



Analysis of Students' Abilities and Difficulties in Compiling a Thesis Proposal: A Study of Embedded Design

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe students' abilities in compiling thesis proposals and identify the easiest and most difficult sections along with the contributing factors. The study used a mixed methods approach with an embedded design, where document analysis of 26 student thesis proposals served as the primary method and in-depth interviews with 8 informants as the secondary method. The results showed that the average score for student proposals was 72.3, ranging from 57 to 86. The easiest parts of the proposal to master were the research background (average score 4.2), practical benefits (4.0), and operational definitions (3.9). Conversely, the most difficult parts were data validity (2.1), research instruments (2.2), consistency between proposal sections (2.4), limitation of focus and data (2.5), and research methods (2.8). Interviews revealed that the main cause of difficulties was not simply a lack of conceptual understanding (50%), but rather difficulty applying already understood concepts to their own proposals (transfer deficit) (62.5%), a lack of proposal writing practice (50%), a lack of sample instruments, and psychological factors such as laziness and social pressure (FOMO). This study recommends a shift in learning from a theoretical approach to guided practice, the provision of a comprehensive proposal example bank, and increased contextualized individual guidance.

Keywords: student abilities, student difficulties, compiling thesis proposal, embedded design

Analisis Kemampuan dan Kesulitan Menyusun Proposal Skripsi bagi Mahasiswa: Studi Desain Terintegrasi

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan kemampuan mahasiswa dalam menyusun proposal skripsi serta mengidentifikasi bagian-bagian yang paling mudah dan paling sulit beserta faktor-faktor penyebabnya. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan campuran (mixed methods) dengan desain embedded, di mana analisis dokumen terhadap 26 proposal skripsi mahasiswa berfungsi sebagai metode primer dan wawancara mendalam terhadap 8 informan sebagai metode sekunder. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rata-rata nilai proposal mahasiswa adalah 72,3 dari rentang 57 hingga 86. Bagian proposal yang paling mudah dikuasai adalah latar belakang penelitian (rata-rata skor 4,2), manfaat praktis (4,0), dan definisi operasional (3,9). Sebaliknya, bagian yang paling sulit adalah keabsahan data (2,1), instrumen penelitian (2,2), konsistensi antar bagian proposal (2,4), pembatasan fokus dan data (2,5), serta metode penelitian (2,8). Wawancara mengungkap bahwa penyebab utama kesulitan bukanlah ketidakpahaman konsep semata (50%), melainkan kesulitan menerapkan konsep yang sudah dipahami ke dalam proposal sendiri (transfer deficit) sebesar 62,5%, kurangnya latihan menulis proposal (50%), minimnya contoh instrumen, serta faktor psikologis seperti rasa malas dan tekanan sosial (FOMO). Penelitian ini merekomendasikan pergeseran pembelajaran dari pendekatan teoretis ke praktik terbimbing, penyediaan bank contoh proposal lengkap, serta peningkatan bimbingan individual yang kontekstual.

Kata kunci: kemampuan menyusun proposal, kesulitan menulis, proposal skripsi, desain terintegrasi

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to write a research proposal is a fundamental competency that university students must master as a prerequisite for completing a final assignment or thesis. A research proposal serves as a roadmap that guides students in conducting research in a systematic, structured, and scientifically accountable manner. It includes problem identification, a literature review, a theoretical framework, and a research methodology that serve as the foundation for conducting research in the field. As emphasized by Sugiyono (2019), a research method is a set of scientific procedures or steps for collecting, processing, and analyzing data to answer research questions or test hypotheses. Therefore, mastering research methodology is key to students' success in completing their studies on time.

Fieldwork shows that even though students have taken the Research Methodology course, most of them are unable to write a good thesis proposal. Based on teaching experience with the Research Methodology course in previous semesters in the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program, it was found that students' ability to write thesis proposals is still relatively low. Of the approximately 120 students who have attended the course in the past three years, more than 60% of them received grades below the minimum completion standard for the thesis proposal component. Several weaknesses that consistently emerged were the inability to formulate research problems accurately, difficulty determining relevant and appropriate theories for the study object, unclear explanations of the research methods to be used, and incomplete research instruments such as data cards, interview guidelines, or assessment rubrics. Furthermore, most students also experienced difficulty in maintaining consistency between the title, problem formulation, objectives, and research methods. These initial findings indicate a significant gap between the theoretical

understanding gained in class and the practical ability to write thesis proposals among students in this study program.

The urgency of this research lies in the importance of comprehensively identifying students' difficulties in developing their thesis proposals as a basis for improving their learning of Research Methodology. Without accurately mapping the most challenging aspects for students, efforts to improve learning will be speculative and ineffective. A thesis is essentially a research product; students who do not understand the research process will struggle to develop their thesis proposals (Zuriati, 2017). Research on students' methodological challenges in developing their thesis proposals has found that difficulties are not only technical but also related to psychological aspects such as motivation and laziness, as well as external factors such as an unsupportive environment and limited access to references (Anjariani, Arifi, & Zaini, 2022). Therefore, research that can holistically uncover students' difficulties, both in terms of the proposal's substance and their own perceptions, is urgently needed.

Several previous studies have examined the problem of students' difficulties in preparing thesis proposals from various perspectives. Research by Irianto (2024) analyzed students' understanding of research methods in preparing final assignments in the Research Methodology course, involving 80 students. The results showed that students generally understood research methods well, but theoretical concepts were still difficult to apply when preparing final assignments. Research by Anjariani, Arifi, and Zaini (2022) identified methodological problems for Islamic Religious Education students in preparing thesis research proposals, finding that internal factors (lack of understanding, self-motivation, laziness) and external factors (other course assignments, busy schedules) were the main causes of difficulties. Meanwhile, research by Susetyo and Noermanzah



(2020) on the abilities and difficulties of Indonesian Language Education students in writing thesis research proposals found that students experienced difficulties in writing problems and problem formulation, theoretical foundations and literature reviews, determining research methods, data collection techniques, instrument preparation, and research data analysis.

Based on the review of relevant research presented, several gaps exist that constitute opportunities for this research. First, most previous research focuses on only one data source, namely from students through questionnaires or interviews, or from proposal documents alone. No research has simultaneously combined proposal document analysis (to assess objective quality) with in-depth student interviews (to capture their subjective perceptions) within a single research design. Second, research specifically mapping the easiest and most difficult sections according to students' direct experience is still limited. Third, the context of this research is the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program, with its diverse subject matter (linguistics, literature, and learning), which has not been extensively researched. Therefore, this study offers a novel, mixed-method approach that integrates student proposal document analysis and in-depth interviews to obtain a comprehensive picture of students' abilities and difficulties in preparing thesis proposals.

Based on the background and identification of research gaps that have been described, this study aims to: (1) describe students' abilities in compiling a thesis proposal as a whole based on the results of proposal document analysis; (2) identify the parts of the proposal that are easiest and most difficult for students to compile based on the results of proposal examination; (3) explore students' perceptions of the difficulties they experience in compiling a thesis proposal and the factors that cause them; and (4) compare findings from document analysis and interviews to gain a

comprehensive understanding of the problems of compiling a thesis proposal.

The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical and practical benefits. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the scientific repertoire in the field of education, particularly related to the pedagogy of scientific writing and learning research methodology in higher education. The findings regarding the gap between conceptual understanding and application skills can be used as a reflection for the development of learning theory in higher education. Practically, this research is useful for lecturers who teach Research Methodology courses as evaluation material to improve learning strategies to focus more on parts that prove difficult for students to master. For students, the results of this study can serve as material for introspection and guidance in preparing writing thesis proposals. For institutions or departments, this research can form the basis of policies to provide more targeted resources and guidance. Furthermore, for future researchers, this research can serve as a reference for developing further research on the effectiveness of learning interventions on the most difficult parts of a proposal.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using an embedded design, in which document analysis served as the primary method (26 undergraduate thesis proposals) and interviews functioned as the secondary method (8 informants). This design was selected because document analysis aimed to identify the easiest and most challenging sections in proposal writing, while the interviews were conducted to confirm and explain the underlying causes of those difficulties. As stated by Creswell (2014), in an embedded design, the secondary method supports the primary method by providing elaboration on its findings, making it suitable for studies that seek not only to describe a phenomenon but also to understand the context behind it (Sugiyono, 2019).

The participants consisted of 26 students from the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program who had completed the Research Methodology course, selected through total sampling. Meanwhile, eight interview participants were chosen using purposive sampling based on three achievement categories. The first instrument was a 5-point Likert scale assessment rubric, which was tested for inter-rater reliability and yielded a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.81, indicating almost perfect agreement. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the preliminary findings of the document analysis. Data collection was conducted sequentially, beginning with document analysis of the 26 thesis proposals, followed by in-depth interviews with the eight selected students (Moleong, 2017; Razak, 2017).

Data were analyzed in an integrated manner. Document data were analyzed using descriptive quantitative techniques, including mean scores and frequency distributions, whereas interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Herzog et al. (2019). To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was applied by comparing the results obtained from the document analysis with those derived from the interviews.

RESULT

This study was conducted among students in the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Program who had completed the Research Methodology course. Data were collected through document analysis of 26 student thesis proposals as the primary method and in-depth interviews with 8 informants as the secondary method. The research results are presented sequentially in accordance with the embedded design, beginning with the presentation of descriptive quantitative data from the primary method, followed by qualitative data from the document analysis, and finally qualitative data from the interviews as corroboration.

1. Results of the Proposal Document Analysis

Document analysis of 26 student thesis proposals was conducted using an evaluation rubric covering the components of background, problem formulation, literature review, research methods, research instruments, and scientific writing style.

1.1 Descriptive Statistics of Proposal Scores

Based on the results of the examination of 26 student thesis proposals, the highest score achieved was 86, the lowest was 57, with a score range of 29. The mean score was 72.3, the median was 72.0, and the mode was 68. The frequency distribution of student proposal scores is presented in Table 1.

Table-1
Frequency Distribution of Student Proposal Scores

Scores	Category	Frequency	Percentage
80-86	Good	8	30,8%
70-79	Fairly Good	8	30,8%
55-69	Poor	10	38,4%
	Total	26	100%

The data in Table 1 show that 8 proposals (30.8%) fell into the good to very good category, 8 proposals (30.8%) fell into the fair category, and 10 proposals (38.4%) fell into the poor category and required major revisions. Thus, nearly four out of ten students still needed to make significant revisions to their proposals.

1.2 Average Score per Proposal Component

To determine which proposal components were most well-developed and which were weakest, the researcher calculated the average score for each component of the 26 proposals. The results are presented in Table 2.



Table-2

Average Score by Proposal Component		
Proposal Component	Average Score	Category
Research background/context	4,2	high
Practical benefits of the research	4,0	high
Operational definitions	3,9	moderate
Review of Relevant research	3,7	moderate
Research question	3,5	moderate
Scientific writing and Editing	3,1	moderate
Theoretical Framework	3,0	low
Research Methodology	2,8	low
Focus and data limitations	2,5	low
Consistency across sections of the proposal	2,4	low
Research instruments	2,2	very low
Data validity/reliability	2,1	very low

The data in Table 2 (maximum score for each component = 5) show that the proposal components with the highest average scores were research background/context (4.2), practical benefits of the research (4.0), and operational definitions (3.9). Conversely, the components with the lowest average scores were data validity (2.1), research instruments (2.2), consistency across proposal sections (2.4), focus and data limitations (2.5), and research methods (2.8). These findings indicate that students find it relatively easier to write the initial, narrative-declarative sections of the proposal but face significant difficulties with sections requiring technical and procedural design.

1.3 Frequency of Weakness Types

Based on an examination of 26 proposals, the researcher recorded the frequency of occurrence for each type of weakness. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table-3
Frequency of Weaknesses in Proposals

Type of Weakness	Frequency	Percentage
Research instruments are incomplete or missing	24	92,3%
Data validity not operationally defined	22	84,6%
Data boundaries unclear	20	76,9%
Inconsistency in title, focus, objectives, and methods	18	69,2%
Theoretical framework not operational	17	65,4%
Theoretical benefits not addressed	15	57,7%
Spelling and technical writing errors	14	53,8%
Literature review remains descriptive, not synthetic	12	46,2%

The data in Table 3 show that the most prevalent weakness was incomplete or missing research instruments, which appeared in 24 of the 26 proposals (92.3%). The second most common weakness was data validity that had not been operationally defined (84.6%), followed by unclear data boundaries (76.9%), a lack of consistency across proposal sections (69.2%), and a theoretical framework that was not operationalized (65.4%).

1.4 The Proposal Sections Students Mastered Best

The results of the document analysis indicate that students were relatively capable of writing three components well. First, the research background or context was the section students

mastered most, with an average score of 4.2. Most students were able to open their proposals with a general narrative and descriptive overview of language, literature, learning, digital media, local culture, or social issues. Second, the practical benefits of the research were also relatively easy for students to articulate, with an average score of 4.0. Nearly all students could identify benefits for researchers, students, teachers, readers, the community, schools, or institutions. Third, operational definitions fell into the moderate category with an average score of 3.9. Students were quite capable of writing operational definitions, particularly for key terms in the title such as toponymy, lexicon, speech acts, emotions, folk poetry, and various digital learning media.

1.5 The Weakest Parts of the Proposal

The results of the document analysis reveal that there are five components that represent the most significant weaknesses. The first and most significant weakness lies in data validity, with an average score of 2.1. This shortcoming can be distinguished based on the chosen research approach. In proposals using a qualitative approach, students only described triangulation in general terms without explaining the operational mechanisms of source, technique, or temporal triangulation. Meanwhile, in proposals using a quantitative approach, students failed to detail the validity and reliability tests of the instruments and did not include prerequisite analysis tests such as the normality test.

The second weakness is the research instruments, with an average score of 2.2. Almost all proposals require strengthening of the instruments; in qualitative research, students did not include data cards or interview guidelines; in quantitative research, item matrices and scoring rubrics were absent; and in field research, observation sheets were not included. The third weakness is consistency across sections of the proposal, with an average score of 2.4. Some proposals exhibit serious inconsistencies, such as changing Grade 7 to Grade 8, a title regarding writing skills but a multiple-choice instrument, or

research objectives that do not align with the title. The fourth weakness is the narrow focus and data scope, with an average score of 2.5. In social media research, the scope has not been narrowed down based on accounts, posts, time periods, or comments. In field research, the criteria for informants and the amount of data have not been operationally defined. The fifth weakness is the research method, with an average score of 2.8, where students remain uncertain about selecting appropriate data collection and data analysis techniques.

2. Results of Student Interviews

To deepen the findings from the document analysis, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 students selected purposively based on score variation, comprising 2 students from the high category (scores 80–86), 3 from the moderate category (scores 70–79), and 3 from the low category (scores 55–69). The informants' profiles are presented in Table 4.

Table-4
Profile of Interview Informants

Code	Score	Category	Research Topic
I-01	86	High	Mixed code
I-02	84	High	Toponymy
I-03	77	Medium	Cultural lexicon
I-04	75	Medium	Differentiated instruction
I-05	71	Medium	Psychological trauma
I-06	68	Low	Cohesion-coherence
I-07	63	Low	TikTok satirical figures
I-08	58	Low	Identity fragmentation

2.1 Challenges in Research Methodology

All informants (8 out of 8, or 100%) confirmed that research methodology was the most difficult part of drafting the proposal. Informant I-05 (score 71) stated: "The most difficult part is the research methodology. The research methodology section contains several subsections, including the type of research, data collection techniques, data analysis techniques, time, and location. That's what made it difficult for me in that section because I was



confused about which techniques I should use for my research.” Informant I-04 (score 75) also noted: “The most difficult part is the research methodology because I still don’t fully understand some aspects of it, particularly in determining data collection techniques and how to analyze research data.” Even an informant from the high-scoring category (I-01, score 86) admitted: “Once I got into the research methods, it became even more confusing, especially the data collection part. So I looked at a lot of thesis examples.”

2.2 Difficulties in Selecting a Theory

Seven out of eight informants (87.5%) also acknowledged difficulties in selecting the appropriate theory. I-01 (score 86) stated: “The difficult part is selecting a theory. I was confused about which theory to use because I read about code-mixing theories but couldn’t find one. After I asked the professor, it turned out the theory was derived from the parent theory of sociolinguistics.” I-02 (score 84) explained: “The most difficult part is the theoretical review. In that section, I had to determine and combine the theories to be used. However, I didn’t know which theory was most suitable for the research I was conducting.” Meanwhile, I-07 (score 63) mentioned external factors that compounded her confusion: “Previously, the course instructor suggested using pragmatic theory, but then there was a directive from the department stating that pragmatic theory is no longer permitted. Therefore, I was confused about determining another suitable theory.”

2.3 Difficulties in Developing Research Instruments

Regarding research instruments the most significant weakness in document analysis all informants (8 out of 8, or 100%) acknowledged experiencing difficulties. I-01 (score 86) candidly stated: “Honestly, I haven’t been able to develop the interview instrument yet. I know there are interview guidelines, but I don’t understand how to create the instrument. I’m confused; I don’t

know how to go about making it. There are no examples to use as a reference.” I-07 (score 63) explained: “I don’t know the appropriate format for the instrument, I’m unsure about the content that should be included, and I’m having trouble linking the instrument to the theory being used.” There was even an informant (I-05, score 71) who admitted not knowing that a literature review also requires an instrument: “In my research, I’m using a literature review. Well, in that literature review, I didn’t know that there would be instruments like the ones described earlier.” I-08 (score 58) added psychological factors as a barrier: “The specific difficulties with all of that stem from the fact that sometimes there’s a sense of laziness and it feels like a hassle to create the instruments.”

2.4 Difficulties in Maintaining Consistency in the Proposal

Regarding consistency across sections of the proposal, five out of eight informants (62.5%) admitted to having experienced confusion. I-08 (score 58) explained: “In my opinion, the cause is a lack of understanding of the logical flow of proposal writing; sometimes there is external pressure due to circumstances and responsibilities, and the more pressured I feel, the more confused I become about where to start.” I-04 (score 75) added: “In my opinion, the cause is a change in the title midway through the proposal drafting process. In my experience, the title that had been determined turned out not to align with the research problem and objectives.” However, an informant from the high-scoring category (I-01, score 86) had a different experience: “*I was once confused, but since I had read a thesis on code-mixing, I came to understand that the research question must align with the theory. Plus, I received guidance from my advisor, so I was able to adjust it.*”

2.5 Main Factors Contributing to Proposal Shortcomings

Table 5 presents the factors contributing to proposal shortcomings as perceived by the informants.

Table-5
Factors Causing Proposal Imperfections

Factor	Number of Informant	Percentage
Understands the concept but finds it difficult to apply it to their own proposal	5	62,5%
Lacks understanding of research methodology concepts	4	50,0%
Lacks practice in writing proposals	4	50,0%
Too tight a deadline	2	25,0%
Limited references/reading materials	2	25,0%
Laziness or lack of motivation	2	25,0%

I-01 (score 86) stated: "I understand the concept: "I've studied how to structure Chapters 1 through 3, but I'm having trouble applying that to my own proposal. I'm still confused about how to put it together. Additionally, I lack practice in writing proposals. This is my first time writing a proposal, so I still lack experience." Meanwhile, I-06 (score 68) tended to cite a lack of conceptual understanding:"The main factors causing my proposal to be less than perfect are a lack of understanding of research methodology concepts, a lack of practice, and a lack of references or reading materials."

2.6 The Most Helpful Aspect in Writing the Proposal

Regarding the most helpful aspect during the proposal-writing process, intensive guidance from faculty members was cited by nearly all informants (7 out of 8, or 87.5%) as the most influential factor. I-04 (score 75) stated: "Through the Research Methodology course, I received intensive guidance from the instructor during the research proposal preparation process. This guidance was very helpful in helping me understand the steps and techniques for preparing a proposal, which I had not previously mastered well." In addition to

faculty guidance, examples of past proposals were cited by 6 informants (75%), written guidelines by 5 informants (62.5%), discussions with peers by 5 informants (62.5%), and TikTok tutorial videos by 3 informants (37.5%).

I-08 (score 58) offered a unique perspective on social pressure during proposal writing: "Students shouldn't just follow trends (FOMO). Don't force yourself to keep up just because you see peers moving quickly. While speed is possible, it's better to master the concepts first. The key is not to force yourself to rush; it's better to go slow as long as you understand what you're researching".

Synthesis of Findings from Primary and Secondary Methods

Table 6 presents a comparison between the findings from the document analysis and the confirmation from the interviews.

Table-6
Primary and Secondary Methods

Findings from Document Analysis (Primary)	Confirmation from Interviews (Secondary Method)
Research instruments: 92.3% of proposals were weak	100% of informants report difficulties
Theoretical framework: average score 3.0 (low)	100% of informants reported difficulties
Theoretical framework: average score 3.0 (low)	87.5% of informants had difficulty determining the theory
Proposal consistency: 69.2% of proposals were weak	62.5% of informants reported being confused
Data boundaries: 76.9% of proposals were weak	62.5% of informants reported difficulties

The interviews further revealed that the primary cause of difficulty was not merely a lack of conceptual understanding (50%), but rather the difficulty in applying understood concepts to their own proposals (62.5%), which was exacerbated



by a lack of practice in writing proposals (50%) and a scarcity of sample documents to use as references. Furthermore, the interviews also revealed psychological factors such as laziness (25%) and social pressure (FOMO) as factors that also influenced the quality of students' proposals, particularly among those with lower grades. Thus, this study successfully mapped out comprehensively the parts of the proposal that were easiest and most difficult for students to draft, as well as the factors causing these difficulties, based on two complementary data sources.

DISCUSSION

Students' Ability in Preparing Thesis Proposals

The results of the study indicate that students' ability to prepare thesis proposals varies, with an average score of 72.3. A total of 30.8% of students were classified in the good to very good category, 30.8% in the fairly good category, and 38.4% in the poor category (requiring major revisions). These findings confirm the results of a study by Susetyo & Noermanzah (2020), which found that students in Indonesian Language Education programs still encounter difficulties in writing research proposals for their theses, particularly in methodological and technical aspects. This variation in ability suggests that although students have completed Research Methodology courses, not all of them are able to apply the knowledge acquired effectively. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Irianto (2024), which revealed that students generally understand research methods theoretically; however, they often struggle to apply these theoretical concepts when preparing their final projects. The fact that 38.4% of students fall into the poor category is a figure that cannot be overlooked and indicates that the teaching and learning process of Research Methodology courses needs to be re-evaluated.

Sections of the Proposal Most Easily Mastered by Students

The sections of the proposal that students found easiest to master were the research background (mean score = 4.2), the practical

significance of the study (4.0), and the operational definitions (3.9). These three sections share similar characteristics in that they are narrative and declarative in nature. Students only need to explain what they know or what they plan to do without having to design complex technical procedures. The research background can be developed from general phenomena observed by students, the practical significance of the study is relatively easy to write because students only need to identify stakeholders related to the research topic, and operational definitions can often be cited or adapted from existing sources. These findings are consistent with the results of a study by Sukmawati (2023), which showed that aspects such as the research title and the significance of the study were categorized more favorably than methodological aspects.

Sections of the Proposal Most Difficult for Students to Master

The sections of the proposal that students found most difficult to master were data validity (2.1), research instruments (2.2), consistency among proposal sections (2.4), delimitation of research focus and data (2.5), and research methodology (2.8). These five components require students to transform theoretical concepts into technical products that are measurable, operational, and academically justifiable. Research instruments emerged as the most dominant weakness, with 92.3% of the proposals showing deficiencies in this aspect. This finding indicates that students do not fully understand the form and content of the instruments that must be developed, whether for qualitative or quantitative research. Interviews revealed that students admitted having no adequate examples to use as references and that a misconception exists that library research does not require research instruments. In fact, research instruments constitute the core of any research project; without adequate instruments, it is impossible for researchers to collect valid and reliable data. Weaknesses in data validity (84.6% of proposals were problematic) were closely related to deficiencies in research instruments. If

students do not understand how to develop appropriate instruments, it becomes difficult for them to explain validity testing, reliability measures, or credible triangulation procedures. Problems with consistency among proposal sections (69.2% of proposals were problematic) stemmed from a limited understanding of the logical flow of a research proposal, as well as changes in research titles during the writing process that were not followed by corresponding revisions in other sections. Interviews revealed that students often felt confused due to external pressures and increasing academic responsibilities. The lack of operationalized theoretical frameworks (65.4% of proposals were problematic) indicates that students still perceive theory as merely the content of Chapter II that must be included, rather than as an analytical tool to guide data interpretation. Interviews further revealed that students experienced difficulties in selecting appropriate theories and applying them to research data. These findings confirm the results of a study by Anjariani, Arifi, and Zaini (2022), which found that students' methodological problems include an inadequate understanding of the research process and its logical sequence.

Students' Perceptions of Difficulties and Contributing Factors

The interviews revealed that all informants (100%) identified research methodology as the most difficult aspect of proposal writing, while 87.5% acknowledged difficulties in selecting appropriate theories. The most significant finding was that 62.5% of the informants stated that the primary cause of their difficulties was that they understood the concepts but struggled to apply them to their own proposals, whereas only 50% reported a lack of conceptual understanding. This finding challenges the common assumption that students' difficulties are solely caused by inadequate conceptual knowledge. In cognitive psychology and education, this gap is known as a transfer deficit—the failure to transfer knowledge from one context (classroom learning) to another

(the preparation of an actual research proposal) (Larsen-Freeman, 2013). Students may be able to explain methodological concepts during examinations, yet fail when required to design a research method for a specific phenomenon they intend to investigate. The lack of practice in proposal writing, identified by 50% of the informants, was also a significant factor. This finding indicates that proposal-writing competence cannot be developed solely through exposure to theoretical knowledge; rather, it requires repeated practice and specific feedback. This view is reinforced by the statement of Informant I-01 (Karmila, score 86): *"This is my first time writing a research proposal, so I still lack experience."* In addition to cognitive and skill-related factors, the interviews also revealed psychological and social influences. Laziness was identified by 25% of the informants as a contributing factor, while the phenomenon of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) was recognized as a form of social pressure that encourages students to rush through proposal preparation without achieving adequate understanding. In the academic context, FOMO refers to students' anxiety that they may fall behind their peers academically (Przybylski et al., 2013). Informant I-08 (Rahmatia, score 58) explicitly stated: *"Do not force yourself to keep up with friends who seem to be progressing faster. It is better to move slowly while truly understanding what you are researching."* The phenomenon of academic FOMO has received limited attention in the literature on difficulties in proposal writing. Therefore, this finding may represent an original contribution of the present study.

Implications of the Findings for Research Methodology Instruction

The findings of this study have significant implications for improving the teaching of Research Methodology. First, there is a need to shift from a predominantly theoretical approach to guided practice through project-based learning, in which students complete each component of a research proposal in stages. This process should



be accompanied by concrete examples and specific feedback to help overcome the problem of transfer deficit. Second, educational institutions should provide a repository of complete proposal examples that include research instruments—such as data cards, interview guides, assessment rubrics, and test blueprints—from various types of research. Students' complaints that there are "no examples available to serve as references" should be addressed through the provision of adequate learning resources. Third, individual and contextualized supervision needs to be strengthened because nearly all informants (87.5%) identified intensive guidance from lecturers as the most helpful factor in proposal preparation. Lecturers should assist students in bridging the gap between theoretical concepts and the specific research objects they intend to investigate. In addition, peer-feedback approaches can be further optimized, as 62.5% of the informants reported that discussions with classmates were beneficial. Fourth, psychological aspects deserve greater attention. This can be achieved by creating a supportive classroom environment, setting realistic academic targets, and explicitly emphasizing that the quality of understanding is more important than the speed of completion. Such measures may help reduce the negative effects of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and encourage students to focus on developing a deeper understanding of their research rather than merely keeping pace with their peers.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 26 research proposals from a single study program within one specific period, and therefore the findings should be generalized with caution. Second, the study was primarily diagnostic in nature and did not extend to the implementation or evaluation of instructional interventions. Third, the interview phase involved only eight informants. Although this number was sufficient to achieve data saturation at an exploratory level, a larger number of participants

might have provided a broader range of perspectives. Fourth, the study did not examine external factors that may influence students' proposal-writing abilities, such as the quality of supervision provided by thesis advisors outside the Research Methodology course or the level of family support received by students. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and may serve as directions for future research.

Recommendation for Future Research

Future studies are recommended to: (1) conduct comparative research across different study programs or educational institutions; (2) undertake development research, particularly design-based research, to examine the effectiveness of project-based learning interventions in addressing the most challenging components of research proposal writing; (3) conduct quantitative studies with larger sample sizes to investigate the relationships between various predictor variables including academic FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and the quality of research proposals; and (4) carry out longitudinal studies that track students from their Research Methodology course through to the completion of their undergraduate theses. These research directions are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing students' proposal-writing abilities and to contribute to the development of more effective instructional strategies in Research Methodology education.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to describe students' abilities in writing thesis proposals and identify the easiest and most difficult sections based on document analysis of 26 proposals and interviews with eight informants. The results indicate that students' abilities vary, with an average score of 72.3, ranging from 57 to 86. The proposal sections most easily mastered by students were the research background (average score of 4.2), practical

benefits of the research (4.0), and operational definitions (3.9), which are narrative-declarative in nature. Conversely, the most difficult sections were data validity (2.1), research instruments (2.2), consistency between proposal sections (2.4), limiting focus and data (2.5), and research methods (2.8), which require technical-procedural skills.

Interviews confirmed these findings and revealed that the primary root cause of difficulties was not simply a lack of conceptual understanding (50%), but rather a transfer deficit—difficulty applying previously understood concepts to one's own proposal (62.5%). This problem is exacerbated by the lack of authentic writing practice (50%), lack of access to good instrument examples, and the emergence of psychological factors such as laziness and social pressure (FOMO) among students. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the learning of Research Methodology shift from a theoretical approach to guided practice through project-based learning, institutions provide a comprehensive bank of proposal examples and instruments, and lecturers increase contextual individual guidance while creating a classroom climate that prioritizes in-depth understanding over speed of completion. For future researchers, it is recommended to test the effectiveness of specific learning interventions aimed at addressing the transfer deficit in the methodology and research instruments section.

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