

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze and identify the factors contribute to the difficulties encountered by undergraduate students in writing research proposal. Descriptive research design was employed in this study. 36 undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at FKIP of Universitas Tanjungpura in Pontianak were selected as the sample using purposive sampling. The data were gathered through a questionnaire comprising 25 items adapted from Dwihandini et al. (2013), focus on the three factors that contribute to students' difficulties in writing research proposals including psychological factors, sociocultural factors, and linguistic factors. Data analysis indicated that psychological factors with the percentage of 61%, as the most dominant factors causing students' difficulties in writing research proposal, linguistic factor with the percentage of 21%, and sociocultural factor with the percentage of 18%. Therefore, psychological aspects as the most influential factor causing students' difficulties in research proposal writing.

Keywords: *academic writing, undergraduate students, research proposal.*

Academic writing is a formal writing style most often used in schools, universities, and colleges. Rind et al. (2020) defines academic writing as one of the types of writing for academic purposes in academic contexts or institutions, such as college or university. This type of writing aims to communicate ideas, provide information, and enhance the reader's understanding. The style of academic writing distinguishes it from other types of writing because it uses formal and standard language and has strict rules about the writing format (Wirantaka,

2019). Writing in an academic context should use precise word choices, be structured and supported by evidence. In higher education, the most common types of academic writing are essays, theses, research papers, research proposals, and dissertations.

Research proposal is one of the types of academic writing that undergraduate students are required to write before conducting a research. Greene and Lidinsky (2015) defined a research proposal as the formal plan that outlines the aims for conducting a

research project, specifying the methods what a researcher intends to use, and describing the implications of the work. It specifically describes what a student will investigate, why it should be done and also as a step-by-step framework before conducting a research. Moreover, Acheampong (2021) states that research proposal should include comprehensive literature reviews and must provide convincing evidence to establish the necessity of the proposed research study. While writing a research proposal, undergraduate students should provide clearly and detailed information in order to convince academic supervisors or readers that the research will be useful, interesting, and worth doing.

In addition to provide clearly and detailed information in writing a research proposal, students must be able to show their capability to conduct a research. This can be shown through the understanding about the topics and problems of the research. For this reason, Yamin and Purwati (2020) argue that writing a research proposal requires the personal capacity to organize mindset, thoughts, ideas, facts, and problems, all of which need to be formulated into the research problem. As a result, in order to be successful in writing a research proposal, students must have a good competence and skill.

At Universitas Tanjungpura, particularly in English Education Study Program, there are several courses that must be taken by students in learning to write research proposal. These courses include *Research on English Language Teaching*, WRP (*Writing Research Proposal*), SRD (*Seminar Research Design*) and *Research Paper*. These courses help students to understand and learn research proposal writing. However, there are still undergraduate

students who have difficulties and spend a long time in writing their research proposal. Therefore, the researcher was interested in figuring out the factors that lead to difficulties for undergraduate students in writing their research proposals in the English Education Study Program at FKIP in Universitas Tanjungpura.

Previous studies in the broader literature have investigated the difficulties encountered by students when writing their research proposals. Manchishi et al. (2015) conducted a study with the aim of identifying the common mistakes and challenges encountered by postgraduate students at the University of Zambia. They discovered a variety of mistakes and challenges encountered by postgraduate students in research proposal writing such as topics were too broad and unclear, inability to state the problem being investigated, identify the gap in the literature, employing incorrect methodologies, incorrect using referencing style and plagiarism, limited availability of lecturers for consultations, receiving negative feedback from supervisors, and facing limited time for proposal writing and inadequate reading materials.

Rezeki (2018) conducted a study to examine how students cite sources in writing their research proposals. The findings indicated that students frequently made errors in citation, particularly in language and content, the citations were mostly written as non-integral/non-reporting, and evidence of plagiarism and a lack of critical thinking in their research proposals. Another study by Suryatiningsih (2019) aimed to investigate the difficulties encountered by students in writing research proposals. The results of the study

showed that students having difficulties in writing the research background, relying on direct quotations without proper paraphrasing of expert statements, deviating from the topic focus, lacking motivation to explore relevant references for quotation support, and having difficulties in identifying gaps in previous research.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Muneer et al. (2020) aimed to highlight the challenges and obstacles encountered by postgraduate students in research proposal writing. The results indicated that postgraduate students having difficulties in selecting the right topic, understanding with the research supervisor, lack of guidance, lack of knowledge about appropriate paraphrasing techniques and avoiding plagiarism. Another researcher which discusses the same problems with this research was Acheampong (2021) whose aim was to examine the problems in international postgraduate students' research proposals. The finding showed that having problems to identify research gaps, review and criticizing the literature, lack of evidence to support the research proposal, inadequate of research materials, time allocated to write the proposal was insufficient, and supervisors are not available for consultation are difficulties for most postgraduate students in writing their research proposal.

Previous studies have investigated the difficulties encountered by postgraduate students in writing academic research proposals. However, those previous studies had differences with this present study in terms of research methods and techniques. Most of the previous studies used case studies, qualitative research methods, and interviews as tools for data collection. In

this present study, the researcher intended to analyze the difficulties faced by undergraduate students in writing a research proposal, employing a descriptive quantitative research method and utilizing a questionnaire as the tool for data collection. The focus of this study was not only to analyze the difficulties that undergraduate students had in writing research proposals but also to identify the factors contributing to the difficulties.

METHOD

Descriptive research design was employed to analyze and identify the factors contribute to the students' difficulties in writing a research proposal. According to Thomas (2021), descriptive research is used to factually and accurately describe a situation or area of interest, ascertain the frequency with which it occurs, and categorize the gathered information. This method was appropriate for this study because the researcher used a questionnaire to collect data and analyzed it statistically.

36 undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at FKIP, Universitas Tanjungpura in Pontianak were purposefully selected using purposive sampling. The researcher used a questionnaire to collect the data. The questionnaire was administered online using Google form to the participants to collect the data in this study. The model questionnaire was a closed-ended questionnaire by using five-point Likert scale, see the table below:

Table 1. Five-Point Likert Scale Interpretation

Response Options	Numerical Value
Strongly Agree	5
Agree	4
Neutral	3

Disagree	2
Strongly Disagree	1

The questionnaire was adapted from Dwihandini et al. (2013) consisting of 25 statement items. The following table displayed the specification of the statement items in the questionnaire:

Table 2. Table of Specification

Factors	Number Items	Total Items
Psychological Factors	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10 11,12,13,14,15	15
Sociocultural Factors	16,17,18,19,20	5
Linguistic Factors	21,22,23,24,25	5

The questionnaire results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, involving the tabulation of data and the calculation of percentages for each factor. The following was the formula to calculate the percentage of each items in the questionnaire:

$$\text{Percentages} = \frac{\text{The total frequency of each item}}{\text{The maximum score}} \times 100\%$$

FINDINGS

The researcher obtained the data by distributing online questionnaire using Google Form to the respondents in order to identify which factors as the most dominant in causing students' difficulties in writing their research proposal. 36 undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at FKIP Universitas Tanjungpura were involved as the respondents in this research. The questionnaire consists of 25 items, which were categorized into three factors, namely psychological factors, sociocultural factors and linguistic factors. The results of the study were presented as follows:

a. The Dominant Factors Causing Students' Difficulties in Writing Research Proposal

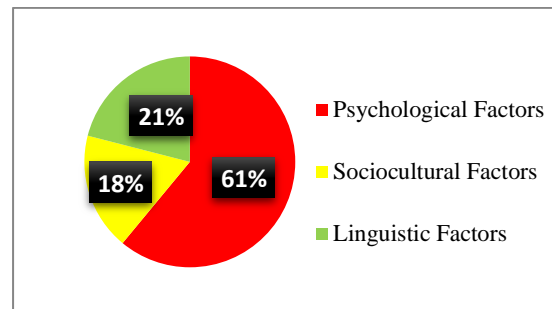


Chart 1. Factors Causing Students' Difficulties in Writing Research Proposal

The chart above shows that psychological factor as the most dominant factors of causing students' difficulties in writing research proposal, which received the highest percentage of 61% and with a total score of 1720. The second highest factor is linguistic factor with the percentage 21% and with a total score of 597. The third factor is sociocultural factor with the lowest percentage of 18% and the total score of 515.

b. Results of Questionnaire Analysis

The data from the questionnaire was calculated using the percentage formula. Students encounter difficulties in writing research proposals due to three factors: psychological factors, sociocultural factors, and linguistic factors. The following tables were created to show the percentage of each items based on each factor category.

Table 3. Psychological Factors of Students' Difficulties in Writing Research Proposal

No	Statements	Mean Score	Percentage
1	Having difficulty in choosing the right topic for a research proposal	3.44	68.88%
2	Not knowing the correct structure of a research proposal.	2.88	57.77%
3	Not having prior knowledge due to the research topic.	2.80	56.11%
4	Having difficulty in identifying and formulating research problem.	2.97	59.44%
5	Having difficulty when writing the research objectives of a research proposal.	2.88	57.78%
6	Having difficulty when writing the literature review in a research proposal.	3.30	66.11%
7	Having difficulty in writing the conceptual framework in a research proposal.	3.27	65.55%
8	Having difficulty in deciding the methodology for a research proposal.	3.08	61.66%
9	Having difficulty in choosing technique sampling of a research proposal.	3.08	61.66%
10	Having difficulty in selecting data analysis for a research proposal.	3.00	60%
11	Having difficulty in using referencing style in a research proposal.	3.52	70.55%
12	Having difficulty to write my research proposal because afraid of making mistakes in writing.	3.69	73.88%
13	Afraid of being criticized by my supervisor when consulting the research proposal.	3.36	67.22%
14	Having intrinsic motivation in writing a research proposal.	3.27	65.56%
15	Having extrinsic motivation in writing a research proposal.	3.16	63.33%

There are 15 items deal with the psychological factors of students' difficulties in writing research proposal. The following are the percentages of each item in the questionnaire of students difficulties in writing research proposals based on psychological factors, ranging from the highest to the lowest percentage. From the table above, it can be seen that item number 12, "*Having difficulty to write my research proposal because afraid of making mistakes in writing*" received the highest percentage of 73.88% with the mean score 3.69. Item number 11, "*Having difficulty in using referencing style in a research proposal*" as the second highest percentage of 70,55% with the mean score

3.52. In the item number 1 "*Having difficulty in choosing the right topic for a research proposal*", as the third highest percentage of 68,88% with the mean score 3.44.

Item number 13, "*Afraid of being criticized by my supervisor when consulting the research proposal*" received a percentage of 67.22% with the mean score of 3.36. Item number 6 "*Having difficulty when writing the literature review in a research proposal*" got 66.11% with the mean score 3.30. Item number 14 "*having intrinsic motivation in writing a research proposal*" got 65.56% with the mean score 3.27. Item number 7 "*having*

difficulty in writing the conceptual framework in a research proposal” got 65.55% with the mean score 3.27. Item number 15 “having extrinsic motivation in writing my research proposal” got 63.33% with the mean score 3.16.

In the item number 8 “having difficulty in deciding the methodology for a research proposal” and item number 9 “having difficulty in choosing technique sampling of a research proposal” got 61.66% with the mean score 3.08. In the item number 10 “having difficulty in selecting data analysis for a research proposal” got 60% with the mean score

3.00. Item number 4 “having difficulty in identifying and formulating research problem” got 59.44% with the mean score 2.97. Item number 5 “having difficulty when writing the research objectives of a research proposal” got 57.78% has the mean score 2.88. Item number 2 “Not knowing the correct structure of a research proposal” got 57.77% with the mean score 2.88 and item number 3 “Not having prior knowledge due to the research topic” received the lowest percentage of 56,11% with the mean score 2.80.

Table 4. Sociocultural Factors of Students’ Difficulties in Writing Research Proposal

No	Statements	Mean Score	Percentage
16	Having difficulty in discussing a research proposal with other undergraduate students.	2.13	42.77%
17	Having difficulty in discussing a research proposal with supervisors.	2.97	59.44%
18	Having difficulty in understanding the supervisors’ suggestion or feedback.	3.02	60.55%
19	Having difficulty to have knowledge about the roles of the social context related to the study on the proposal writing.	3.22	64.44%
20	Having difficulty in sustaining communication through speech style in research proposal writing.	2.94	58.88%

Table 4 shows the results of students’ difficulties in writing a research proposal based on sociocultural factors. From the table above, it can be seen that item number 19 “Having difficulty to have knowledge about the roles of the social context related to the study on the proposal writing” received the highest percentage of 64.44% with the mean score 3.22. Item number 18 “Having difficulty in understanding my supervisors’ suggestion or feedback” got 60.55% with the mean score 3.02. Item number 17 “Having

difficulty in discussing my research proposal with my supervisors” got 59.44% with the mean score 2.97. Item number 20 “Having difficulty in sustaining communication through speech style in research proposal writing.” got 58.88% with the mean score 2.94 and item number 16 “Having difficulty in discussing a research proposal with other undergraduate students” got the lowest percentage is 42.77% with the mean score 2.13.

Table 5. Linguistic Factors of Students’ Difficulties in Writing Research Proposal

No	Statements	Mean Score	Percentage
21	Having difficulty in writing sentences or paragraph using English grammar correctly	3.55	70.55%

22	Having difficulty in minimalizing the error of the grammar on the proposal writing, such as, articles, preposition	3.47	69.44%
23	Having difficulty using punctuation, capitalization in the proposal writing	2.72	54.44%
24	Having difficulty to paraphrase sentences from the sources to the proposal writing	3.44	68.88%
25	Having difficulty in choosing the right vocabulary in writing research proposal correctly	3.41	68.33%

Table 5 deals with students difficulties in writing research proposal based on linguistic factors. From the table above, it can be seen that item number 21, “*Having difficulty in writing sentences or paragraph using English grammar correctly*” got the highest percentage of 70.55% with the mean score 3.55. Item number 22 “*Having difficulty in minimalizing the error of the grammar on my proposal writing, such as, articles, preposition.*” got 69.44% with the mean

score 3.47. Item number 24, “*Having difficulty to paraphrasing sentences from the sources to my proposal writing*” got 68,88% with the mean score 3.44. Item number 25 “*Having difficulty in choosing the right vocabulary in writing research proposal correctly*” got 68.33% with the mean score 3.41, and the lowest percentage is in the item number 23 “*Having difficulty using punctuation, capitalization in the proposal writing*” got 54.44% with the mean score 2.72.

DISCUSSION

This study analyzed the factors contributing to the difficulties in writing the research proposal encountered by undergraduate students in the English education study program at FKIP in Universitas Tanjungpura. The research findings indicated that psychological factors were the dominant factor contributing to difficulties experienced by students in writing research proposals, which received the highest percentage and total score. The difficulties based on psychological factors were categorized by three indicators namely self-esteem, anxiety, and motivation. In terms of self-esteem, the highest percentage from students’ responses of the questionnaire was students felt difficult in using referencing style in writing the research proposal. In line with that, the previous study from Manchinshi et al. (2015) on postgraduate students at the University of

Zambia found that wrong referencing style as the students’ challenges in research proposal writing. Using the proper referencing style is critical in academic writing, particularly when writing a research proposal (Rezeki, 2018).

Another difficulty which received the highest percentage in terms of self-esteem was students felt difficult in choosing the right topic for their research. This finding aligns with the previous studies, Muneer et al. (2020) and Acheampong (2021), they revealed that deciding the research topic as one of the difficulties encountered by students in writing research proposal. Students should decide the appropriate research topic based on their interests and their abilities before conducting a research. Moreover, having difficulties in writing the literature review also becomes the students’ difficulties in writing their research proposal. In line with that, the

previous study from Suryatiningsih (2019) revealed that students were lazy to read more references in writing the research proposal. Students should read more about references, such as books or journal articles to help them get more ideas in writing the research proposal.

Another statement which received the highest percentage in terms of self-esteem was having difficulty in writing the conceptual framework in a research proposal. A conceptual framework functions as a guide map for research, assisting students in visualizing the research project and put it into action. Students should construct their conceptual framework before conducting a research.

In terms of anxiety, the highest percentage from students' responses of the questionnaire was afraid of making mistakes in writing research proposal. In line with that, the previous study conducted by Khairah and Fatimah (2022) found that students are anxious and having low self-confidence in writing the research proposal. Another statement that had the highest percentage in terms of anxiety was that students felt anxious because they were afraid of being criticized by their supervisor during consultations on the research proposal. The similar findings from the previous study Khairah and Fatimah (2022) found that fear of negative evaluation from supervisors as one of the causes of students' anxiety in writing thesis proposal. This indicated that anxiety as one of the aspects of psychological factor can negatively impact students' performance in writing the research proposal.

Linguistic factors in a second position as the factors contribute to students' difficulties in writing the research proposal. Based on the findings, the researcher found that most students are having difficulties in writing sentences or paragraph using English grammar correctly and minimalizing the error of the grammar the proposal writing. Writing a research proposal in English has become a

requirement for students who majoring in the English education. Writing a research proposal in English is more difficult for students than writing a research proposal in their native language. The process of converting ideas into English sentences requires the use of correct grammar. In line with that, an essential element in the writing process is grammatical competence, which involves a thorough understanding of grammatical rules and lexical item in the process of writing (Wahyuningsih, 2018). Hence, learning grammar is crucial for students in order to write a research proposal in English.

Another issue that students face when writing research proposals based on the linguistic factor was having difficulties in paraphrasing sentences from sources. This finding is in line with the previous study from Suryatiningsih (2019), who also revealed that most students only rewrite the expert statement without paraphrasing it from the source. Paraphrasing is also crucial in writing research proposal in order to avoid plagiarism. Moreover, students also get difficulty in choosing the right vocabulary in writing the research proposal. Students should be more pay attention in using vocabulary in academic writing, particularly in writing the research proposal.

The third factor contributes to the students difficulties in writing the research proposal was sociocultural factor. There were two indicators in this factor, such as the relationship between undergraduate student with their society and the relationship between students with their supervisor. From 5 items of the questionnaire that represents socio-cultural factor, the highest percentage was having difficulty in understanding their supervisors' suggestion or feedback when doing the consultation their research proposal. In line with that, the previous study from Dwihandini et al. (2013) also found that undergraduate students of Universitas Mahasaraswati felt difficult to

following the instruction given by thesis supervisor. Understanding feedback and suggestions from supervisors is critical for improving the quality of research proposal writing.

CONCLUSION

The primary goal of this study was to analyze and identify the factors contributing to the students difficulties in writing research proposal. The findings revealed that psychological factors were the dominant factor contributes to the students difficulties in writing research proposal. In terms of psychological factors, students encounter difficulties related to self-esteem, particularly in selecting the appropriate topic for their research, using referencing style, and difficulties in writing the literature review in the research proposal. In terms of anxiety, students are afraid of making mistakes in writing and being criticized by

their supervisor during the process of consulting on the research proposal.

Linguistic factors in the second position as the factor contribute to the students' difficulties in writing the research proposal, such as lack of understanding in grammar, difficulty in paraphrasing sentences from sources, and lack of vocabulary. The last factor was sociocultural factors that affect students get difficulty in writing the research proposal, such as lack of understanding the suggestion and feedback from their supervisors.

The results presented in this study will serve as valuable information for both students and lecturers, offering insights into the difficulties encountered by undergraduate students when writing research proposals. Furthermore, the findings of this research can serve as a valuable reference for researchers with comparable research interests. In addition, employing diverse methods and using more data collection techniques will enhance the strength of future research.

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