



## The Implementation of Project-Based Learning in Teaching Descriptive Writing Based on Local Wisdom at MAN 3 Cirebon

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### ABSTRACT

*Previous research on project-based learning (PBL) in descriptive writing has largely examined writing outcomes or local-wisdom content within a single cultural setting. Less attention has been given to how PBL is implemented when students from different regional backgrounds use diverse local-wisdom topics to produce an authentic text-based product in an Indonesian Islamic senior high school. This qualitative case study investigated the implementation and challenges of local-wisdom-based PBL in a tenth-grade descriptive writing class at MAN 3 Cirebon. Participants were one English teacher and 33 students; 32 students participated in follow-up interviews. Data were obtained from four classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, lesson and project documents, students' descriptive texts, and six tourism brochures. The data were analyzed thematically and compared across sources. The findings show that the project proceeded through orientation and topic selection, collaborative planning and information gathering, drafting and peer-supported revision, brochure design, presentation, and reflection. Student choice, division of roles, peer assistance, and culturally familiar topics supported active participation and helped students elaborate content, organize information, and attend to vocabulary and grammatical form. Local-wisdom topics also enabled students to connect English writing with cultural knowledge and representation. The main challenges were limited classroom time, uneven participation, restricted vocabulary and grammatical control, and difficulty expressing culturally specific meanings in English. The study indicates that culturally grounded PBL can provide a meaningful framework for descriptive writing when accompanied by explicit language scaffolding, structured group accountability, and realistic project scheduling.*

## 1. Introduction

Writing is a complex productive skill because learners must generate relevant ideas, organize information, select appropriate vocabulary, control grammar, and anticipate readers' needs. These demands are particularly evident in descriptive writing, in which students are expected to create a clear representation of a person, place, object, event, or cultural practice. Indonesian EFL learners frequently encounter lexical and syntactic difficulties when writing descriptive texts, including inaccurate word choice, incomplete sentence patterns, and errors in the simple present tense (Masruddin, 2019; Masruddin & Nasriandi, 2022). Similar difficulties have been reported among secondary-school learners who struggle to elaborate ideas, construct coherent paragraphs, and use genre-appropriate language (Kristiana et al., 2021). Consequently, descriptive writing instruction needs to address both linguistic accuracy and the development of meaningful content.

Descriptive texts generally consist of identification followed by a description of relevant attributes, and they commonly employ the simple present tense, adjectives, linking verbs, and adverbial expressions (Gerot & Wignell, 1994; Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Teaching these features as isolated rules, however, does not necessarily help students use them purposefully. Process-oriented writing instruction emphasizes planning, drafting, feedback, revision, and editing as recursive activities through which writers develop and refine meaning (Hyland, 2019). Classroom studies have likewise shown the value of structured peer interaction and contextual media for supporting writing development (Masruddin, 2015; Masruddin et al., 2021). These perspectives suggest that students require authentic purposes for writing, opportunities to collaborate, and timely scaffolding while composing texts.

Project-based learning (PBL) provides such conditions by organizing learning around an extended, purposeful task that results in a public or usable product. PBL engages learners in inquiry, decision-making, collaboration, and the creation of artifacts rather than limiting them to teacher-directed exercises (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Krajcik & Shin, 2014). In language education, a project can integrate content exploration with repeated opportunities to read, discuss, draft, revise, and present in the target language (Beckett & Miller, 2006; Thomas, 2017). The approach is also compatible with the student-centered and competency-oriented direction of Indonesia's current curriculum framework (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2024). For descriptive writing, a project such as a tourism brochure gives students a recognizable audience and communicative purpose while requiring them to select and organize descriptive information.

Local wisdom can strengthen the contextual value of such projects. It encompasses inherited knowledge, practices, values, traditions, artifacts, and ways of interpreting community life. Integrating local wisdom into learning materials can help students connect formal learning with their cultural environments and can make cultural knowledge more visible within school curricula (Baderiah et al., 2022; Munawir et al., 2024). Research in Luwu and other Indonesian settings has shown that educational activities based on

traditional games, cultural heritage, and locally grounded values can support cultural recognition and meaningful participation (Baderiah & Munawir, 2024; Rustan & Munawir, 2020). In EFL instruction, local cultural content can also provide familiar ideas and vocabulary-learning contexts. For example, Masruddin and Munawir (2022) reported that a local-culture-based treasure-hunt activity supported vocabulary learning and students' knowledge of cultural heritage.

The cultural integration of writing instruction is especially relevant in Islamic senior high schools, where learning materials are expected to respond to both language objectives and students' social and cultural contexts. Masruddin et al. (2025), for instance, demonstrated that English writing materials can be designed around contextually meaningful values for tenth-grade students in an Islamic senior high school. Nevertheless, contextual content alone is insufficient. Students still need support in transforming cultural knowledge into coherent English texts, particularly when culturally specific meanings have no simple linguistic equivalent. PBL may provide a productive framework for this transformation because it combines inquiry, collaborative drafting, feedback, and product creation.

Previous studies have examined PBL for improving writing performance and engagement (Egilia et al., 2023; Zega et al., 2023), while other studies have developed descriptive-text materials or learning activities based on local wisdom (Dharma et al., 2021; Efrina et al., 2020; Kharisma & Rahayu, 2021). These studies establish the educational value of PBL and culturally relevant content, but two limitations remain. First, local-wisdom studies often focus on one cultural area, whereas some classrooms include students from several regions. Second, many studies emphasize outcomes or material development rather than the classroom process through which students select cultural topics, negotiate meaning, draft and revise descriptions, and create an authentic product. There is therefore a need for process-focused evidence from culturally diverse classrooms.

The present study addresses this gap by examining PBL in a tenth-grade class at MAN 3 Cirebon, where students used local-wisdom topics associated with different regional backgrounds to create tourism brochures. The study focuses on the stages of implementation, the role of collaboration and cultural familiarity in descriptive writing, and the challenges encountered by the teacher and students. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1. How is project-based learning implemented in teaching descriptive writing based on local wisdom?

RQ2. What challenges arise during the implementation of project-based learning in local-wisdom-based descriptive writing?

## **2. Method**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine PBL within its natural classroom context. A case study was appropriate because the inquiry focused on a bounded case: one tenth-grade English class implementing a local-wisdom-based descriptive writing project at an Islamic senior high school (Creswell,

2012; Yin, 2003). The design enabled the researcher to examine instructional stages, participant experiences, classroom interaction, written products, and implementation challenges without manipulating the learning environment.

The study was conducted at MAN 3 Cirebon, an Islamic senior high school in Cirebon, West Java, Indonesia. The school context was selected purposively because the English teacher had experience using project-based activities and the class included students from different regional backgrounds. This diversity provided an appropriate setting for examining how multiple local-wisdom topics could be incorporated into one descriptive writing project.

The participants were one English teacher and 33 students from class X.G. Purposive sampling was used because the teacher was directly responsible for the project and the students participated in all classroom stages relevant to the research questions (Bernard, 2007). The project topics were mainly associated with Cirebon, Tegal, and DKI Jakarta and included cultural traditions, historical sites, tourist destinations, and local performances familiar to the students. Of the 33 students who participated in the classroom project, 32 took part in the follow-up interviews.

Data were drawn from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. The observation instrument consisted of a checklist and field-note format focusing on the stages of PBL, teacher scaffolding, student participation, collaboration, topic selection, writing activities, and the integration of local wisdom. The interview guides contained open-ended questions about participants' experiences, perceived learning, division of group roles, linguistic difficulties, cultural-content development, and project management. Documentary data included the lesson plan, students' descriptive texts, and six tourism brochures produced by the groups. Using these sources made it possible to compare what was planned, what occurred in the classroom, what participants reported, and what appeared in the final products.

The researcher conducted non-participant observations during four classroom meetings. Each meeting lasted approximately 90 minutes, following the regular English schedule. The observed sequence comprised (1) project introduction and planning, (2) information gathering and initial writing, (3) brochure creation and text revision, and (4) project presentation. Field notes and observation checklists were completed during each meeting. Audio recordings and classroom documentation were used in several meetings to support the accuracy of the observation record.

After the project, the English teacher participated in a face-to-face semi-structured interview lasting approximately 25–35 minutes. Student interviews were conducted individually or in small groups after the presentation session and lasted approximately 10–15 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian so participants could explain their experiences clearly. With permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Document analysis was conducted concurrently with the observation and interview review. The researcher examined the lesson plan to identify the intended project stages and analyzed students' descriptive texts and brochures for evidence of topic development, genre organization, language use, and the representation of local wisdom. Documentary evidence was used to support—not numerically score—the interpretation of classroom and interview data.

The data were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents were read repeatedly. Initial codes were assigned to segments concerning project stages, student choice, collaboration, drafting and revision, local-wisdom content, cultural awareness, language-related difficulty, time management, and group participation. Related codes were grouped into candidate themes and checked against the research questions and the full data set. Data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing were also used to organize evidence across sources (Miles et al., 2014). The final interpretation emphasized convergence and divergence among observations, interviews, and documents rather than treating any single source as conclusive.

Credibility was supported through methodological triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Observation, interview, and document evidence were compared across themes. Selected interview interpretations were returned to participants for confirmation, and coding and thematic decisions were discussed with academic supervisors and peers. An audit trail was maintained through field notes, recordings, transcripts, coding records, and analytical memos. These procedures strengthened transparency and consistency.

Before data collection, the researcher obtained permission from the school and informed consent from the teacher and students. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and their right to withdraw. Pseudonyms were used in reporting, and the data were stored securely for research purposes.

### 3. Result

The analysis produced findings that directly address the two research questions. The first set describes how the project was implemented through a sequence of orientation, collaborative planning, inquiry, drafting, revision, brochure production, presentation, and reflection. The second set concerns implementation challenges. Table 1 summarizes the themes and the principal evidence used in the interpretation.

*Table 1. Summary of themes and supporting evidence*

| Research focus             | Theme                                                      | Principal evidence                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>RQ1: Implementation</b> | Project orientation, topic selection, and group planning   | Four observed meetings; students selected local-wisdom topics, distributed roles, and planned brochure content.                                           |
| <b>RQ1: Implementation</b> | Collaborative inquiry, drafting, and revision              | Observation notes, teacher and student interviews, descriptive-text drafts, peer assistance with vocabulary and sentence construction.                    |
| <b>RQ1: Implementation</b> | Brochure design, presentation, and reflection              | Six group brochures; final presentations; integration of written descriptions, photographs, illustrations, and layout.                                    |
| <b>RQ1: Implementation</b> | Cultural connection and learner ownership                  | Student interviews describing the use of familiar traditions, historical places, and tourism topics in English.                                           |
| <b>RQ2: Challenges</b>     | Time, language, participation, and cultural representation | Groups completed work outside class; vocabulary and grammar difficulties; stronger students contributed more; initial drafts lacked cultural elaboration. |

Observation data showed that the teacher introduced the tourism-brochure project and organized the work across four meetings. Students selected topics connected with local traditions, historical sites, performances, and tourist destinations, including Kasepuhan Palace, Karangsong Beach, the Nyadran tradition,



Lenong performance, and the Guci tourism site. They then formed groups, distributed responsibilities, gathered information, and planned the content and visual organization of their brochures. Topic selection was not merely decorative; it determined what cultural information students needed to investigate and what descriptive language they needed to use.

*"During the initial discussion, we decided to split the tasks based on what each member was good at. I wrote the descriptive text, while others focused on gathering information and designing the brochure. I felt more motivated because I was involved in both planning and writing."* (Student A, interview)

This account indicates that role allocation was negotiated according to students' perceived strengths. The opportunity to participate in planning also supported a sense of responsibility for the final product. Another student described how content decisions were discussed rather than predetermined by the teacher.

*"In my group, I was responsible for collecting information about the place we chose. While discussing, I proposed adding more explanation about the uniqueness of the Kesepuhan Palace to the text. When the group members accepted my idea, I felt that my contribution was useful for the group."* (Student B, interview)

The teacher similarly perceived a difference between the project and routine writing lessons.

*"Students were more active because they were involved in selecting topics and completing the project together. Compared to regular writing lessons, they participated more during discussions and asked more questions."* (Teacher interview)

The writing process developed through information gathering, collective drafting, peer feedback, and teacher guidance. Students discussed vocabulary, sentence structure, genre organization, and the amount of cultural detail to include. Observation notes indicated that group members frequently exchanged suggestions before consulting the teacher. This pattern made peer interaction an initial source of linguistic and content support.

*"When writing the brochure, sometimes I did not know the English vocabulary, so my friends helped me find better words and correct the sentences. After revising together, our text became clearer."* (Student C, interview)

*"Students often discussed vocabulary and sentence construction with their peers before asking for my help. They tried to solve problems together first."* (Teacher interview)

Students also evaluated their drafts in relation to the genre model provided by the teacher. Their comments show attention to generic structure, language features, coherence, and clarity rather than only to the visual completion of the brochure.

*"In my opinion, our group's descriptive text has been good because the content has matched the local tourism topic we chose, and the text has followed the language features and generic structure based on the examples given by the teacher."* (Student D, interview)

*"In my opinion, the descriptive text produced by our group has been well organized because the information about the object has been clearly delivered. We tried to follow the structure given by the teacher, so the text has become more coherent and easier to understand."* (Student E, interview)

Document analysis supported these accounts. One group wrote, "Kesepuhan Palace is one of the historical places in Cirebon. The palace has unique architecture that combines Javanese, Sundanese, Chinese, and Dutch cultures. Many tourists visit this place because of its historical value and beautiful design." Another group described Karangsang Beach as "famous for its beautiful mangrove forest and natural scenery" and noted that visitors could take boat tours and photographs. These

excerpts show the use of identification and descriptive details, although they also illustrate the continuing need for linguistic editing and more precise cultural elaboration.

All six groups incorporated local-wisdom content into their tourism brochures. The products combined descriptive paragraphs with photographs, illustrations, and brochure layouts. The cultural content included historical background, traditions, attractions, facilities, and the perceived uniqueness of each place or practice. For example, one group explained the purpose of Nyadran as a traditional ceremony through which local people pray for their ancestors and express gratitude. The brochure format therefore required students to select information for an audience rather than reproduce a textbook definition.

*"In my opinion, our descriptive text has been good because it has clearly described the object. We also tried to add details of local wisdom, so the text not only describes the place but also shows the detail tradition."* (Student F, interview)

Students described the cultural dimension as a reason the task felt relevant. Familiarity with the topics appeared to support idea generation, while information gathering also led some students to discover details they had not previously known.

*"I liked this project because we could explain our local culture in English. Usually, we only talk about traditions in Indonesian, but this project helped us introduce them in another language."* (Student G, interview)

*"When discussing Kesepuhan Palace, I realized that there were many historical details that I did not know before. So, while learning English, I also learned more about my culture."* (Student H, interview)

The final presentation stage gave the groups a public purpose for completing their brochures and explaining their cultural choices. The subsequent interviews functioned as reflection on group roles, writing decisions, and difficulties. The evidence supports a finding of perceived writing development and increased awareness of writing criteria; because the study did not use pre- and post-tests or a formal analytic scoring procedure, it does not establish a measured improvement in writing achievement.

Four interrelated challenges emerged. First, the project required more time than the regular lesson allocation. Planning, information gathering, drafting, revising, layout design, and presentation could not always be completed within four 90-minute meetings, and several groups continued revising and designing their brochures outside class.

Second, students' vocabulary and grammatical control limited their ability to express cultural knowledge in English. The difficulty was not a lack of ideas alone; students often understood the topic but could not readily formulate accurate and detailed English descriptions.

*"I understood the tradition that we discussed, but it was difficult to explain it in English because I did not know the vocabulary and grammar very well."* (Student I, interview)

*"Students generally understood the local wisdom topics, but many of them still struggled to express their ideas in English because of limited vocabulary and grammar."* (Teacher interview)

Third, participation was not fully equal. The teacher reported that students with stronger English proficiency often contributed more to drafting, whereas less-proficient students sometimes depended heavily on peers. The negotiated division of

tasks supported project completion, but it also risked separating writing from design or information-gathering roles.

Fourth, students found it difficult to represent culturally specific meanings in a concise English brochure. Initial drafts often contained general facts but limited explanation of historical significance, cultural values, or the relationship between a practice and the community. Teacher prompts and peer discussion were therefore necessary to help students elaborate cultural content while maintaining an understandable descriptive structure.

#### **4. Discussion**

The findings show that local-wisdom-based PBL was implemented as a staged writing and product-development process rather than as a single classroom assignment. The project began with topic selection and role negotiation, continued through inquiry, drafting, peer assistance, revision, and brochure design, and culminated in presentation and reflection. This sequence reflects the central features of PBL: sustained engagement with a meaningful task, learner decision-making, collaboration, and production of an artifact for an audience (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Krajcik & Shin, 2014). The brochure gave the writing process a visible purpose and made revision relevant to the quality of a final communicative product.

The findings also demonstrate how a process approach to writing can operate within PBL. Students did not produce a descriptive text in one attempt; they discussed content, drafted, revised sentences, checked genre conventions, and combined written and visual information. This supports Hyland's (2019) view of writing as recursive meaning-making and is consistent with evidence that structured peer talk can help learners generate and refine written ideas (Masruddin et al., 2021). The project context may have strengthened the function of peer feedback because students needed to solve immediate problems involving vocabulary, sentence construction, coherence, and brochure content. However, the qualitative evidence should be interpreted as perceived and observed development, not as proof of statistically measured improvement.

Local wisdom served as both content and a cognitive resource. Students' familiarity with cultural places and practices reduced the initial difficulty of finding a topic and provided a basis for elaboration. At the same time, information gathering extended their knowledge beyond what they already knew. This dual function is important: culturally familiar content can activate prior knowledge, while inquiry can prevent the activity from becoming a superficial repetition of familiar facts. The result is compatible with research emphasizing the need for learning materials that connect students with cultural roots (Baderiah et al., 2022; Munawir et al., 2024) and with studies showing that locally grounded activities can support cultural recognition and learner participation (Rustan & Munawir, 2020).

The present study extends this literature by showing how students from different regional backgrounds can bring multiple forms of local wisdom into the same EFL project. Earlier local-wisdom interventions have frequently been associated with one cultural context or one set of materials. In contrast, the MAN 3 Cirebon classroom drew on several regional topics and required groups to decide what information would represent each topic to readers. This diversity is the study's principal



contribution. It suggests that culturally responsive PBL need not treat a class as culturally uniform; it can create space for different regional experiences while maintaining a common genre, product, and language objective.

The addition of English as the medium of cultural representation created both pedagogical value and difficulty. Students could use English to introduce local culture to a wider imagined audience, as also illustrated by local-culture-based English activities in previous research (Masruddin & Munawir, 2022). Yet cultural familiarity did not automatically produce linguistically effective texts. The lexical and syntactic challenges identified in this study are consistent with error-analysis research on Indonesian descriptive writing, particularly problems in word choice, sentence formation, and the simple present tense (Masruddin, 2019; Masruddin & Nasriandi, 2022). This finding explains why culturally grounded content should be accompanied by explicit language support, including vocabulary banks, model texts, sentence patterns, mini-lessons on grammar, and focused feedback during revision.

The study further indicates that materials and task design mediate the relationship between cultural content and writing performance. Contextual writing worksheets for Islamic senior high school students can organize language practice and values-based content into sequenced tasks (Masruddin et al., 2025). In the present project, the teacher provided genre examples and guidance, but the reported challenges suggest that more systematic scaffolding could improve accessibility. A planning sheet could require each group to identify the object, key physical details, historical or cultural significance, relevant vocabulary, and sources of information before drafting. A revision checklist could separately address content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and cultural accuracy.

Unequal participation is another important limitation of collaborative PBL. Role allocation increased ownership, but it also allowed stronger writers to dominate language production while other students concentrated on design or information gathering. Collaboration should therefore be structured so that all students participate in writing-related decisions. Possible mechanisms include rotating roles, individual drafting responsibilities, peer-explanation requirements, and short individual reflections attached to the group product. Such accountability preserves the benefits of collaboration while reducing overdependence on more proficient peers.

Time pressure should likewise be understood as a design issue rather than a minor logistical problem. Authentic projects require time for content research, language formulation, revision, and product design. A realistic schedule should distinguish essential language objectives from optional visual features and should include interim deadlines. Some stages may be completed outside class, but the teacher needs to ensure equitable access to technology and supervision. The project can also be divided into smaller assessed milestones so that the writing process remains visible and is not overshadowed by the final brochure.

Theoretically, the study contributes to culturally responsive PBL in EFL by illustrating a three-part relationship among cultural familiarity, collaborative mediation, and language scaffolding. Familiar topics supported idea generation; peer interaction enabled students to pool linguistic and cultural resources; teacher scaffolding helped transform these resources into a recognizable descriptive genre. The approach was most productive when these three components worked together.

Cultural content without language support would leave students unable to express meaning, while language exercises without a meaningful cultural purpose would reduce the authenticity of the project.

## 5. Conclusion

This qualitative case study examined the implementation of project-based learning in a local-wisdom-based descriptive writing class at MAN 3 Cirebon. The project was carried out through topic selection, group planning, information gathering, drafting, peer-supported revision, brochure design, presentation, and reflection. Across observations, interviews, and documents, students demonstrated active involvement in project decisions and used culturally familiar topics to develop descriptive content. The six tourism brochures showed that students could combine English descriptions with cultural and tourism information, although the texts still required linguistic and cultural elaboration.

The study does not claim a measured improvement in writing achievement because it did not employ pre- and post-tests or a formal scoring comparison. Instead, the evidence indicates perceived development in students' attention to content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, coherence, and genre conventions. Local wisdom also made the task more contextually meaningful and enabled students to view English as a medium for cultural representation. The main constraints were limited time, restricted vocabulary and grammatical control, unequal group participation, and difficulty expressing culturally specific meanings in English. Effective implementation therefore depends on explicit language scaffolding, structured individual accountability within group work, staged deadlines, and guidance on cultural elaboration.

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