

An Analysis of Vocational High School Students' Difficulties in Translating English Descriptive Texts into Indonesian: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. Translating English texts into Indonesian is essential for Vocational High School (SMK) students' professional communication readiness. However, many students still face significant difficulties, especially with descriptive texts. This systematic literature review (SLR) identifies and analyzes the difficulties and causal factors SMK students face when translating English descriptive texts into Indonesian, drawing on publications from 2016 to 2026. Using a qualitative-synthetic approach based on the PRISMA framework, the study analyzed 20 accredited empirical articles from Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ERIC, and Garuda. The findings reveal that translation difficulties stem from linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Linguistic factors include limited vocabulary, weak grammar, and syntactic differences between English and Indonesian. In contrast, non-linguistic factors involve reliance on literal translation, low self-confidence, and limited use of translation tools. Lexical errors dominate, followed by omission, grammatical, syntactic, and addition errors. These findings highlight the need for targeted pedagogical strategies to improve SMK students' translation competence.

Keywords: Descriptive Text; English-Indonesian Translation; Error Analysis; Translation Difficulties; Vocational High School.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, characterized by rapid information flow and economic integration across nations, mastery of English as an international language has shifted from an academic complement to a strategic necessity, particularly in vocational education. Vocational High Schools (SMK) in Indonesia are specifically designed to produce graduates who are work-ready, skilled, and adaptable to the needs of the business and industrial world. In this context, English serves as the primary instrument for accessing technical documents, operational manuals, standard work procedures, and facilitating interpersonal communication in multinational work environments across sectors such as tourism, information technology, mechanical engineering, and hospitality. Translation skills, which include reading comprehension and the ability of reconstruct meaning in the mother tongue, therefore represent a vital indicator of language literacy that directly impacts graduate employability.

As emphasized by Baker (2018) in the latest edition of *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*, contemporary translation competence involves not only linguistic transfer but also critical engagement with digital tools, ethical decision-making, and genre-specific strategies, including the challenges posed by machine translation and post-editing practices. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant for vocational students who must navigate authentic workplace texts while developing independent translation competence beyond passive reliance on technology.

Although English language instruction begins at the elementary and secondary levels in Indonesia, vocational high school students' translation performance often reveals a significant gap between curriculum demands and field realities. Many vocational high school students show inadequate proficiency when faced with translation assignments, particularly with authentic texts that require more than surface-level understanding. This discrepancy between educational objectives and actual student competency has become a persistent concern for English educators and curriculum developers alike, prompting the need for systematic investigation into the specific nature and causes of these difficulties.

One text genre that plays a key role in the vocational high school curriculum yet consistently challenges students is descriptive text. Descriptive text is designed to provide a detailed visual, spatial, or characteristic depiction of a particular object, place, person, or phenomenon. Textually, this type of text relies on specific adjectives, complex noun phrases, participial clauses, and simple present-tense grammatical structures. For vocational high school students, translating descriptive text requires more than mere word-for-word translation; it demands understanding of cultural context, semantic nuances, and reconstruction of phrase order to achieve natural acceptability in Indonesian grammar. The complexity increases when descriptive texts contain technical terminology specific to students' vocational fields, adding another layer of cognitive challenge to the translation process.

Translation competence requires learners to transfer meaning accurately while maintaining grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic appropriateness across the source and target languages (Ismail et al., 2023). In EFL settings, translation is also treated as a language-learning tool because it supports comprehension, vocabulary growth, and awareness of structural differences between languages (Alsaawi, 2026; Alshaikhi, 2022; Sukaesih, 2023).

Students' translation difficulties concentrate in lexical choice, grammar, and structure (Shiddiq et al., 2023; Syukrina, 2021). Semantic errors are often the most frequent, including inappropriate word choice, prepositions, articles, and spelling problems (Ismail et al., 2023). Other studies report strong patterns of omission, misformation, distortion, and confusion in sense relations, indicating that students often fail to preserve complete meaning during translation (Arsai et al., 2024).

These problems are partly explained by structural differences between Indonesian and English, especially tense marking, articles, plurality, prepositions, and word order (Ismail et al., 2023). Students also tend to rely on literal translation or first-dictionary equivalents without sufficient contextual adjustment, which often produces awkward or inaccurate output (Arsai et al., 2024; Alsaawi, 2026). Vocabulary mastery is another consistent predictor of translation quality, and correlational evidence shows a positive relationship between students' vocabulary knowledge and translation performance (Roswati et al., 2025; Ningrum et al., 2023).

Beyond linguistic limitations, recent studies also highlight the increasing use of machine translation (MT) tools among EFL learners as a supporting resource in translation activities. However, the availability of these tools does not necessarily eliminate students' translation difficulties, as learners may still encounter problems with lexical selection, grammatical accuracy, and contextual meaning. Shin et al. (2023) emphasized that students need post-editing skills to critically evaluate and improve machine-generated translations rather than relying on them uncritically. Similarly, Harto et al. (2022) reported that students' experiences with machine translation require adequate awareness of translation quality and revision strategies. Therefore, while machine translation can support the translation process, students' fundamental linguistic competence remains an essential factor in producing accurate and contextually appropriate translations.

Furthermore, several previous studies provide mixed insights into the complexity of this problem. Permatasari and Yuliasri (2020) found that vocational school students made several translation errors when translating analytical exposition texts, particularly incorrect word choice, punctuation, missing words, word order, and unknown-word errors. Although the text genre differs from descriptive texts, the findings provide relevant evidence regarding recurring translation problems among vocational students. Furthermore, findings by Martha Suri (2023) and Rizqullah et

al. (2023) confirm that vocational high school students' translation errors are not limited to vocabulary but also include structural distortions, such as omissions of vital grammatical elements and misordering of phrases. More recent empirical evidence strengthens these observations. Kembaren et al. (2024) found that students' difficulties in translating descriptive texts stem from both internal factors (limited motivation, cognitive ability, and vocabulary knowledge) and external factors (teaching environment, reliance on translation tools, and structural differences between English and Indonesian). Similarly, Limantoro and Datu (2021) reported that vocational students frequently use structural and semantic translation strategies yet still produce errors because they over-rely on machine translation without adequate post-editing skills. Studies conducted in vocational contexts between 2024 and 2026 further highlight persistent lexical deficits, grammatical interference, and low self-efficacy as recurring barriers (see also recent analyses of SMK students' descriptive text translation performance).

The problem is further complicated by students' tendency to rely heavily on machine translation applications without being equipped with the critical awareness necessary for post-editing, resulting in translations that may be grammatically correct but semantically inappropriate. As Baker (2018) argues, the ubiquity of machine translation in contemporary practice necessitates explicit training in critical evaluation and human post-editing, skills that have received limited attention in many vocational English learning contexts.

Although numerous studies have addressed translation difficulties in various text types, synthetic studies specifically compiling, critiquing, and mapping the patterns of difficulties experienced by vocational high school students in translating English descriptive texts into Indonesian are still very limited. Descriptive texts are a key stepping stone in developing vocational technical literacy, yet systematic documentation of student challenges in this genre remains insufficiently explored. This academic gap necessitates a comprehensive literature review that synthesizes existing empirical evidence to provide a clearer understanding of the problem landscape. Therefore, this systematic literature review was designed to fill this academic gap by: (1) mapping the types of errors and difficulties in translating descriptive texts that are most dominantly experienced by vocational school students based on empirical literature in 2026; (2) critically analyzing the factors causing these difficulties, both from linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions; and (3) formulating pedagogical implications and recommendations for vocational-based translation teaching strategies that are responsive to technological developments. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform curriculum development, teaching methodology, and teacher training programs aimed at enhancing SMK students' translation competence in alignment with workplace demands.

To achieve the objectives of this study, three research questions are formulated. The first question addresses the types of difficulties and translation errors vocational high school students experience when translating English descriptive texts into Indonesian. The second question investigates the linguistic and non-linguistic factors contributing to these students' difficulties in the same translation task. Finally, the third question explores the pedagogical strategies and educational implications obtainable from the existing literature to improve vocational high school students' translation competence.

The significance of this study lies in its potential contribution to English language teaching in vocational education. The findings may assist teachers in identifying students' most common translation problems, help curriculum developers design vocationally relevant learning materials, and inform teacher-training programs concerning translation pedagogy and digital-literacy development. In addition, the findings may support the development of instructional practices that move beyond literal translation and encourage students to transfer meaning accurately, appropriately, and naturally between English and Indonesian.

2. Method

This study employed the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, following the international standard framework of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), because PRISMA improves transparency, comprehensiveness, and replicability in evidence identification, screening, and reporting (Tafa et al., 2024; Arbain, 2026). The SLR approach was chosen to ensure that the literature collection, screening, and analysis were conducted in a transparent, systematic, and measurable manner. This systematic approach enabled rigorous identification, evaluation, and synthesis of relevant empirical studies while minimizing selection bias and ensuring a replicable review process.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted between 15 January 2026 and 28 March 2026 using academically indexed databases, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, ERIC, and the Indonesian Publication Index (Garuda). The publication period was limited to 2016 to 2026 to ensure freshness of data and relevance to the latest curriculum developments in Indonesia, spanning from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. The keywords used in the search strategy included combinations of the following terms in both English and Indonesian: “translation difficulties,” “translation error analysis,” “descriptive text,” “vocational high school / SMK,” “English-Indonesian translation,” “kesulitan penerjemahan,” “analisis kesalahan terjemahan,” and “teks deskriptif.”

To maintain the quality and relevance of the selected studies, we established explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria before screening, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication type	Peer-reviewed empirical journal articles	Conference proceedings, theses/dissertations, book chapters, review articles without empirical data.
Research subjects	Vocational high school (SMK) students in Indonesia	University students, junior high school students, senior high school (SMA) students only
Focus of study	English-Indonesian translation of descriptive texts	Translation of other text types (narrative, recount, procedure, etc.) or Indonesian-English direction only
Study design	Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) with clear data on errors or difficulties	Purely theoretical papers, opinion pieces, or studies without primary data
Language of publication	English or Indonesian	Other languages
Publication year	2016–2026	Before 2016
Availability	Full-text accessible	Abstract only or inaccessible full-text

The study selection process followed the four PRISMA stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The detailed flow of article selection is summarized below and illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

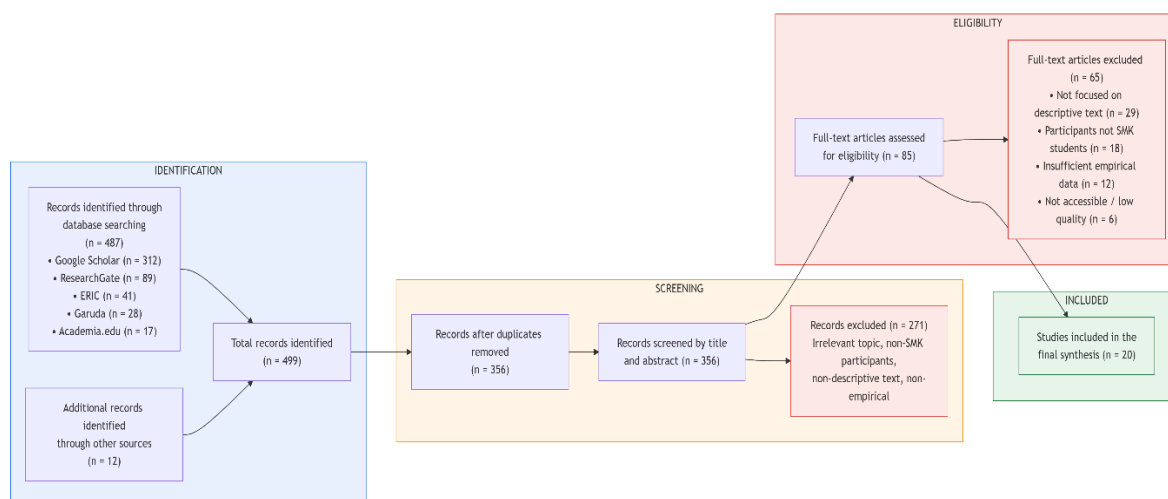


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Article Selection Process

From the initial 499 records identified, we removed 143 duplicates, leaving 356 unique records. After title and abstract screening, we excluded 271 records. We assessed the remaining 85 full-text articles for eligibility; of these, 65 were excluded based on the predetermined criteria. Finally, 20 empirical articles met all inclusion criteria and were retained for in-depth analysis.

To ensure the methodological rigor of the included studies, each of the 20 selected articles was assessed using a modified Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) checklist adapted for empirical educational research. The assessment focused on five key domains: (1) clarity of research aims, (2) appropriateness of research design, (3) adequacy of data collection methods, (4) rigor of data analysis, and (5) clarity and relevance of findings to the research questions of this review. Articles scoring below 60% on the checklist were excluded during the eligibility stage. All 20 retained studies scored between 70% and 95%, indicating acceptable to high methodological quality.

The analysis process involved coding, categorizing, and synthesizing findings across the 20 selected studies using thematic synthesis techniques. The analysis identified, compared, and integrated recurring patterns related to types of translation errors, linguistic and non-linguistic factors, and pedagogical implications to answer the research questions of this systematic review.

3. Result

Arsai et al. (2024) support these findings, highlighting omission, misinformation, and distortion errors as evidence of students' difficulties in maintaining meaning equivalence. Based on a critical synthesis of 20 selected empirical articles, the study found that vocational high school students' difficulties in translating descriptive texts fall into two main domains: linguistic error phenomena and non-linguistic determinants. Data synthesis shows that vocational high school students' translation errors form structured, recurring patterns across multiple studies. Table 1 summarizes the mapping of the main error types and their empirical manifestations in the field, providing a comprehensive overview of the most frequently occurring translation challenges.

Table 1. The Distribution of Students' Translation Error Types

Error Categories		Frequency / Sub-Type	Error Indicator		Case Example (SL → TL: Students → Ideal)
Lexical	Error (Word Choice)	Dominant (32.3% – 45%)	Limited vocabulary;	Semantic context failure; Literal translation.	SL: The hotel provides a stay experience.

Grammatical Errors	High (15% - 28%)	Lack of understanding of tenses; Failure of the function of <i>to be</i> ; Word form error.	Student: The hotel provides a stopping experience. Ideal: The hotel provides an overnight experience. SL: My school is clean and green. Student: My school is clean and green. Ideal: My school is clean and beautiful.
Syntax Error (Word Order)	Medium (5.2% - 16%)	DM vs MD pattern interference; Noun phrase structure error.	SL: Local government built this facility. Student: The local government built this facility. Ideal: The local government built this facility.
Omission Error	High (27% - 34.5%)	Omission of key adjectives; Omission of specific participants.	SL: The sophisticated device operates automatically. Student: The device runs automatically. Ideal: The sophisticated device operates automatically.
Addition Error	Low-Medium (8% - 27%)	Adding words that destroy meaning; Redundancy of phrases.	SL: It has three main rooms. Student: It has three main rooms. Ideal: The building has three main rooms.

Source: Data synthesized from Permatasari & Yuliasri (2020); Ratnaningsih & Azizah (2019); Sijono & Aristo (2019); Kembaren et al. (2024)

In-depth Analysis of Error Categories

Lexical errors consistently rank high in almost all reviewed literature (Permatasari & Yuliasri, 2020; Ratnaningsih & Azizah, 2019). This happens because vocational high school students tend to view vocabulary in isolation rather than as contextualized lexical items. This weakness can lead of literal (word-for-word) translation that fails to capture the semantic nuances appropriate to the descriptive text context. When faced with polysemous words, students tend to choose the first meaning that appears in the dictionary without considering the contextual clues available in the descriptive passage. This lexical deficiency is particularly problematic in descriptive texts which rely heavily on precise adjective choices to convey accurate visual and sensory information.

Grammatical errors are rooted in fundamental typological differences between English and Indonesian languages. Sijono and Aristo (2019) emphasize that mother-tongue interference (interlingual transfer) accounts for the largest percentage of grammatical errors observed in student translations. In descriptive texts, linking verbs or verbs *to be* (such as *is*, *am*, *are*) are often translated rigidly as “adalah” in inappropriate places or omitted disproportionately, resulting in translations that sound unnatural to native Indonesian speakers. The system of tenses in English, which is largely foreign to the Indonesian language system, creates persistent confusion for students who must

navigate between past, present, and future time references without the grammatical markers available in their first language.

Descriptive texts are rich in complex noun phrases that present significant syntactic challenges for students. English noun phrase structure uses the Modifier + Head (MD) rule, where adjectives and other modifiers precede the main noun. In contrast, Indonesian uses the Head + Modifier (DM) rule, where the main noun comes first, followed by its modifiers. Vocational high school students with limited syntactic understanding often transfer the SL word order rawly to the TL, resulting in ambiguous constructions.

Omission errors represent another significant category of translation difficulty, occurring when students fail to translate key elements of the source text such as adjectives, specific participants, or important descriptive details. This phenomenon can be attributed to students' cognitive overload during the translation process, where they prioritize main nouns and verbs while sacrificing modifying elements that are essential for descriptive richness. Addition errors, while less frequent, occur when students add unnecessary words or create redundancy in their translations, often as a result of overcompensating for perceived inadequacies in their vocabulary or grammatical knowledge.

Factors Causing Translation Difficulties

The linguistic factors contributing to translation difficulties encompass three primary dimensions. First, vocabulary deficiencies are a major obstacle, as vocational high school students must master not only general English vocabulary but also technical vocabulary relevant to their field of expertise. Second, the asymmetry of language structure between English and Indonesian creates persistent confusion for students. Third, students struggle to identify extralinguistic context, lacking an understanding of cultural equivalents or semantic transposition strategies that would support more natural translation outcomes.

The non-linguistic factors identified through this literature review are equally significant. Low self-efficacy and learning motivation, as documented by Kembaren et al. (2024), represent psychological barriers that reduce students' efforts to translate accurately and persistently. Limitations in teaching translation strategies compound this problem, as translation is rarely taught as a separate skill with structured techniques such as transposition, modulation, or adaptation. Furthermore, passive reliance on machine translation (MT) has emerged as a contemporary concern, with students often copying Google Translate or DeepL results without developing the necessary post-editing skills.

Pedagogical Implications and Strategic Solutions

The findings of this literature review have serious implications for English language teaching practices at the vocational high school level. To overcome structural and systematic translation challenges, three main pedagogical reorientations are required. First, the integration of Genre-Based Approach (GBA) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) principles in teaching descriptive texts. Second, explicit instruction in translation strategies is essential. Students need to learn techniques such of transposition, modulation, and structural adjustment directly in the learning process. Third, the curriculum should integrate Machine Translation Post-Editing (MTPE). Educators should guide students to utilize artificial intelligence and machine translation tools as initial drafts, then focus training on critical evaluation and quality improvement of translation outcomes.

4. Discussion

The synthesis of 20 empirical studies confirms that translation difficulties experienced by vocational high school students in rendering English descriptive texts into Indonesian are

multidimensional and persistent. Lexical errors emerge as the most dominant category (32.3%–45%), followed closely by omission errors (27%–34.5%) and grammatical errors (15%–28%). These patterns align with previous findings (Permatasari & Yuliasri, 2020; Kembaren et al., 2024) and highlight that vocabulary knowledge and the ability to render modifying elements accurately remain core challenges in descriptive text translation.

The linguistic factors, particularly limited technical vocabulary, interlingual interference, and syntactic asymmetry between English and Indonesian, interact with non-linguistic factors such as low self-efficacy, insufficient explicit strategy instruction, and uncritical reliance on machine translation tools. This interaction explains why students frequently produce translations that are either incomplete or unnatural, even when they understand the general meaning of the source text.

The pedagogical implications from this review point to the need of shift translation instruction from incidental practice to a more deliberate, strategy-based, and technology-aware approach. Integrating a Genre-Based Approach with ESP materials, teaching explicit translation techniques, and training students in Machine Translation Post-Editing (MTPE) appear to be promising directions for improving vocational students' translation competence.

Despite its contributions, this systematic literature review has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, the review was limited to empirical studies published between 2016 and 2026 that specifically focused on vocational high school students and descriptive texts. Consequently, findings from studies involving other educational levels or different text genres were excluded, which may limit the generalizability of the results beyond the SMK context. Second, although rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, the quality and depth of reporting in the primary studies varied considerably; some articles provided limited quantitative data on error frequencies or insufficient description of research procedures. Third, the search was restricted to selected databases (Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ERIC, Garuda, and Academia.edu), and it is possible that relevant studies published in less accessible journals or repositories were not captured. Finally, as a literature synthesis, this study does not include primary data collection; therefore, the identified patterns and recommendations require further empirical validation through classroom-based intervention studies.

These limitations suggest that future research should expand the scope of systematic reviews to include a wider range of text types and educational levels, employ more comprehensive database coverage, and conduct primary studies that test the effectiveness of the pedagogical strategies recommended in this review.

5. Conclusion

This systematic literature review concludes that vocational high school students in Indonesia still face significant and multidimensional obstacles in translating English descriptive texts into Indonesian. The synthesis of 20 empirical studies reveals that these difficulties are primarily rooted in the interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Linguistically, students struggle most with lexical choice (32.3%–45% of errors), followed by omission of essential descriptive elements (27%–34.5%), grammatical inaccuracies (15%–28%), syntactic interference arising from differences in noun-phrase structure, and occasional addition errors. Non-linguistically, low self-efficacy, limited knowledge of translation strategies, and uncritical dependence on machine translation tools further exacerbate the problem. Collectively, these findings indicate that translation competence among SMK students remains underdeveloped relative to the communicative demands of the modern workplace.

The practical implications of this review call for a fundamental reorientation of English language pedagogy in vocational high schools. Translation instruction should no longer be treated as a peripheral activity but as a core competence that integrates Genre-Based Approach and English for Specific Purposes principles, explicit teaching of translation strategies (transposition, modulation, and adaptation), and systematic training in Machine Translation Post-Editing (MTPE). Such an approach enables students to move beyond literal word-for-word rendering toward accurate, natural, and contextually appropriate meaning transfer.

At the policy level, the findings suggest several concrete actions. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, together with the Directorate of Vocational Education, should consider incorporating explicit translation competence and digital literacy (including responsible use of AI-assisted translation tools) into the SMK English curriculum. Teacher professional development programs need to include modules on translation pedagogy and post-editing skills so that English teachers are equipped to address the specific difficulties identified in this review. Furthermore, the development of vocationally authentic descriptive materials—aligned with students' majors such as hospitality, automotive engineering, information technology, and tourism—should be prioritized in official teaching resources and textbooks. These policy measures would help ensure that SMK graduates possess the language skills required for effective communication in increasingly globalized industrial settings.

This review is not without limitations. The scope was restricted to peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2016 and 2026 that specifically examined vocational high school students and descriptive texts; consequently, it excluded insights from other educational levels or text genres. The methodological quality and reporting depth of the included primary studies varied, and the search was limited to selected databases, which may have omitted relevant publications available in less accessible repositories. As a secondary synthesis, the study does not generate new primary data; therefore, the recommended pedagogical strategies require further classroom-based validation.

Despite these limitations, the present review contributes a coherent mapping of translation difficulties faced by SMK students and offers evidence-based directions for improving teaching practice and educational policy. Future research should design and evaluate intervention studies that test the effectiveness of Genre-Based, strategy-focused, and technology-enhanced approaches in authentic vocational classrooms, and explore the long-term impact of such interventions on students' workplace readiness.

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