



An Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Writing Descriptive Texts among Tenth-Grade Students at State Senior High School 1 Tanjung Tiram in the 2025/2026 Academic Year

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ABSTRACT

Writing descriptive texts remains challenging for English as a Foreign Language learners because it requires the integration of grammatical accuracy, vocabulary mastery, idea organization, and knowledge of text structure. This study aimed to analyze the difficulties experienced by tenth-grade students in writing descriptive texts at State Senior High School 1 Tanjung Tiram during the 2025/2026 academic year. The study employed a descriptive qualitative method, with participants selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observation, writing tests, and interviews. The findings revealed that students encountered difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, idea organization, generic structure, spelling, and punctuation. Grammatical mastery emerged as the most prominent difficulty, particularly in applying the simple present tense and selecting appropriate forms of *to be* (*is*, *am*, and *are*), as many students incorrectly used past forms such as *was* and *were*. Interview findings further identified linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and pedagogical factors underlying these difficulties. The study concludes that strengthening grammatical competence through interactive instruction and sustained writing practice is essential for improving students' descriptive writing ability.

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INTRODUCTION

English has become an important international language across various domains, including education, communication, technology, business, and social interaction. In Indonesia, educational institutions teach English as a foreign language from junior high school through the university level. Among the four major language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—students often find writing particularly challenging because it requires them to organize ideas, apply grammatical rules accurately, and communicate their thoughts clearly in written form (Fitria, 2022). Agustin et al. (2024) describe writing as a productive skill that integrates grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and sentence organization. Developing proficiency in these interconnected components requires students to engage in continuous and meaningful writing practice.

Writing also constitutes an essential component of English language learning because it supports the development of critical thinking and written communication skills. Damanik et al. (2023) emphasize that writing enables students to communicate ideas, feelings, and knowledge through written language. Shahsavari & Kourepaz (2020) further explain that writing involves a systematic process of planning, drafting, editing, and producing a final text. Students need sufficient knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and textual organization to complete these stages effectively. Differences between English and students' first language can complicate this process, leading to grammatical errors, inappropriate vocabulary use, and difficulties in organizing ideas coherently.

Descriptive text represents one of the text types taught at the senior high school level. This type of text describes a particular person, place, animal, or object in sufficient detail to enable readers to construct a clear representation of the subject. Graham et al. (2021) explain that descriptive texts provide information about the characteristics of an object so that readers can visualize it more clearly. Descriptive texts generally comprise two generic structures—identification and description—and employ linguistic features such as the simple present tense, adjectives, linking verbs, and specific participants. Students therefore need to understand both the generic structure and the relevant linguistic features to produce effective descriptive texts (Ariani, 2023).

Despite these instructional expectations, many students continue to experience difficulties in writing descriptive texts. Previous research has identified recurring problems involving grammar, vocabulary, textual organization, mechanics, and idea development. Students may encounter difficulties in applying grammatical structures, organizing the generic structure of a descriptive text, selecting appropriate vocabulary, spelling words accurately, and developing ideas into coherent sentences. Limited vocabulary, inadequate grammatical knowledge, low motivation, and insufficient writing practice can further intensify these difficulties (Mundi et al., 2023). These recurring problems demonstrate that successful descriptive writing requires students to coordinate multiple linguistic and cognitive resources throughout the writing process.

Preliminary observations conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Tiram revealed similar difficulties among tenth-grade students when writing descriptive texts. Many students encountered problems in applying the simple present tense, particularly in selecting the appropriate forms of *to be*, including *is*, *am*, and *are*. Students frequently used past-tense forms such as *was* and *were* in descriptive texts even when the context required the simple present tense. They also experienced difficulties in organizing ideas, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and constructing grammatically accurate sentences. These difficulties resulted in descriptive texts that lacked clarity, grammatical accuracy, and structural coherence.

Several interconnected factors may contribute to students' difficulties in descriptive writing, including linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and pedagogical factors. Linguistically, limited vocabulary and inadequate grammatical mastery can restrict students' ability to construct accurate sentences, while cognitive difficulties can affect their ability to organize ideas and develop relevant content. Psychological factors such as low confidence and limited motivation can discourage students from engaging actively in English writing activities. Pedagogical practices that emphasize theoretical explanations over sustained writing practice may also provide students with insufficient opportunities to develop their writing skills. Yulianawati (2019) similarly highlights the influence of psychological factors, particularly anxiety and lack of confidence, on students' writing performance.

Existing studies have documented various linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties in descriptive writing, yet the difficulties experienced by students may vary according to their specific instructional and educational contexts. A closer examination is therefore necessary to identify how these difficulties manifest among tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Tiram, particularly in relation to grammatical accuracy and the use of the simple present tense. Identifying both the difficulties and their underlying factors can provide teachers with a clearer basis for developing instructional strategies that respond to students' actual writing needs. Such an analysis can also clarify how difficulties involving grammar, vocabulary, idea organization, and textual structure interact during descriptive-text production. This contextual focus distinguishes the present study by examining students' descriptive writing difficulties within a specific English as a Foreign Language classroom setting.

Based on this research problem, the present study analyzes the difficulties experienced by tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Tiram in writing descriptive texts during the 2025/2026 academic year. The study specifically focuses on identifying students' writing difficulties, with particular attention to grammatical problems involving the simple present tense. It also examines the factors contributing to the difficulties identified in students' descriptive writing. Through this analysis, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges students encounter when producing descriptive texts in English. The findings can provide an empirical basis for developing writing instruction that more effectively addresses students' linguistic and learning needs.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach to investigate students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts. Qualitative research enables researchers to explore and understand social phenomena by examining participants' words, behaviors, experiences, and perspectives rather than relying primarily on numerical data. Ryser (2021) explains that qualitative research is particularly appropriate for investigating phenomena within their natural settings and developing an understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences. The researcher selected this approach to obtain an in-depth description of the difficulties students encountered during the writing process. Specifically, the study analyzed students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts, with particular attention to their use of the simple present tense (Nassaji, 2015).

The researcher conducted the study at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Tiram in Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra, during the 2025/2026 academic year. Data collection took place on April 23, 2026, during English classroom activities in which students were learning descriptive texts. The participants comprised tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Tiram who had previously studied descriptive texts. The researcher selected the participants through purposive sampling based on the English teacher's recommendation, focusing on students who had learned descriptive writing and experienced difficulties in producing descriptive texts. This sampling procedure enabled the researcher to obtain information from participants whose experiences were directly relevant to the research focus.

The study focused on students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts, particularly grammatical difficulties involving the simple present tense. The researcher examined both the types of errors evident in students' writing and the factors contributing to their difficulties in producing descriptive texts. To collect the data, the researcher employed three techniques: classroom observation, a descriptive writing test documented through students' written work, and interviews. During classroom observation, the researcher examined the teaching and learning process as well as students' participation and difficulties during writing activities. The researcher also recorded field notes concerning students' behavior, classroom interactions, and the instructional methods employed by the teacher.

The researcher used a descriptive writing test as the second source of data. Students were instructed to compose a descriptive text based on a specific topic, such as a person, place, or object. The researcher used students' written texts as the primary data source for examining grammatical errors, vocabulary use, generic structure, and sentence organization. The analysis specifically identified students' difficulties in applying the simple present tense, linking verbs, adjectives, and the structural conventions of descriptive texts. This procedure provided direct evidence of the linguistic and organizational difficulties that emerged in students' actual written production.

The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with selected students and the English teacher to obtain more detailed information about the factors underlying students' writing difficulties. The interviews explored linguistic, psychological, cognitive, and pedagogical factors that potentially influenced students' ability to produce descriptive texts. Through open-ended questions, the researcher examined students' opinions, feelings, and experiences related to learning and practicing English writing. The teacher interview provided complementary information concerning students' difficulties and the instructional context in which descriptive writing was taught. These interview data enabled the researcher to interpret the difficulties identified through observation and students' written texts from multiple perspectives.

The researcher analyzed the collected data using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's framework. The analytical process comprised data familiarization, coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report production. The researcher systematically examined students' written texts, observation notes, and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns related to difficulties in descriptive writing. The identified patterns were subsequently organized into themes, including grammatical difficulties, vocabulary limitations, organizational problems, and psychological factors. This analytical procedure enabled the researcher to integrate evidence from multiple data sources into a structured interpretation of students' writing difficulties.

The researcher employed triangulation and *member checking* to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Triangulation involved comparing evidence obtained from classroom observations, students' writing tests, and interviews to examine the consistency of findings across different data sources. The researcher also conducted *member checking* by confirming the interview findings with the participants to ensure that the interpretations accurately represented their responses and experiences. These procedures reduced the likelihood that the findings relied exclusively on a single source of evidence or the researcher's interpretation. The combination of triangulation and *member checking* therefore strengthened the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study analyzed the difficulties experienced by tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Tiram when writing descriptive texts during the 2025/2026 academic year. The researcher collected data through classroom observation, writing tests, and interviews to obtain complementary evidence of students' writing difficulties. The analysis of students' descriptive texts focused primarily on grammatical difficulties involving the simple present tense, while also

examining vocabulary use, generic structure, and sentence organization. Observation and interview data provided further information about students' experiences during writing activities and the factors underlying the identified difficulties. The integration of these data sources revealed several recurring problems that affected students' ability to produce accurate and well-organized descriptive texts.

The analysis of the writing tests revealed that most students encountered difficulties in applying the simple present tense accurately in descriptive texts. The most prominent grammatical problems involved the selection and use of *to be*, particularly *is*, *am*, and *are*. Many students incorrectly employed past-tense forms such as *was* and *were* when describing facts or general conditions that required the simple present tense. These errors demonstrate students' difficulties in distinguishing present and past forms of *to be* according to the intended meaning of their sentences. The recurring pattern also indicates that students had not yet consistently applied simple present tense rules during descriptive-text production.

Grammatical errors appeared in the descriptive writing of almost all students, particularly in sentences requiring appropriate subject–verb agreement. Several students, for example, produced sentences such as “My favorite are my bedroom,” “The school garden are very beautiful,” and “The market were very crowded.” In these constructions, students selected *are* or *were* where the grammatical context required *is*. The recurrence of such errors indicates that students experienced difficulties matching singular subjects with the appropriate form of *to be*. These examples provide direct evidence of students' limited ability to apply subject–verb agreement and simple present tense rules consistently in descriptive writing.

Students also encountered difficulties in organizing ideas and applying the generic structure of descriptive texts. Some students were unable to distinguish clearly between the identification and description sections, which affected the overall organization of their texts. Several written texts provided insufficient descriptive detail and relied on repetitive expressions when presenting information about the subject being described. Limited vocabulary further restricted students' ability to describe people, places, and objects precisely and effectively. These findings demonstrate that students' difficulties extended beyond grammatical accuracy to include textual organization, content development, and lexical selection.

The analysis also identified recurring mechanical difficulties involving spelling, punctuation, incomplete sentences, and inappropriate word forms. These problems reduced the clarity and readability of several students' descriptive texts. Classroom observations further revealed that many students appeared hesitant and lacked confidence while completing their writing activities. Students frequently asked questions about grammar and vocabulary, particularly concerning the appropriate use of the simple present tense. Their classroom behavior corresponded with the linguistic difficulties identified in their written work.

The interview findings identified four interrelated factors underlying students' difficulties: linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and pedagogical factors. Linguistic factors involved limited vocabulary and insufficient grammatical mastery, while cognitive factors involved difficulties in developing ideas and organizing paragraphs coherently. Psychological factors included low motivation, anxiety, and lack of confidence when writing English texts. Pedagogical factors involved limited opportunities for writing practice and the continued use of teacher-centered instructional methods. Collectively, these findings indicate that students' difficulties resulted from multiple factors rather than from a single aspect of writing competence.

Among the difficulties identified in students' written texts, grammatical mastery emerged as the most prominent problem, particularly in the application of the simple present tense. Students repeatedly demonstrated uncertainty when matching singular and plural subjects with the appropriate forms of *to be*. Their writing also showed confusion between present forms such as *is*, *am*, and *are* and past forms such as *was* and *were*. The recurrence of these patterns across students' written work indicates persistent difficulty in applying basic grammatical rules within descriptive-text contexts. Grammatical difficulties therefore represented a central feature of the writing problems identified in this study.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that students' difficulties in descriptive writing involved several interconnected dimensions of writing competence. Hidayah (2021) identifies writing as one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners because

it requires the simultaneous mastery of grammar, vocabulary, organization, and mechanics. Consistent with this perspective, students in the present study frequently struggled to apply grammatical rules accurately while also organizing and developing their descriptive texts. Their grammatical difficulties affected both sentence accuracy and the overall clarity of their written communication. The findings demonstrate that successful descriptive writing requires students to coordinate multiple linguistic and organizational components rather than master each component in isolation.

The findings also correspond with Inayah et al. (2024), who identified grammar, generic structure, and vocabulary as common areas of difficulty in students' descriptive writing. Students in the present study experienced particular difficulty distinguishing the identification and description components of descriptive texts. Many students consequently produced texts with weak organization and insufficient content development. These organizational difficulties occurred alongside grammatical and lexical problems, further affecting the overall quality of their writing. The similarity between these findings and previous research suggests that difficulties with descriptive-text structure remain relevant within different EFL learning contexts.

Limited vocabulary constituted another important difficulty affecting students' descriptive writing. Students frequently relied on simple and repetitive words, which restricted their ability to provide precise and detailed descriptions. Noprianto (2017) similarly states that limited vocabulary can hinder students' ability to develop ideas and construct coherent descriptive paragraphs. Insufficient lexical resources may therefore restrict not only word choice but also students' capacity to elaborate on the characteristics of the people, places, or objects they describe. The present findings reinforce the importance of vocabulary development as an integral component of descriptive writing instruction.

Psychological factors also influenced students' engagement with English writing activities. Classroom observations and interviews revealed that many students lacked confidence, experienced anxiety, and hesitated to express their ideas because they feared making grammatical mistakes. Pratama et al. (2022) similarly explain that anxiety and low motivation can substantially affect students' writing ability. These psychological barriers may intensify existing linguistic difficulties by discouraging students from experimenting with language and expressing ideas more extensively. A supportive classroom environment therefore remains important for encouraging students to participate actively in writing activities despite the possibility of making errors.

Pedagogical conditions provided another important context for understanding students' writing difficulties. Classroom instruction remained largely dominated by teacher explanations and provided students with limited opportunities for sustained writing practice. Students also had few opportunities to participate in collaborative writing activities or receive detailed feedback on their written work. Such instructional conditions can restrict students' opportunities to apply grammatical knowledge, develop ideas, and revise their writing through meaningful practice (Kristiana et al., 2021; Syifa et al., 2022). More interactive writing instruction and systematic feedback may provide students with greater opportunities to develop both linguistic accuracy and confidence in producing descriptive texts.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' difficulties in writing descriptive texts resulted from interconnected linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and pedagogical factors. Among these dimensions, grammatical mastery emerged as the most prominent difficulty, particularly in applying the simple present tense and selecting appropriate forms of *to be*. Cognitive difficulties in developing and organizing ideas, psychological barriers involving anxiety and low confidence, and limited opportunities for writing practice further complicated students' writing performance. These findings indicate that addressing descriptive writing difficulties requires instruction that integrates explicit grammatical support with vocabulary development, idea organization, sustained writing practice, and constructive feedback. Such an integrated approach can provide a stronger pedagogical basis for improving students' ability to produce accurate, coherent, and meaningful descriptive texts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Tanjung Tiram experienced various difficulties in writing descriptive texts during the 2025/2026 academic year. Grammatical difficulties emerged as the most prominent problem, particularly in applying the simple present tense, selecting appropriate forms of *to be* (*is*, *am*, and *are*), and maintaining subject–verb agreement, as students frequently used inappropriate past forms such as *was* and *were*. Students also encountered difficulties involving limited vocabulary, idea organization, generic structure, spelling,

and punctuation, which often resulted in unclear, repetitive, and structurally weak descriptive texts. Evidence from classroom observations, writing tests, and interviews further revealed that these difficulties were associated with interconnected linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and pedagogical factors, including inadequate grammatical and vocabulary mastery, difficulties in developing ideas, anxiety, low confidence and motivation, limited writing practice, and teacher-centered instruction. These findings demonstrate that students' difficulties in descriptive writing extend beyond grammatical competence and involve multiple factors that influence their ability to produce accurate, coherent, and well-organized texts.

English teachers should provide more intensive and student-centered writing instruction that integrates explicit grammatical support, vocabulary development, idea organization, sustained writing practice, and constructive feedback, particularly when teaching the simple present tense and the generic structure of descriptive texts. Students should also receive greater opportunities to practice writing independently and collaboratively so that they can develop grammatical accuracy, lexical competence, confidence, and the ability to organize descriptive texts effectively. The findings should nevertheless be interpreted within the specific context of this qualitative study, which focused on tenth-grade students at a single school and examined difficulties associated specifically with descriptive writing; consequently, the findings may not represent students from different schools, educational levels, or writing contexts. The study also relied on classroom observations, writing tests, and interviews conducted within a particular instructional setting and period, which limited its ability to capture changes in students' writing difficulties over an extended period. Future research should involve broader and more diverse educational contexts, examine other English writing genres, and employ longitudinal or complementary research designs to develop a more comprehensive understanding of students' writing difficulties and the instructional approaches that may address them.

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