

Difficulties Of Grade X Students In Writing Descriptive Texts At SMA Negeri 3 Palu

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and describe the specific difficulties experienced by Grade X students at SMA Negeri 3 Palu in writing descriptive texts in English. More specifically, the study seeks to examine students' understanding of the generic structure of descriptive texts, their use of vocabulary, and their application of grammatical rules in writing. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed to provide a detailed picture of students' writing problems based on their own responses. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed to Grade X students who had learned descriptive text writing in their English classes. The findings reveal that students face several challenges when writing descriptive texts. Many students had difficulty distinguishing between the identification and description parts of the text, which often resulted in unclear or incomplete descriptions. Students also reported limited vocabulary, making it difficult for them to express ideas clearly and vary their word choices. In addition, grammatical problems, particularly in the use of tenses and sentence structure, were frequently identified as major obstacles in their writing. These results are consistent with previous studies that report similar difficulties among EFL learners in writing descriptive texts. Limited mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and text organization has been widely recognized as a key factor affecting students' writing performance. The findings suggest that students need more structured guidance and practice to develop these skills. Therefore, this study recommends that English teachers provide focused instruction and targeted training to help students better understand text structure, expand their vocabulary, and improve grammatical accuracy in descriptive writing.

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1. Introduction

English plays an increasingly important role in Indonesia's educational system, especially at the senior high school level, where it is a compulsory subject and a key component of national examinations (Kemendikbud, 2020; Rahman & Weda, 2018; Suherman et al., 2022). Among the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—writing is often regarded as one of the most complex and demanding for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Writing requires not only knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but also the ability to organize ideas coherently and adapt language to the conventions of specific text types (Hyland, 2019; Rahman, 2018; Aswad et al., 2019). One of the essential text types taught in the Indonesian high school curriculum is the descriptive text. This genre is expected to help students describe people, places, things, or events in detail, using appropriate language structures and vocabulary (Widodo, 2016; Said et al., 2021; Andini et al., 2021).

Despite its prominence in the curriculum, many students continue to struggle with writing descriptive texts effectively. Various studies have shown that Indonesian students often produce descriptive texts that are fragmented, lacking in coherence, and marked by frequent errors in vocabulary and grammar (Fitrawati, 2018; Utami et al., 2022). Furthermore, students frequently confuse the organizational structure of a descriptive text, particularly the distinction between the identification section and the description section, leading to disorganized writing that does not fully communicate the intended meaning (Yuliana et al., 2021; Prihandoko et al., 2019; Adinda et al., 2025). These difficulties pose significant challenges not only for students' performance in classroom assessments but also for their ability to express ideas clearly in written English, which is increasingly essential in the global context.

Writing difficulties among EFL learners are influenced by multiple factors, including limited exposure to English outside the classroom, insufficient vocabulary knowledge, and anxiety about making mistakes (Zhang, 2020; Junaid et al., 2026). Cultural factors may also contribute, as Indonesian students often come from educational backgrounds emphasizing memorization and teacher-centered learning, which may limit opportunities for authentic writing practice (Nguyen et al., 2023; Andini et al., 2026). Grammar differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English further complicate the process, as sentence structure and tenses do not always align, causing confusion and errors when students attempt to translate their thoughts directly from their first language into English (Rahmawati, 2019; Anggawirya et al., 2021; Dalyan et al., 2022).

Several researchers have proposed strategies to overcome these challenges. For example, the use of visual media, such as picture series, has been found effective in helping students generate ideas and improve the organization of descriptive texts (Astuti & Rukmini, 2020). Other interventions include peer feedback, scaffolding techniques, and explicit teaching of text structure (Hyland, 2019; Fitrawati, 2018). However, despite these pedagogical advances, many teachers report persistent difficulties in helping students achieve proficiency in descriptive writing. This suggests a gap between the teaching methods employed and the specific needs of students in different contexts.

In Palu, Central Sulawesi, local contexts further shape students' learning experiences. SMA Negeri 3 Palu is one of the largest public high schools in the city, serving students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Teachers at this school have observed that students often struggle with writing tasks, particularly descriptive texts, despite having been introduced to this genre since junior high school. This observation aligns with national studies indicating that writing is a challenging skill for Indonesian EFL learners. Yet, there has been limited research focusing specifically on the difficulties faced by students in Palu, an area recovering from the 2018 earthquake and experiencing various socio-cultural and economic shifts that may influence educational outcomes. Understanding the specific nature of students' difficulties in this context is crucial for designing effective interventions tailored to their needs.

Moreover, while previous studies have extensively documented general writing difficulties among EFL students, fewer studies have explored how these difficulties manifest specifically in the writing of descriptive texts. Even fewer have examined students' perspectives on their own challenges, which could provide valuable insights for developing more student-centered teaching approaches (Nguyen et al., 2023; Zhang, 2020). Therefore, investigating the particular difficulties experienced by Grade X students at SMA Negeri 3 Palu can contribute to both local and broader educational discussions. It can inform teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers about the areas where students need the most support, thereby helping to improve English language teaching practices.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the specific difficulties encountered by Grade X students at SMA Negeri 3 Palu in writing descriptive texts. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research seeks to identify common problems related to text structure, vocabulary usage, and grammatical accuracy, as well as the underlying factors contributing to these issues. Unlike purely quantitative studies, a qualitative perspective allows for a deeper understanding of students' subjective experiences and perceptions, which are critical for developing responsive and effective teaching strategies.

The findings of this study are expected to provide practical recommendations for English teachers, particularly in similar contexts in Indonesia, who are striving to help students improve their writing skills. By identifying the precise nature of the obstacles students face, teachers can better tailor their instructional strategies, provide focused support, and foster a more engaging and effective writing classroom. Furthermore, the results may offer valuable input for curriculum revisions and the design of targeted teacher training programs, ensuring that English writing instruction meets the real needs of learners.

Therefore, this study is motivated by the persistent challenges Indonesian students face in writing descriptive texts, the importance of writing skills in the EFL context, and the lack of research focusing on students in Palu. It seeks to contribute new knowledge and practical solutions to improve teaching practices and help students become more confident and capable writers of English descriptive texts.

2. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate the specific difficulties experienced by Grade X students at SMA Negeri 3 Palu in writing descriptive texts. A qualitative descriptive method was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in depth, focusing on how they perceive and articulate their own challenges in writing (Creswell, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Rather than testing

hypotheses or manipulating variables, qualitative descriptive research seeks to provide a detailed, factual account of the phenomena under study-in this case, students' writing difficulties.

The study was conducted at SMA Negeri 3 Palu, a senior high school in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The participants were students in Grade X, selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. To ensure that participants could provide meaningful insights, the researcher consulted with an English teacher to identify students who were sufficiently able to reflect on their writing experiences. In total, twenty students participated in the study.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions designed to capture detailed information about students' challenges in writing descriptive texts. The items covered aspects such as understanding the structure of descriptive texts (distinguishing between identification and description), vocabulary use, grammar accuracy, and students' overall confidence and attitudes toward writing in English. The use of online forms facilitated ease of access for students and ensured data could be collected efficiently despite potential time or logistical constraints.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using the interactive model of data analysis proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three key steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. These stages were applied as follows:

Data analysis was conducted through three main stages. First, data reduction was carried out by carefully reviewing all students' responses from the questionnaire. The researcher selected information that was directly related to the research objectives and focused on students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts. Responses that were irrelevant or lacked sufficient detail were excluded in order to refine the data and ensure clearer analysis. This process helped reduce complexity and allowed the researcher to concentrate on meaningful information.

Second, data display was applied by organizing the reduced data into tables and charts. This step aimed to present the data in a clear and systematic way. Through visual representation, the researcher was able to identify the frequency and types of difficulties reported by the students. Patterns and trends related to common writing problems became more visible during this stage, supporting more accurate interpretation of the findings.

Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted by interpreting the displayed data to determine the most significant difficulties faced by the students. The conclusions highlighted key problem areas, such as confusion between identification and description, limited vocabulary variety, and frequent grammatical errors. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the researcher continuously reviewed and cross-checked the data and interpretations throughout the analysis process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Result

This study aimed to identify the specific difficulties faced by Grade X students of SMA Negeri 3 Palu in writing descriptive texts in English. Data were gathered through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, focusing on key aspects of descriptive writing such as text structure, vocabulary use, and grammar accuracy.

Following the data collection, the researcher conducted data reduction to focus on responses relevant to the study objectives. The data were then categorized and analyzed to highlight patterns in students' difficulties. The results are presented comprehensively in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Students' Difficulties in Writing Descriptive Texts

No	Question	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Are you still confused about distinguishing between identification and description?	76.5	23.5
2	Can you connect descriptive text between identification and description well?	29.4	70.5
3	Do you always write with repetitive words in every sentence due to limited vocabulary?	100	0
4	Do you always use monotonous vocabulary so that words in sentences become unvaried due to limited vocabulary?	88.2	11.8

5	Do you always make mistakes in using grammar so that readers have difficulty understanding the text?	82.4	17.6
6	Don't you understand simple present tense well?	52.9	47.1
7	Can't you distinguish between one sentence and another because you don't use good writing rules?	88.2	11.8
8	Do you always make mistakes in capitalization?	58.8	41.2
9	Do you have insufficient knowledge about the topic to be described so that you have difficulty writing?	76.5	23.5
10	Do you have a lot of knowledge about the topic to be described so that it's easy to write?	23.5	76.5

Based on the data collected through the online questionnaire distributed to Grade X students of SMA Negeri 3 Palu, it was found that students face various challenges in writing descriptive texts in English. The detailed findings are summarized in Table 1 above and further explained as follows.

A significant portion of the students, 76.5%, reported that they are still confused about distinguishing between the identification and description parts of a descriptive text. This indicates that most students do not fully grasp the text structure, leading to writing that lacks clarity and organization. Furthermore, only 29.4% of students said they could connect the identification and description sections effectively, leaving 70.5% struggling to create cohesive and coherent texts. This suggests a need for explicit instruction and practice on how to structure descriptive writing appropriately.

Regarding vocabulary use, all respondents (100%) admitted to frequently repeating words in their sentences due to limited vocabulary. In addition, 88.2% of students stated they often use monotonous vocabulary, making their sentences lack variety and expressiveness. This limitation significantly impacts the quality of their writing, as varied vocabulary is essential for crafting engaging and precise descriptions.

In terms of grammar, 82.4% of the students reported making frequent grammatical errors that hinder readers' understanding of their texts. This reveals that many students lack mastery of basic grammatical structures, particularly when trying to express their ideas in written form. Notably, more than half (52.9%) of the students admitted they do not understand the use of the simple present tense well, even though this tense is fundamental in writing descriptive texts. This deficiency presents a substantial obstacle to writing grammatically accurate and meaningful sentences.

Regarding the application of writing conventions, as many as 88.2% of students expressed difficulties distinguishing one sentence from another due to a poor understanding of proper writing rules, such as punctuation, sentence connections, and the use of linking words. Furthermore, 58.8% of students confessed to frequently making errors in capitalization, for example, at the beginning of sentences or in proper nouns. Such mechanical errors affect the readability and professionalism of students' writing.

In terms of topic knowledge, 76.5% of students felt they lacked sufficient knowledge about the topics they needed to describe, which made it challenging for them to generate ideas and develop their texts. Only 23.5% of students reported having substantial knowledge about the topics, making writing easier for them. This lack of familiarity with the content prevents students from producing informative, engaging, and relevant texts.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the primary difficulties faced by Grade X students of SMA Negeri 3 Palu in writing descriptive texts are:

1. Difficulty distinguishing between identification and description sections.
2. Limited and repetitive vocabulary.
3. Frequent grammatical errors.
4. Weaknesses in applying writing conventions.
5. Insufficient knowledge of writing topics.

3.2 Discussion

This study investigated the difficulties faced by Grade X students of SMA Negeri 3 Palu in writing descriptive texts in English. The findings reveal several significant challenges related to text structure, vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, and writing conventions, as well as insufficient topic knowledge. These results align with previous research highlighting persistent obstacles faced by learners of English as a foreign language in writing skills development (Hyland, 2019; Nation, 2022).

One of the most prominent difficulties identified in this study is students' inability to distinguish between the identification and description sections in descriptive texts, with 76.5% of respondents indicating confusion in this area. This structural misunderstanding can result in texts that are disorganized and unclear. Hyland (2019) emphasizes that a clear understanding of genre structure is crucial for producing coherent and effective writing. When students lack awareness of how to organize content, it significantly affects their ability to communicate meaningfully through written texts. Teachers, therefore, need to provide explicit instruction on text structure, possibly through the use of models and scaffolded writing activities.

Another significant challenge is students' limited vocabulary, as indicated by 100% of students who reported repeating words due to a lack of alternatives. Repetitive and monotonous vocabulary not only diminishes the quality of writing but also limits students' ability to express nuanced ideas and create engaging texts. Nation (2022) asserts that vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to successful writing, as it affects both fluency and accuracy. Incorporating vocabulary enrichment activities, such as word mapping, synonym exploration, and contextual vocabulary exercises, could help students expand their lexical resources and produce more varied and engaging descriptive texts.

In terms of grammar, 82.4% of students acknowledged frequent errors, particularly in using the simple present tense, which is essential for writing descriptive texts. Grammatical competence is vital for conveying clear and precise meaning, and consistent errors can hinder reader understanding and reduce confidence in students' writing abilities. As highlighted by Celce-Murcia (2016), grammar instruction should be integrated meaningfully into writing practice, emphasizing how grammatical choices support specific communicative purposes in texts. Teachers might consider integrating grammar instruction with writing tasks, using error correction, and engaging students in reflective grammar activities.

Furthermore, difficulties in applying writing conventions were evident among the participants, with 88.2% struggling to differentiate sentences due to poor punctuation and connection techniques, and 58.8% experiencing challenges with proper capitalization. Mechanical errors, though often viewed as minor, significantly affect the clarity and professionalism of written texts. Explicit teaching of writing mechanics, combined with frequent practice and feedback, can help students internalize these essential rules (Harmer, 2015).

Finally, the study found that topic knowledge significantly affects students' ability to write descriptive texts. About 76.5% of students reported insufficient knowledge of topics, which limits their capacity to generate ideas and develop detailed descriptions. Content knowledge and language proficiency are interdependent, as a lack of familiarity with a topic restricts vocabulary use and idea development (Hyland, 2019). Teachers might integrate content-based learning, connecting English writing tasks to students' broader knowledge and experiences to enhance engagement and writing quality.

In conclusion, the results of this study highlight that writing descriptive texts poses considerable challenges for Grade X students at SMA Negeri 3 Palu. Addressing these challenges requires multifaceted teaching approaches, including explicit instruction on text structure, focused vocabulary building, integrated grammar teaching, and support for developing content knowledge. With targeted interventions, students' ability to write clear, varied, and effective descriptive texts can be significantly improved.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the difficulties encountered by Grade X students of SMA Negeri 3 Palu in writing descriptive texts in English. The findings revealed significant challenges, particularly in distinguishing between the identification and description parts of the text, using varied and appropriate vocabulary, and applying correct grammatical structures. Students also experienced difficulties with writing conventions such as punctuation and capitalization, and many reported a lack of sufficient knowledge about the topics they were asked to describe.

These difficulties are consistent with previous research, which indicates that learners of English as a foreign language often struggle with text organization, lexical variety, and grammatical accuracy in writing tasks. Such challenges can hinder students' ability to produce clear, coherent, and engaging written texts.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that teachers implement targeted instructional strategies to support students in overcoming these challenges. These strategies could include explicit teaching of text structure, vocabulary expansion activities, integrated grammar instruction, and opportunities for students to build topic knowledge relevant to writing tasks. By addressing these areas, educators can help students develop greater confidence and competence in writing descriptive texts in English.

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