



Students' Difficulties in Using the Simple Present Tense in Writing Descriptive Texts among Tenth-Grade Students at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat in the 2025/2026 Academic Year

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ABSTRACT

The accurate use of the simple present tense remains challenging for English as a Foreign Language learners, particularly when they are required to construct grammatically appropriate descriptive texts. This study investigates the difficulties experienced by tenth-grade students in using the simple present tense when writing descriptive texts at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat during the 2025/2026 academic year. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design, involving 34 students from Class X-1 selected through total sampling. Data were collected through writing tests and interviews and analyzed using the surface strategy taxonomy of error analysis. The findings revealed two major grammatical difficulties: the use of the verb *to be* (*is*, *am*, and *are*) in nominal sentences and the addition of the suffix *-s/-es* to verbs with third-person singular subjects. Omission constituted the dominant error type (83.33%), followed by misformation (16.67%). These findings indicate that students' difficulties primarily arise from linguistic limitations compounded by first-language interference, highlighting the need for more focused instruction on simple present tense structures in descriptive writing.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is a productive language skill that requires learners to integrate vocabulary knowledge, idea organization, and linguistic accuracy to communicate meaning effectively to readers (Mukarromah & Suryanto, 2022). Among the various genres taught at the secondary level, descriptive text plays an important role because it enables students to describe the characteristics of a person, place, or object in detail. From a linguistic perspective, descriptive texts commonly employ the simple present tense to express facts, habitual conditions, and general characteristics. Students therefore need sufficient grammatical competence to construct accurate and comprehensible descriptions. Inaccurate tense usage can interfere with both the intended meaning and the coherence of the resulting text (Adejare, 2022).

Previous studies have identified several difficulties that students encounter when writing descriptive texts, including limited vocabulary, inadequate organization of ideas, insufficient grammatical mastery, and mechanical writing problems (Daulay et al., 2023; Hanifa & Safitri, 2024). Among these difficulties, vocabulary and grammar represent particularly prominent problems, with each accounting for 84% of the difficulties reported in previous research. These findings demonstrate that students require not only sufficient lexical resources but also adequate grammatical competence to communicate descriptive information effectively. Ismayanti & Kholiq (2020) similarly affirmed that grammatical difficulties constitute a substantial barrier to students' ability to produce accurate and coherent descriptive texts. The recurring prominence of grammatical difficulties highlights the importance of examining specific grammatical features that students struggle to apply in descriptive writing.

Observations conducted during the *Pengenalan Lapangan Persekolahan Terpadu (PLPT)* at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat identified the use of the simple present tense as a particularly prominent difficulty among students. The observed problems primarily involved subject–verb agreement, the appropriate use of *to be*, and the addition of the suffix *-s/-es* to verbs with third-person singular subjects (Mukarromah & Suryanto, 2022). Syifa et al. (2022) similarly identified three major categories of writing difficulties among students: limited vocabulary, insufficient grammatical mastery, and inadequate knowledge of text structure. These findings demonstrate that grammatical difficulties constitute part of a broader set of challenges that students encounter when producing descriptive texts.

The persistent difficulty in applying the simple present tense therefore warrants further investigation within the specific context of descriptive writing.

Previous research has also demonstrated that students' grammatical difficulties extend beyond declarative knowledge of grammatical rules and involve their ability to apply those rules consistently during text production (Fitri et al., 2022). Hafizah et al. (2024) found that students demonstrated limited understanding of tenses, particularly when applying subject–verb agreement. Sa'adah (2020) further reported that mastery of grammatical structures substantially influences the quality of descriptive texts because grammatical inaccuracies can disrupt textual coherence. These studies suggest that knowing grammatical rules does not necessarily ensure students' ability to implement them accurately and consistently in authentic writing tasks. Examining students' actual written production can therefore provide a clearer understanding of how difficulties with the simple present tense manifest in descriptive texts.

The cognitive demands inherent in the writing process further complicate students' mastery and application of the simple present tense. Demneri (2024) emphasizes that writing represents a particularly challenging skill because learners must simultaneously apply linguistic rules, organize ideas, and sustain a continuous thinking process, making grammatical accuracy especially demanding for EFL learners. Mondal (2025) similarly found that grammatical errors, particularly those involving verb forms, remain persistent in EFL writing and often result from incomplete internalization of grammatical rules rather than a complete absence of grammatical knowledge. Mertosono & Erniwati (2023) further confirmed that students' grammatical difficulties in descriptive writing frequently involve subject–verb agreement, demonstrating persistent challenges in applying simple present tense rules across different educational contexts. Collectively, these findings indicate that students' difficulties require analysis not only in terms of their perceived challenges but also through the grammatical error patterns evident in their written texts.

Despite extensive research on grammatical difficulties in descriptive writing, further investigation is needed to connect students' reported difficulties with the specific error patterns that emerge when they apply the simple present tense in actual text production. This study addresses this issue by examining both the difficulties experienced by students and the grammatical errors evident in their descriptive writing. Specifically, the study aims to investigate: (1) the types of difficulties experienced by tenth-grade students in using the simple present tense when writing descriptive texts and (2) the grammatical error patterns that reflect these difficulties. By integrating students' experienced difficulties with evidence from their written production, the study seeks to provide a more contextualized understanding of simple present tense use among EFL learners at the senior secondary level. The findings can contribute to the development of grammar instruction that more directly addresses recurring difficulties in applying the simple present tense to descriptive writing.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to investigate students' difficulties in using the simple present tense when writing descriptive texts. The participants comprised all 34 students of Class X-1 at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat during the 2025/2026 academic year. The researchers selected the participants through total sampling, which included all members of the target population in the study. Sugiyono (2020) states that total sampling is appropriate when the population is relatively small, allowing all members of the population to serve as the research sample. This sampling procedure enabled the study to examine the difficulties experienced by the entire class within the specific educational context under investigation.

The researchers collected data using two instruments: a descriptive writing test and interviews. In the writing test, each student was instructed to compose a descriptive text of at least 80 words about a person they knew. The researchers examined the students' written texts to identify grammatical errors related specifically to the use of *to be* and the suffix *-s/-es* within the simple present tense. They also conducted interviews with several students to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding the difficulties they encountered when applying the simple present tense in descriptive writing (Creswell, 2015). The combination of written evidence and students' accounts provided complementary data for identifying and interpreting the difficulties encountered during the writing process.

The researchers analyzed the data using the surface strategy taxonomy of error analysis by Arikunto (2019), which classifies errors into four categories: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. They identified relevant grammatical errors in the students' descriptive texts and classified them according to these four categories.

The researchers also referred to Byrne's (1988) theoretical framework to categorize writing difficulties into linguistic, psychological, and cognitive dimensions. This analytical framework enabled the researchers to examine both the grammatical error patterns evident in students' written texts and the broader difficulties reported through the interviews. The integration of these analytical perspectives provided a structured basis for interpreting students' difficulties in applying the simple present tense in descriptive writing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Students' Difficulties in Using the Simple Present Tense

All 34 students of Class X-1 participated in the descriptive writing test. The analysis showed that most students experienced at least one grammatical difficulty when applying the simple present tense in their descriptive texts. The identified difficulties comprised three categories: omission of *to be* (11 students, 36.67%), omission of the suffix *-s/-es* (14 students, 46.67%), and misformation (5 students, 16.67%). Among these categories, omission of the suffix *-s/-es* represented the most frequently identified difficulty, followed by omission of *to be* and misformation. Table 1 presents a complete summary of the grammatical errors identified in the students' descriptive texts.

Table 1. Summary of Students' Grammatical Errors in Writing Descriptive Texts

No.	Initial	Omission of <i>To Be</i>	Omission of <i>-s/-es</i>	Misformation	Total
1	AM	–	–	–	0
2	AA	1	–	–	1
3	ARA	–	1	–	1
4	A	–	–	2	2
5	AU	–	–	–	0
6	AEP	1	–	–	1
7	ADS	–	1	–	1
8	AN	1	–	1	2
9	APAS	–	–	–	0
10	BA	1	–	–	1
11	CNBS	–	–	1	1
12	EFL	–	–	1	1
13	EN	–	1	–	1
14	FR	–	–	–	0
15	FRL	1	–	–	1
16	FA	–	–	–	0
17	GA	1	–	–	1
18	IM	–	2	–	2
19	IPS	–	1	–	1
20	MSS	1	–	–	1
21	MS	–	–	–	0
22	NAN	1	–	–	1
23	NA	–	1	–	1
24	NL	1	–	–	1
25	RPP	1	–	–	1
26	RRR	–	1	–	1
27	RLS	–	–	–	0
28	SRU	–	2	–	2
29	SS	–	1	–	1
30	SDP	1	–	–	1
31	SK	–	–	–	0
32	WCP	–	2	–	2
33	YKF	–	1	–	1
34	ZM	–	–	–	0
TOTAL		11	14	5	30

Percentage calculations using the formula $P = F/N \times 100\%$ yielded 46.67% for omission of *-s/-es*, 36.67% for omission of *to be*, and 16.67% for misformation. These results identify omission of *-s/-es* as the most frequently recorded grammatical error, accounting for nearly half of the total errors. Omission of *to be* represented the second most frequent error, while misformation occurred less frequently. The distribution demonstrates that students encountered particular difficulty in applying grammatical rules involving verb forms and nominal sentence structures.

These patterns indicate that students still require greater mastery and consistency in applying simple present tense rules when constructing descriptive texts.

Error Analysis of *To Be* Usage

Omission of *to be* occurred when students failed to include *is*, *am*, or *are* in nominal sentences in which these grammatical elements were required. The analysis identified 11 instances of this error in the students' descriptive texts. These omissions resulted in grammatically incomplete constructions because the students did not provide the linking verb required to connect the subject with its complement. The errors demonstrate students' difficulties in constructing nominal sentences according to the grammatical conventions of the simple present tense. Representative examples of the omission of *to be* are presented below.

Incorrect: "He my friend in junior high school." (AA)

Correct: "He is my friend in junior high school."

Incorrect: "She younger than me." (GA)

Correct: "She is younger than me."

Misformation of *to be* represented another grammatical difficulty identified in the students' writing. The analysis recorded five instances in which students included *to be* but selected a form that was inappropriate for the grammatical context. This pattern differs from omission because students demonstrated awareness that the sentence required *to be* but failed to select the appropriate form. Such errors indicate difficulties in coordinating tense requirements with the grammatical characteristics of the subject and sentence. The following example illustrates a misformation error involving *to be*.

Incorrect: "His activities as a student were cleaning the house." (EFL)

Correct: "His activities as a student are cleaning the house."

The omission pattern involving *to be* may reflect interference from Indonesian, which does not require a direct equivalent of *to be* in comparable nominal sentence constructions. Students who transferred Indonesian sentence patterns directly into English consequently tended to omit this grammatical element. Misformation errors reveal a different pattern because students recognized the grammatical need for *to be* but experienced difficulty selecting the appropriate form according to the tense and subject. These two error patterns demonstrate that students' difficulties involved both the presence of obligatory grammatical elements and the selection of their appropriate forms. The findings therefore illustrate how differences between Indonesian and English grammatical structures may contribute to difficulties in constructing simple present tense sentences.

Error Analysis of *-s/-es* Suffix Usage

In the simple present tense, verbs with third-person singular subjects such as *he*, *she*, and *it* require the suffix *-s* or *-es*. Failure to apply this rule constituted the most frequently recorded grammatical error, with 14 instances identified in the students' descriptive texts. Students commonly used the base form of the verb despite using a third-person singular subject that required morphological marking. This pattern demonstrates inconsistency in applying subject-verb agreement within simple present tense constructions. Representative examples of *-s/-es* omission are presented below.

Incorrect: "He dream of becoming an athlete." (ARA)

Correct: "He dreams of becoming an athlete."

Incorrect: "She live in Jampalan and she like reading a novel." (WCP)

Correct: "She lives in Jampalan and she likes reading a novel."

The recurring omission of *-s/-es* indicates that students had not yet consistently applied subject–verb agreement rules in their descriptive writing. Although students may have encountered the grammatical rule during instruction, their written production demonstrates difficulty applying it consistently when constructing sentences. The frequency of these errors suggests that knowledge of the rule had not yet developed into consistent grammatical application during the writing process. Students therefore experienced difficulty coordinating the grammatical subject with the required morphological form of the verb. This pattern highlights the distinction between knowing a grammatical rule and consistently applying that rule during actual text production.

Confirmation of Findings through Interviews

The interview findings supported the grammatical difficulties identified through the analysis of students' descriptive texts. Several students expressed uncertainty about when to use *to be* and when to add the suffix *-s/-es* to verbs in the simple present tense. Their responses also indicated difficulties in transferring ideas from Indonesian into grammatically appropriate English sentences. One student (A) explicitly described this difficulty as follows:

"Writing a descriptive text in Indonesian is easy. But when I have to translate it into English, it immediately becomes difficult. I still often get confused about using *to be* (*is, am, are*) and verbs that take the *-s/-es* suffix, because I have not fully mastered them yet."

Other students, including ARA, AU, and RRR, expressed similar difficulties in determining the appropriate rules for using the suffix *-s/-es*. They also reported frequently relying on direct translation from Indonesian when constructing English sentences. These responses support the writing-test findings by showing that students experienced uncertainty in applying grammatical rules during actual text production. The interview evidence also indicates that first-language interference contributed to the grammatical difficulties identified in their descriptive writing. The convergence between the written errors and students' reported experiences strengthens the interpretation that linguistic difficulties, particularly grammatical rule application and first-language interference, played an important role in their use of the simple present tense.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the difficulties experienced by Class X-1 students in applying the simple present tense to descriptive writing were predominantly linguistic, consistent with the categorization proposed by Byrne (1988). These difficulties centered on two grammatical areas: the appropriate use of *to be* in nominal sentences and the addition of the suffix *-s/-es* to verbs with third-person singular subjects. The recurring patterns of grammatical errors across the students' written texts suggest that these difficulties represented persistent problems rather than isolated occurrences (Banks, 2002). Students particularly struggled to supply grammatical elements that English requires but that differ from comparable structures in Indonesian. These findings highlight the importance of examining students' grammatical difficulties through the specific linguistic features involved in producing descriptive texts.

Omission constituted the dominant error type, accounting for 83.33% of all identified errors. This substantial proportion indicates that students primarily failed to include obligatory grammatical elements rather than unnecessarily adding or incorrectly ordering elements within their sentences. The analysis identified no addition or misordering errors, further distinguishing omission as the principal pattern characterizing students' grammatical difficulties. Students' errors therefore reflected incomplete application of grammatical rules rather than confusion concerning word order. This pattern suggests that students encountered particular difficulty in consistently applying obligatory forms of *to be* and *-s/-es* while constructing simple present tense sentences.

The interview findings further indicate that interference from Indonesian contributed to students' grammatical difficulties. Indonesian does not require a direct equivalent of *to be* in comparable nominal constructions and does not inflect verbs according to third-person singular subjects in the same manner as English. Students who relied on direct translation from Indonesian therefore tended to omit *to be* or the suffix *-s/-es* when constructing English sentences. The correspondence between students' written errors and their interview responses indicates that differences between the grammatical systems of Indonesian and English influenced their application of simple present tense structures. These findings support previous research emphasizing negative first-language transfer as an important source of grammatical errors in English as a Foreign Language writing.

The findings also carry important pedagogical implications for grammar instruction in descriptive writing. Teachers should move beyond the memorization of grammatical rules and provide students with opportunities to apply the simple present tense through extended and meaningful writing activities. Instruction should particularly emphasize the distinction between nominal and verbal sentence patterns, the grammatical function and appropriate forms of *to be*, and subject–verb agreement involving third-person singular subjects. Contextualized writing practice can help students connect explicit grammatical knowledge with its application during actual text production. Such instruction can directly address the recurring error patterns identified in students’ descriptive texts while strengthening their ability to apply simple present tense structures more consistently.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the difficulties experienced by Class X-1 students at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat in using the simple present tense when writing descriptive texts were predominantly linguistic. The two most problematic grammatical areas involved the appropriate use of *to be* (*is*, *am*, and *are*) in nominal sentences and the addition of the suffix *-s/-es* to verbs with third-person singular subjects. Omission constituted the dominant error type, accounting for 83.33% of the identified errors, while misinformation accounted for the remaining 16.67%. The recurring error patterns indicate that students primarily struggled to consistently apply obligatory grammatical elements when constructing simple present tense sentences. The findings also indicate that interference from Indonesian contributed to these difficulties because differences between the grammatical systems of Indonesian and English influenced students’ application of English grammatical structures.

English teachers should provide grammar instruction that emphasizes the contextual application of grammatical rules rather than relying primarily on memorization. Classroom activities should provide students with meaningful opportunities to distinguish nominal from verbal sentence patterns, apply the appropriate forms of *to be*, and use the suffix *-s/-es* accurately with third-person singular subjects. Teachers can integrate these grammatical features into extended descriptive-writing activities so that students practice applying the rules within authentic textual contexts. Instruction should also explicitly address structural differences between Indonesian and English to help students recognize and minimize first-language interference. Future researchers may investigate other grammatical aspects of descriptive writing or examine the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions designed to improve students’ grammatical accuracy.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The study involved only 34 students from one class at a single school, which limits the extent to which the findings can represent students in other educational contexts. The analysis also focused specifically on the use of *to be* and the suffix *-s/-es* within the simple present tense, and therefore did not examine the broader range of grammatical difficulties that may occur in students’ descriptive writing. The qualitative case study design also focused on describing students’ difficulties and error patterns rather than testing the effectiveness of a particular instructional intervention. Future studies could involve larger and more diverse participant groups, examine additional grammatical features, and employ intervention-based designs to determine how particular instructional strategies influence students’ grammatical accuracy in writing.

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