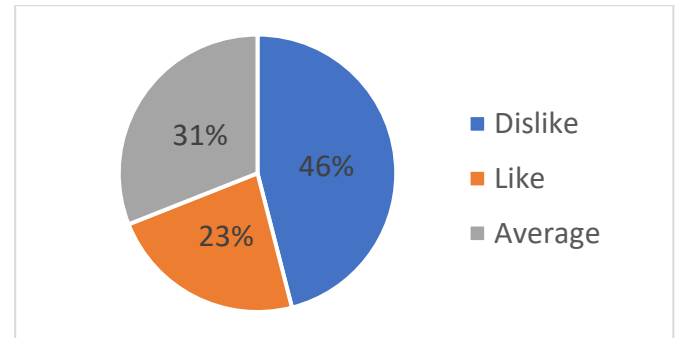
Grade 4 students are in a transition period from intuitive–imagery thinking to more generalized–logical thinking. They have rich imaginations, sensitive emotions, and enjoy experiential and interactive activities. However, if the lessons are dry and lack creativity, they easily lose focus. Therefore, organizing flexible learning activities that encourage students' active participation is an important condition for effectively developing language competence.

## **3. CURRENT SITUATION AND ISSUES RAISED**

### **3.1. The reality of teaching tree description writing in class 4A1 – Dong Thanh Primary School**

In the 2022–2023 school year, the homeroom teacher of class 4A1 conducted a quality survey on

descriptive essays about fruit trees written by 35 students. The results showed that:



*Figure 1: Summary of the Results on the Expression of Interest and Enjoyment in the Writing Practice Subject by 35 Students of Class 4A1, Dong Thanh Primary School, Bac Giang Ward, Bac Ninh Province, Viet Nam.*

Only 23% of students expressed enjoyment and interest in writing lessons. Meanwhile, up to 46% of the students said they did not like the subject. A written test was also conducted with the prompt:

"Green trees not only beautify the surroundings but also give us gentle shade. Describe a shady tree you love."

The results from class 4A1 students were as follows:

- Only **12.5%** of the essays were rated as good (with clear structure, detailed observation, and good expression).
- **25%** had sufficient structure but were poorly developed with weak expression. Many students did not know how to use vocabulary or construct sentences properly, resulting in many expression mistakes. The descriptive essays showed various types of errors depending on the student. Common problems included: monotonous word usage, repeated ideas, shallow observation, and copying directly from the textbook. Students had not yet developed vivid descriptive skills and could not recreate the image of the tree clearly and emotionally.

Based on class observations, teaching periods, and quick interviews with students, some main reasons were identified:

- Students lacked real-life observation opportunities and direct experiences with the objects they were describing.
- They had not been guided on how to organize ideas and write essays with a logical structure.
- Teaching activities were mostly theoretical, lacking interactive and experiential elements, and did not encourage creativity.

### ***3.2. Issues raised***

This situation raises an urgent question in teaching writing to 4th graders:

How can we make students more interested in writing about trees?

How can we help them observe with purpose, build their vocabulary, and express emotions clearly and vividly?

Therefore, it is necessary to build and apply a system of specific, feasible teaching methods that are appropriate to students' age and psychology, to help them gradually form and develop descriptive writing skills in a practical and effective way.

## **4. IMPLEMENTED MEASURES**

### ***4.1. Creating interest in writing tree descriptions***

Interest is an important factor that motivates effective learning. In writing classes, inspiration and positive attitudes are the foundation for students to create lively and creative texts. However, in reality, many primary students consider writing class to be boring and imposed, leading to forced, emotionless writing.

To spark interest in learning and a love for nature—especially the world of trees—the teacher needs to act as a guide and inspiration provider. During lessons, the teacher can:

- **Use images and videos:** The teacher regularly shows students pictures or short videos of different trees, flowers, and their meanings in daily life. This visual approach, using the “drip-drip” method, helps students gain a rich understanding, making it easier for them to recall and include in their writing.
- **Incorporate tree introductions into class activities:** In class meetings, the teacher introduces familiar plants like cactus or

money tree to help students appreciate their beauty and value. This helps develop students' affection and attachment to green plants.

- **"Publish" student writing:** A very effective way to motivate students is to showcase good writing. The teacher created a “Grade 4A1 Literary Magazine,” which features excellent sentences, paragraphs, or essays written by students in a digital format. Positive feedback is also given to encourage individuals, fostering motivation and a spirit of healthy competition within the class.

By organizing creative and engaging learning activities that combine visual aids and timely encouragement, students become more positive and inspired in writing.

### ***4.2. Training students in tree observation skills***

Before writing a tree description, students need to carefully observe the object. Good observation provides specific details that help students create vivid images in their writing. Observation is the important first step in forming a clear mental image of what is being described. A good essay must be based on deep and detailed observation. However, many students only observe with their eyes, lacking depth and not using all their senses.

To overcome this limitation, the teacher implemented the following activities to help students practice observation skills:

#### ***4.2.1. Guiding observation through multiple senses (“The Hand Rule”)***

The teacher used a model called “The Hand Rule” to help students remember how to observe an object using all five senses:

- **Pinky finger – Sight:** Observe with eyes (leaf color, trunk, flowers, fruits...)
- **Ring finger – Hearing:** Listen to sounds (rustling leaves, chirping birds...)
- **Middle finger – Smell:** Smell the scent (flower fragrance, sap scent...)
- **Index finger – Taste:** Taste and describe the flavor (sour-sweet fruits, special taste...)
- **Thumb – Touch:** Touch and feel (rough bark, soft leaves, sharp thorns...)

The teacher asked students open-ended questions for each sense, guiding them to express what they experienced using descriptive language.

#### ***4.2.2. Observing tree parts carefully and in a logical order***

##### **a. Observing in spatial order:**

Students were guided to observe from:

- **Far to near:** Look at the tree from a distance to capture its overall shape.
- **Bottom to top/low to high:** Examine the tree from roots to top, including: roots, trunk, branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits.
- **Surrounding environment:** Notice external influences like birds, climate, people, etc.

##### **b. Observing in time sequence:**

Students observed the tree over time—how it changes from:

- Young to mature,
- Season to season,
- Morning to evening.

The teacher emphasized recording observations in the correct order to highlight changes over time due to growth, weather, or environment.

**Example:** Guiding students to observe the flamboyant tree (phượng):

- **In winter:** The tree looks bare and lifeless, with skinny, leafless branches standing alone.
- **In spring:** From those lifeless branches, tiny buds sprout and grow. Leaves appear, and the tree looks lively again.
- **In summer:** The tree blooms with bright red flowers.

After observation, the teacher guided students to summarize and record what they saw—especially focusing on unique, vivid, and striking details.

#### ***4.2.3. Observing Through Multiple Forms***

A descriptive image becomes vivid and convincing when the writer depicts it in a detailed and lively manner, reflecting objective reality. To achieve this, I guided students to combine various forms of observation (spatial, temporal, sensory, etc.).

In addition, I consistently reminded students to apply multiple observation methods in their writing in order to filter and select the most distinctive and impressive features of the tree they are describing.

#### ***4.2.4. Creating Real-Life Learning Spaces for Students***

Primary school students are characterized by their reliance on direct, visual, and vivid thinking to absorb knowledge. Therefore, for the training of plant observation skills to move beyond passive knowledge intake—where the teacher plays a one-way transmitting role and students only listen—I organized real-life learning activities to give students opportunities to directly observe, feel, and explore the surrounding world.

By observing different types of shade trees, fruit trees, and flowering plants within the school yard or during outdoor lessons, students had the chance to see the shapes, colors, and characteristics of each type of tree in a clear and lively way. As a result, they could more easily remember details, know how to select typical images to include in their writing, and thus enhance the effectiveness of their descriptive essays on plants.

#### ***4.3. Training Students to Outline and Organize Ideas Through Group Activities***

One of the main reasons students' writing tends to be fragmented and lacking coherence is that they skip the outlining stage before writing. Many students have the habit of writing whatever comes to mind, which leads to essays that are disorganized, lacking key points, and disconnected between paragraphs.

To overcome this limitation, I organized group activities to help students build outlines in a logical and systematic way. This method not only improves their ability to organize ideas but also fosters students' initiative, active participation, and collaboration.

##### ***4.3.1. Organizing Group Work Based on Roles***

The class was divided into small groups, with each group assigned specific roles:

- **Idea proposer:** Suggests main ideas for the outline.



- **Recorder:** Collects and writes down ideas discussed in the group.
- **Editor:** Reviews the outline for logic, coherence, and adds necessary points.
- **Presenter:** Represents the group to present the outline to the class.

Assigning roles ensures that every student has a chance to contribute and take responsibility during the group work process.

#### 4.3.2. Group Discussion and Constructing a Common Outline

Under the teacher's guidance, students discussed and agreed on the main content of the descriptive essay. The teacher directed students to structure their outlines into three parts:

- **Introduction:** Introduce the tree being described and the reason or context for choosing it.
- **Body:** Describe the tree's parts in detail, following a logical order (space, time, or a combination), along with the writer's impressions.
- **Conclusion:** Express emotions, impressions, or convey a message about love for nature.

The teacher could provide some sample outlines for reference and encourage students to develop their ideas based on their real-life observations.

#### 4.3.3. Analyzing and Evaluating Group Work Results

After the groups completed their outlines, students were guided to analyze and evaluate each other's work, pointing out strengths and areas for improvement. The teacher observed, supported, and made timely adjustments to ensure the outlines met the requirements for content, order, and coherence.

#### 4.3.4. Creating a Positive and Creative Learning Environment

Lessons were organized flexibly following the "open classroom" model, where students could work in a comfortable environment and were encouraged to discuss, present, and debate. The interaction between teacher and students, as well as among students themselves, contributed to increased interest and effectiveness in learning.

#### 4.4. Training Students to Write Vivid and Creative Sentences in Descriptive Essays about Plants

The beauty of a good essay lies not only in its meaningful content and expression of emotion, but also in its vivid, expressive, and emotionally rich sentences. However, many 4th-grade students still struggle with descriptive language. Most of them only write simple, listing-type sentences that lack literary quality.

To help students improve their expressive ability, I applied specific teaching strategies to guide them in writing vivid sentences, while also organizing language-experience activities in the form of games to make learning more enjoyable.

#### Step 1: Guiding Students on How to Write Vivid Sentences

The teacher introduces basic techniques to help students write vivid and descriptive sentences that are easy to apply:

No.	Technique for Writing Vivid Sentences	Example
1	Use of similes	The flamboyant flowers are as bright red as little flames on the branches.
2	Use of personification	The African mahogany tree stands tall and proud like a warrior guarding the schoolyard.
3	Use of descriptive compound words and onomatopoeia	Dewdrops glitter on the lush green almond leaves.
4	Add details answering questions: Where? When? With what? How? Why? For what purpose?	In the morning, under the gentle sunlight, the rose shyly blooms like a young girl.
5	Express feelings in the sentence (How do you feel? Why do you like it? What excites you?)	Looking at the sunflowers reaching out in the morning sun, I wonder why nature created such a beautiful flower.

	What do you wonder?)	
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Table 1. Some basic techniques to help students write vivid descriptive sentences

The teacher analyzes the examples in detail, allows students to discuss, and encourages them to take notes in their language notebooks.

**Step 2: Organizing a Team Relay Game** To create an exciting learning atmosphere and practice sentence creation skills, the teacher organizes a "Team Relay" game as follows:

- The class is divided into 4 groups. Each group receives a simple sentence, for example: "The flamboyant flowers bloom bright red."
- Within 10 minutes, group members take turns rewriting the sentence in a more vivid way using the learned techniques.
- The group with the most creative and grammatically correct sentences wins.

This game helps students practice writing quickly and accurately while encouraging creativity and teamwork.

**Step 3: Teacher Reviews and Highlights the Best Sentences.** After students have written vivid and effective sentences, the teacher reviews and refines the wording for fluency and correctness, and has students copy the best ones into their notebooks for future use in descriptive writing.

Initially, most students could only write simple, plain sentences. Though not incorrect grammatically or in content, these sentences lacked emotional depth. To make their writing more expressive, students were encouraged to write more vivid sentences.

Example:

- *Before learning the techniques:* "The flamboyant flower is red."
- *After learning the techniques:* "The flamboyant flowers blaze like little fireballs, lighting up the whole schoolyard."

After learning how to write vivid sentences, students became more excited about sentence construction. Writing creatively became easier for them. With an expanded vocabulary and creative imagination, students began producing

impressive, personal sentences. This helps make their descriptive writing more engaging and also supports improvement in Vietnamese Language Arts overall.

#### 4.5. Training Students to Write Complete Essays

Writing a complete descriptive essay is the result of accumulated skills: observation, outlining, and expression. However, many 4th-grade students still struggle with organizing ideas into a coherent essay, particularly in the introduction, body, and conclusion. To address this, the teacher guides students step by step, from writing paragraphs to completing a full descriptive essay.

**Step 1: Analyzing the Prompt and Building an Outline** The teacher helps students identify the prompt's requirements, find appropriate ideas, arrange them according to the three-part structure (introduction – body – conclusion), and choose a logical sequence for description.

**Step 2: Writing Paragraphs** Students develop each section into paragraphs. The teacher emphasizes presentation, structure, spelling, and expression style.

**Step 3: Finalizing the Essay.** Students combine the paragraphs into a complete essay. The teacher monitors and provides feedback to ensure coherence and clarity.

##### 4.5.1. Training in Writing Introductions

In any essay, especially a plant description, the introduction is crucial. It creates the first impression for the reader. A good introduction is natural, engaging, and entices the reader to continue.

*Example of an engaging introduction using sound:*  
"Tweet tweet! Tweet tweet!" The sparrows chirped merrily in the leaves, catching my attention. As I looked up, towering above me stood the almond tree, its leaves turning color to signal the arrival of autumn.

*Analysis:* The sentence describes the joyful chirping of birds in the foliage, which naturally leads to the image of the almond tree changing colors, cleverly introducing the subject of the essay.

**\* Introduction by explaining the reason for the existence of the tree**

I guide students to clearly understand: There are trees that have been silently and persistently shading us since we were born, such as the almond tree in the schoolyard, or ancient banyan and fig trees. But there are also trees that our grandparents or parents bought and planted, or trees we planted from seedlings. Then, I ask the students to tell the story of how the tree came to be, to complete the introduction for the descriptive essay about trees.

Example: My school was founded more than forty years ago. Over time, it has been restructured and renovated many times. Compared to the photo taken when the school was first established, there have been many changes. However, one thing has remained unchanged throughout all these years—the old almond tree in the middle of the schoolyard. It was a young tree planted by the school principal on the first opening day of the school.

**\* Introduction using a song lyric or poem about the tree being described:**

Teachers guide students to select appropriate poems or song lyrics to lead into the essay and introduce the tree species to be described:

Example:

*Tu hú kêu tu hú kêu  
Hoa gạo nở hoa phượng đỏ  
Đây ước mơ hi vọng*

(Means: The cuckoo calls, the cuckoo calls, the red kapok and flamboyant bloom, filling the air with dreams and hopes).

The call of the cuckoo is a signal that summer has arrived. Summer is the most anticipated season for all students, as it's the time we can rest and play freely after months of studying hard. The symbol of such vibrant summers is none other than the buzzing cicadas and rows of blazing red flamboyant trees.

Example:

*Muôn hoa khoe sắc rạng ngời  
Hoa đào tươi thắm gọi mời xuân sang*

(Means: Countless flowers show off their radiant colors, the vibrant peach blossom heralds spring's arrival)

Whenever spring comes, hundreds of flowers compete to bloom, each with its unique beauty, none wanting to be outdone. But in that fragrant and colorful spring garden, it would be a great omission not to mention the peach blossom—a flower that signals the arrival of spring.

There are many other impressive and creative ways to begin an essay. But no matter the approach, it's important to ensure that the introduction flows naturally and expresses sincere emotion. This will help students write a strong opening that captivates readers.

**4.5.2. Training how to write the body paragraphs**

Teachers must help students identify the key ideas to be developed in the body of the descriptive essay and divide it into corresponding paragraphs. There are several ways to structure body paragraphs in a tree description essay:

- **By time sequence:** Students place the object being described in different time frames—across the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter; or in a day: morning, noon, afternoon, evening.
- **By spatial order:** Students observe and describe the tree from various perspectives—looking from afar, from outside in, inside out, the whole view, or detailed parts.
- **By descriptive subject:** For example, describing the roots, trunk, branches, leaves, flowers, or fruits, and surrounding scenery.

After paragraph division, students should think about how to develop ideas within each paragraph. They can link paragraphs using transitional words or by arranging ideas in the sequence already learned. Each paragraph should end with a period and start a new line.

**4.5.3. Training to write a good conclusion**

While the introduction makes the first impression and draws the reader into the essay, a good conclusion leaves a lasting emotional impact.

- **Conclusion by stating the significance or benefits, combined with personal feelings about the tree:**

Example: “In the afternoons, I often go out to look up at the open arms, waiting for birds to return. My fellow villagers would look up at that green

umbrella hanging halfway in the sky to read the wind's strength. Although I've been away from my hometown for almost ten years, I still deeply miss those black canarium trees at the village entrance." (From "The Black Canarium Tree" – Vietnamese Textbook 4 – p.53)

This is a very emotional and beautifully written conclusion. The author both highlights the benefits of the black canarium tree and expresses heartfelt attachment to the familiar tree of their homeland.

- **Conclusion with an expanded message encouraging students to appreciate and care for trees:**

Example: Be proud of the rich and diverse plant life in nature. Let us protect and cherish these beautiful green trees to create a fresh and vibrant living environment.

Example: Take time to observe and care for the trees around you. Create favorable conditions for them to grow strong and beautiful. Only when we love and care for nature will we have a better living environment.

Teachers should guide students to write conclusions that integrate the message of protecting trees and the environment.

With the above guidance, students will be able to write creative and impactful conclusions for descriptive essays about trees. This also helps develop their creativity, descriptive skills, and emotional expression in writing.

#### ***4.6. Measure 6: Innovating how to set topics, evaluate, and give feedback on students' writing***

##### ***4.6.1. Innovating how to set writing topics***

For tree description essays, to stimulate students' interest, I changed how writing prompts are given. Instead of traditional topics like "Describe a flamboyant tree," "Describe a tree you love," or "Describe a flower you like," I gave prompts that encourage creativity.

**Example:** Instead of asking students to describe a favorite flower, I gave this prompt:

(Means: Leaving behind golden hues in the sun, chrysanthemums wave goodbye to autumn, leaving behind a sweet fragrance in the wind, michelia gently steps through the season).

Based on the above poem, describe a flower you love.

Or: "There are many types of trees around you, each with its beauty and meaning. Describe the tree you love the most."

#### ***4.6.2. Innovating how to evaluate and give feedback on students' writing***

When grading students' writing, I mark each good sentence or phrase with a symbol and add loving comments to motivate and encourage students, such as: "You have a talent for writing!", "I love your introduction!", "Your sentence is very well written. Keep it up!".

In writing assignments, I often use kind and constructive comments, first pointing out the strengths, then gently suggesting improvements so students won't fear writing.

**Examples:** "I praise you for... You need to...", "You expressed your feelings well in the conclusion. Well done.", "Well done on writing a descriptive tree essay. You've used creative sentences. Please pay more attention to spelling and formatting next time."

### **5. RESULTS OF THE PEDAGOGICAL TRIAL**

After implementing the mentioned measures in class 4A1 from February to April of the 2023–2024 school year, the teacher assessed the results through a practical descriptive writing test and observation of students' learning attitude changes.

#### **Final test results of the trial:**

- 32 out of 35 students (91.4%) met or exceeded expectations.
- Of these: 10 students (28.6%) achieved Excellent, 18 students (51.4%) achieved Good, and 4 students (11.4%) met the minimum requirement.
- Only 3 students (8.6%) did not meet the requirement, a significant drop from the initial assessment.

#### **Notable improvements included:**

- Students' essays had clear structures, rich details, and used personal emotions.
- Vocabulary improved, and students confidently used simple literary devices like simile and personification.



- The number of spelling and word usage errors decreased significantly.

**Additionally, in class activities:**

- Students participated more enthusiastically in writing lessons, especially in group work and language games.
- They actively shared their writings and gave constructive peer feedback.
- The classroom atmosphere became more open, creative, and lively.

Thus, the measures were applied flexibly and realistically in the classroom, yielding clear results both in academic performance and students' motivation to learn.

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