

Exploring EFL Learners' Writing Introduction to Research Proposals: Difficulties and Solutions

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Abstract

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This study aims to investigate EFL learners' difficulties in writing the introduction to a research proposal. We conducted this study using a survey research design. The subjects of this study were thirty-six learners and the instrument used is a questionnaire. The findings revealed that the learners' total score for agreement with the challenges in writing the Introduction section of a research proposal was 117.75, indicating neutral conditions. It was confirmed by an overall percentage of 65.4%. It indicates that learners do not have a strong judgment about the difficulties of writing an introduction to a research proposal. This neutral condition could indicate perplexity, doubt, or a lack of trust in their abilities. The most difficult components for learners were explaining the origins of the problem or topic in their introduction section, as well as presenting an explanation for the gap. They use some of the best methods to solve their problems, such as reading a lot of relevant sources, discussing with the professor, friends, or others, and employing technology. It is intended that by giving additional help, support, and relevant resources, learners will be able to overcome these challenges and improve their writing skills.

Kata kunci:

Kesulitan menulis;

Solusi; bagian

pendahuluan;

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui kesulitan pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) dalam menulis pendahuluan proposal penelitian. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian survei. Subjek penelitian ini berjumlah tiga puluh enam mahasiswa dan instrumen yang digunakan adalah angket. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa skor total mahasiswa untuk menyetujui kesulitan dalam menulis bagian pendahuluan proposal penelitian adalah 117,75, yang menunjukkan kondisi netral. Hal ini dikonfirmasi oleh persentase keseluruhan sebesar 65,4%. Temuan tersebut menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa tidak memiliki penilaian yang kuat tentang kesulitan menulis pendahuluan proposal

penelitian. Kondisi netral ini bisa menunjukkan kebingungan, keraguan, atau kurangnya kepercayaan terhadap kemampuannya. Komponen yang paling sulit bagi pembelajar adalah menjelaskan asal muasal masalah atau topik pada bagian pendahuluan, serta menyajikan penjelasan mengenai kesenjangan (*gap*) tersebut. Mereka menggunakan beberapa cara terbaik untuk menyelesaikan permasalahan mereka, seperti membaca banyak sumber yang relevan, berdiskusi dengan dosen, teman, atau orang lain, dan memanfaatkan teknologi. Hal ini dimaksudkan bahwa dengan memberikan bantuan tambahan, dukungan, dan sumber daya yang relevan, mahasiswa akan mampu mengatasi kesulitan tersebut dan meningkatkan keterampilan menulis mereka.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is crucial language ability. Writing allows someone to convey his or her ideas and thoughts. He can use writing to restate information he has learned from texts or articles, as well as information he has heard. Furthermore, it is a very useful language skill to convey information through written communication (Amri, 2022).

Writing is essential at the university level, yet it is a difficult skill for learners to learn as they must write essays, academic papers, and theses proposals. Writing is tough since learners need to compile their ideas into a coherent text, essay, or paper in order to convey them. Furthermore, they should maintain great grammar and language abilities when they write. Writing becomes increasingly difficult for them due to their lack of grammar and language abilities. According to Alwasilah, as reported in Safitri et al. (2021) the importance of writing as a sign of academicians' intellectual ability is visible currently. The influence of writing in advanced studies can be noticed in each major, where learners will study the basics of research methodology as well as how to produce a research paper.

One of the academic tasks for tertiary learners is writing a research proposal. It is an important aspect of academic writing for university learners, guiding them in defining their research plans and achieving their university degree. It helps learners understand the project's significance and the quality of their proposal writing, ultimately determining its quality (Susanti & Mahaputri,

2022). Then Afiah et al., (2023) clarified that it is a preliminary outline for a long research stage, a crucial step for learners completing their education. It is evaluated by a team and recommended by the student. Altikriti (2022) adds that the research paper is a critical academic writing process that involves seeking information, evaluating sources, organizing ideas, and supporting them with others' opinions. It not only contributes to the subject but also enhances learners' knowledge in the field. In brief, understanding the significance of proposal writing in higher education is critical for learners to ensure the quality of their studies. This process entails gathering information, analyzing sources, structuring ideas, and basing them on the opinions of others. It not only enhances the issue but also broadens learners' expertise in the discipline.

One of the parts in writing research proposal is introduction. In line this case, Diyana & Monsefi (2017) add that the introduction part covers the research's background, issue statement, purposes, importance, limits, and operational terms. Kabir (2016) as noted by Islamiah (2020) feels that Chapter I should have an introduction as a concise overview of the research proposal, which is often comprised of the backdrop of the study, the research question, the purpose of the study, the significance of the research, and the terms used. Furthermore, Mali (2023) it discusses the study's objectives, explains the issues or problems to be investigated (also known as the problem statement), the necessity to do the research (also known as the need statement), the research questions that will lead the inquiry, and the positive outcomes of performing the research.

Some difficulties in writing research proposal have been found. As stated by Susanti & Mahaputri (2022) it was discovered that the most challenging element of writing a proposal is the introduction, which includes outlining the background of the topic and establishing the objective of the research. Following that, the learners encountered difficulties in conducting a literature review, writing associated findings, and discussing related theories. Following that, the learners encountered difficulties with methodology, particularly when writing the processes for conducting research. Finally, learners struggled with writing bibliographies, particularly references to papers or journals that did not include

the authors' names. Safitri et al. (2021), in their study, found that learners faced numerous problems and delays during their undergraduate thesis writing activity. The problems included a lack of sources and literature connected to the learners' research issue, a lack of research methodological skills, and a lack of awareness about academic writing rules. Moreover, the work of Thabran and Fajaryani (2017) as cited by Dewi (2022) writing a research paper is the most challenging aspect of the undergraduate professional path. Even though learners have spent years training how to write scientific papers and the abilities required, writing a thesis is more than just an application; it is also a student's job to nail it as well as achievable. Additionally, Kareem & Abdurrahman (2023) have found that learners in Iraqi Kurdistan Region universities face challenges in writing and research, including cost, time, and effort, as well as supervisors, research methodology courses, and lack of knowledge.

From the discussion above, the researchers concluded that the learners face common challenges in writing their academic degree, making it crucial to understand and address these issues. This study provides insights into exploring EFL learners' writing introduction section of the research proposal, which focuses on their difficulties and solutions.

METHOD

The present project takes a quantitative standpoint, employing a survey methodology. It is a strategy in which researchers conduct a survey among respondents or the entire population to emphasize their opinions, beliefs, behaviors, or characteristics (Cresswell, 2012). The survey included 36 learners enrolled in languages at higher learning institutions. They are the sixth-semester learners of the English Study Program of the Islamic University of Indragiri.

The researchers acquired information by distributing the survey form, which is a questionnaire. It is linked to Gay et al. (2012), who state that questionnaires and interviews are the two predominant methods of surveys. A questionnaire is a set of inquiries or statements designed for particular groups of study participants to provide responses to. The researchers employed twelve

statements in closed-ended form, prepared and delivered in the Likert scale format, and one open-ended question. Those relate to the learners' difficulties in writing the introduction parts of the research proposals, and how they solved their problems.

The collected information was also processed using descriptive statistics, which included individual scores, percentages, average scores, and difficulty levels. To determine the research question, the difficulty questionnaire findings were reviewed. The participants' responses to the questionnaire about their difficulties in writing the introduction section of the research proposal were examined and interpreted by adhering to the conditions listed in Table 1.

Table 1. EFL Learners' difficulties Criteria in writing introduction section of research proposal

No	Interval Scores	Interpretation
1	36 – 65	Strongly Disagree
2	66 – 95	Disagree
3	96 – 125	Neutral
4	126 – 155	Agree
5	156 – 185	Strongly Agree

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study aims to verify the hypotheses that were presented at the beginning of the project by using a learners' questionnaire. Statistical data analysis provides a general overview of the learners' writing difficulties across all dimensions.

a. Reliability and validity testing

A reliable and valid research instrument is a must. In this case, the researchers tested and analyzed the validity and reliability of the research instrument by using Cronbach's Alpha and Corrected Item-Total Correlation analysis. And then the results are as below:

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.922	12

This output is the result of reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha. It was found that the Cronbach's Alpha result is 0.922. According to Priyatno (2012), if the results of the reliability analysis are higher than 0.8, it is categorized as having good reliability.

Moreover, the results of the validity of the items are as below:

Table 3. Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Item 1	36.1389	63.666	.715	.914
Item 2	35.8056	62.504	.621	.919
Item 3	35.6667	66.686	.584	.919
Item 4	35.9167	63.621	.712	.914
Item 5	35.8611	63.380	.776	.911
Item 6	35.6667	66.629	.564	.920
Item 7	36.1111	63.644	.707	.914
Item 8	36.2778	63.806	.739	.913
Item 9	35.9167	65.336	.617	.918
Item 10	36.3056	63.475	.700	.914
Item 11	36.2222	61.263	.812	.909
Item 12	35.8611	65.666	.568	.920

This output is to find the item's validity. It can be seen in the column Corrected Item-Total Correlation. Then those results were compared with the r-table of the product moment correlation. If the coefficient is positive and higher than the r-table of product moment, then the item is valid, and vice versa (Priyatno, 2012). To see the value in the r-table with N = 36, the value is 0.329. Dealing with Table 3, it can be seen that there are no items in a negative direction, as well as items less than the r-table of the product moment coefficient. Therefore, it can be stated that all items are valid.

b. Learners' Difficulties

The questionnaire results of the learner's difficulties in writing the introduction part of the research proposal are shown in the following table:

Table 4. The results of the learner’s difficulties in writing introduction part of research proposal

Items	Responses										Total	Total Percentage
	SA	%	A	%	N	%	D	%	DA	%		
1	3	8,3	9	25,0	14	38,9	9	25,0	1	2,8	112	62,2%
2	9	25,0	8	22,2	11	30,6	6	16,7	2	5,6	124	68,9%
3	4	11,1	18	50,0	9	25,0	5	13,9	0	0,0	129	71,7%
4	5	13,9	10	27,8	13	36,1	8	22,2	0	0,0	120	66,7%
5	4	11,1	13	36,1	12	33,3	7	19,4	0	0,0	122	67,8%
6	6	16,7	13	36,1	13	36,1	4	11,1	0	0,0	129	71,7%
7	4	11,1	8	22,2	13	36,1	11	30,6	0	0,0	113	62,8%
8	2	5,6	9	25,0	11	30,6	14	38,9	0	0,0	107	59,4%
9	3	8,3	14	38,9	12	33,3	6	16,7	1	2,8	120	66,7%
10	2	5,6	11	30,6	6	16,7	17	47,2	0	0,0	106	58,9%
11	3	8,3	10	27,8	9	25,0	13	36,1	1	2,8	109	60,6%
12	5	13,9	12	33,3	11	30,6	8	22,2	0	0,0	122	67,8%
Total											1413	785,0%
Mean											117,75	65,4%
												(Neutral)

Note: SA= Strongly Agree; A= Agree; N= Neutral; D= Disagree; SD= Strongly Disagree

By concerning the table 4, it can be found some findings by analyzing each item. Item number 1: “*I have difficulty understanding the format of Chapter I (Introduction).*” It can be revealed that there were three learners (8.3%) who strongly agreed with the statement that they had difficulty understanding the format of the introduction part. Eight learners (22.2%) agreed, then eleven learners (30.6%) answered neutral, which means that they were unsure whether or not they had understood properly the format of the introduction part of the research proposal. Nine learners (25%) disagreed and one learner (2.8%) strongly disagreed with the statement, which implied that they had a proper understanding of the format of the introduction part. Overall, the learners' answers were neutral, with a total of 112, which was classified as a neutral category by a level of agreement of 62.2%. This research shows that there are varying levels of understanding among learners regarding the format of Chapter I (Introduction) in research proposals. Only a small percentage finds it very difficult or very confident in their understanding.

Item number 2: “*I have difficulty in selecting the topic and making the title suitable for my interest in research.*” There were nine (25%) strongly agreeing and eight (22.2%) agreeing with the statement. This shows that almost half of the

learners face real challenges in the early stages of the research process. Moreover, eleven (30.6%) learners felt neutral. It means that they are unsure about the extent to which they understand or address the problem of selecting a topic and creating a research title. It is surprising that six (16.7%) and two (5.6%) learners disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement given. This shows that there are a number of learners who feel quite confident about their abilities in this aspect. The total percentage was 68.9%, and the score was 124, which is categorized as agree-response. As a recommendation, to overcome this problem, interventions designed to help them develop skills and confidences in the early stages of the research process are needed.

Item number 3: *"I have difficulty in writing the introduction of a proposal while developing the origins of the problem or topic I am researching."* In this case, more than half of the learners (61.1% a combination of strongly agree and agree responses) had difficulties developing the topic they investigated. Then nine learners (25%) were still feeling neutral. This uncertainty could indicate that they are hesitant or unsure whether or not they are having difficulty writing the introduction. And only five learners (13.9%) disagreed with the case. Last, nobody answers strongly disagree with the case. The total score was 129, which was classified as agreeable, with a final percentage of 71.7%. In short, this shows that only a small percentage feel confident enough about their abilities in this aspect.

Furthermore, item number 4, *"I have difficulty justifying why problems related to my topic are important in writing a proposal introduction,"* Most learners (41.7%, a mix of strongly agree and agree) admitted that they had difficulty justifying why issues related to their topic were important when writing a proposal introduction. This shows that almost half of the learners face challenges in this aspect. As many as 36.1% of learners felt neutral about this statement. This uncertainty could indicate that they are hesitant or unsure whether they truly understand or have overcome the problem of justifying the importance of their topic. A small group of learners (22.2%) felt that they had no difficulty justifying the importance of issues related to their topic. This shows that there are

a number of learners who feel quite confident about their abilities in this aspect. In this case, the total score was 120, which was classified as a neutral level with a final percentage of 66.7%. Overall, the conclusion was that the majority of respondents did not have a strong opinion about the statement, indicating confusion, uncertainty, or a lack of sufficient information.

Item number 5: *“I have difficulty in the background of the problem in supporting facts in the field about the topic I am discussing.”* 47.2% of the learners strongly agreed and agreed with the statement that they have problems proving the facts that relate to the topic. A large number of learners (33.3%) felt neutral about the statement. This could indicate that they are hesitant or unsure about how well they can support the facts on the ground regarding their topic. Finally, 19.4% of them responded that they disagreed, and no one strongly disagreed with the statement. It indicates only some of them had no difficulty supporting facts in the field. This shows that there are a number of learners who feel quite confident about their abilities in this aspect. The final score, which was 122, was classified as a neutral level, with a final percentage of 67.8% indicating that overall, respondents tended not to have a strong opinion about the statement. They are somewhere in the middle, indicating confusion or uncertainty in this aspect.

Additionally, item number 6, *“I have difficulty in providing an explanation regarding the gap between theory and facts in the field related to the topic.”* There were six learners (16.7%) who extremely agreed, and thirteen (36.1%) agreed with the item given. This shows that more than half of the learners face significant challenges in this aspect. Then thirteen (36.1%) were not sure if or not they had problems providing an explanation of the gap in their research. Only some of them (11.1%) who answered disagreed, and no one strongly disagreed. They have no difficulty explaining the gap between theory and facts in the field. The final score was classified as an agreement level, with a final percentage of 71.7% indicating that overall, respondents tended to agree that they experienced difficulty in explaining the gap between theory and facts in the field.

Item number 7: *“I have difficulty in writing the Identification of the Problem section.”* In this case, there were 33.3%, which was a combination of the learners’ answers in strongly agree and agree. They felt that they still had difficulties identifying the problems. Then 36.% showed that they felt neutral to the case. This suggests that many learners are unsure about how well they can write the identification of the problem section. A small group of learners (11.1%) felt that they had no difficulty writing the identification of the problem section. No learners strongly disagreed with this statement, confirming that the majority of learners acknowledged challenges or uncertainty in writing the identification of the problem section. This suggests that there are a small number of learners who feel quite confident about their abilities in this aspect. The total score (113) was classified as neutral. It supports 62.8% as the final percentage. It showed that overall, respondents tended to feel neutral about the difficulty in writing the identification of the problem section. This indicates that there is considerable confusion or uncertainty among the learners.

Item number 8: *“I have difficulty determining the limitations of the problem in writing a proposal.”* The results of the statement were two (5.6%) and nine (25%) who strongly agreed and agreed to the statement given. It means that not more than half of them had difficulties determining the limitations of the problem when writing a proposal. Then there were eleven learners (30.6%) who were unsure whether they had or not difficulties limiting the problems of the issue. Meanwhile, fourteen learners (38.9%) disagreed, and no one strongly agreed with the statement, which implies that they did not really have a problem determining the limitations of their research papers. Then the final score is classified as neutral criteria, with a final percentage of 59.4% indicating that overall, respondents tend to feel neutral about the difficulty in determining the limitation of the problem in their research proposal.

Item number 9, *“I have difficulty formulating research questions,”* had three learners (8%) who strongly agreed and fourteen (38.9%) who agreed with the statement. It indicates that they tend to have difficulties formulating their research question. Twelve learners (33.3%) were neutral toward the item. It means

that they felt curious and doubted whether they really grasped how to formulate the research questions. Moreover, six learners (16.7%) disagreed, and one (2.8%) strongly disagreed with the case given. This shows that there are some learners who feel quite confident about their abilities in this aspect. The ending score was 120; it was classified as a neutral level, with an agreement percentage of 66.7%. It showed that overall, respondents tended to feel neutral about the difficulty in formulating research questions.

Item number 10: “*I have difficulty formulating research objectives.*” It was found that 36.2% of the learners strongly agreed and agreed to the item. This shows that about one-third of the learners face challenges in formulating research objectives. Then six learners (16.7%) responded to the neutral position. This shows that only a small portion of learners are doubtful or unsure about their ability to formulate research objectives. Surprisingly, almost half of the learners (47.2%) claimed to disagree, and nobody strongly disagreed with the statement, indicating that almost half of the learners felt they had no difficulty formulating research objectives. The total score is 106. This result was at a neutral level, with a final percentage of 58.9%. These results indicate that, overall, respondents tend to feel neutral about the difficulties in formulating research objectives.

Item number 11: “*I have difficulty explaining the significance of my study topic for learners, lecturers, readers, and future researchers.*” Three learners (8.3%) extremely agreed, and ten learners (27.8%) agreed with the statement that they have difficulties explaining the significance of the research. Nine learners (25%) could answer that they were feeling doubt about their position if they could properly explore the significance of doing their research. The majority of learners (38.9%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement, indicating that more than a third of the learners felt they had no difficulty explaining the importance of their research topic. The final results showed that the score was 109 at the neutral level, with a percentage agreement of 60.6%. It showed that overall, respondents tended to feel neutral about the difficulty in explaining the importance of the research topic.

Finally, in item number 12, “*I have difficulty in providing definitions of scientific terms related to my research topic,*” in this case, 47.2% of the learners claimed they had problems defining the key term in their research proposal. A large number of learners (33.3%) felt neutral about the statement. This suggests that there is uncertainty among many learners about their ability to define scientific terms. A small group of learners (22.2%) disagreed with this statement, indicating that a small number of learners felt quite confident in their ability to define scientific terms. No learners strongly disagreed with the statement, indicating that those who felt they had no difficulty only disagreed to the extent of agreeing. The final score was classified as neutral criteria, with a final percentage of 67.8% indicating that overall, respondents tended to feel neutral about the difficulty in defining scientific terms.

Overall, the learners’ agreement level with the difficulties in writing the introduction section of the research proposal was 117.75, which was determined as neutral criteria. It was supported by the final percentage of 65.4%. This conclusion shows that learners generally do not have a strong opinion regarding the difficulty of writing an introduction to a research proposal. This neutral feeling could reflect confusion, uncertainty, or a lack of confidence in their skills.

c. Learners’ solutions

The learners’ difficulties in writing the introduction section of their research proposal are serious problems because they will affect the quality of their performance in accomplishing their research proposal. Therefore, they need to find the best ways to solve the problems. Concerning the data found, here are some solutions that the learners used.

The first solution is to read a lot of related references to the topic. Here are some valid data: Learner 1 stated, “*We need more references related to the topic.*” Learner 2 also said, “*The solution i find reference in internet and then i learn the problem.*” Learner 3 confirmed, “*I have to read more sources/references to find research ideas and titles that appropriate with my interests.*” The references used can be from a book, journal, or theses. As student 4 stated, “*The solution I took*

was to read several journals so that my mind could be opened and I could get motivation and procedures for writing each chapter in the proposal.” In brief, one of the main solutions identified by learners to overcome difficulties in writing the introductory section of a research proposal is to read lots of references related to their topic.

The second solution is to discuss it with the lecturer, friends, or others. It proves this, as student 5 said, *“Asking the Lecture about my difficulties in writing Introduction chapter of Research Proposal ...”* and student 6 also claimed, *“I ask my friend who is known more than me.”* It can be concluded that discussing with lecturers, friends, or other people who are more experienced is an effective solution to help learners overcome difficulties in writing the introductory part of their research proposal. These discussions can provide new insights, clarification, and support needed to improve the quality of their writing.

The third solution is to use technology. Student 7 argued, *“I usually search a proposal which is similar to mine to get an example of how to write the content... Sometimes, I also ask chat GPT to get me the outline and then put it together with my understanding,”* student 8 *“If I have difficulty in designing a proposal, I usually ask my friends or look for a solution by asking a search engine like Google. If I don't find a bright spot, I will use AI chat such as chatGPT and Google Gemini.”* It sums up that utilizing technology can be a very effective tool to help learners understand and develop their research proposals. Technology provides quick access to a variety of relevant sources of information and examples.

Finally, it can be concluded that learners struggle with writing introductions for research proposals, which influences their performance. To cope with these challenges, they must learn the best ways to overcome them, as found in the data, such as by reading a lot of related references, discussing them with the lecturer, friends, or others, and using technology.

Discussion

The research results showed that the learners' level of agreement regarding the difficulty of writing the introductory part of a research proposal was at a total score of 117.75, which was categorized as neutral criteria with a final percentage of 65.4%. This indicates that learners generally do not have a strong opinion regarding the difficulty of writing an introduction to a research proposal. These neutral feelings may reflect confusion, uncertainty, or a lack of confidence in their skills.

Some learners expressed difficulty in understanding the format of the introductory section of a research proposal. This emphasizes the importance of clear and structured guidelines regarding the expected writing format (Klimova, 2019). Many learners find it difficult to choose a topic and formulate research questions. This indicates the need for more specific guidance and support in the early stages of research (Kumar, S. & Nizam, 2021). Then they have difficulty developing the background to the problem and explaining the importance of their research. This shows that they need more practice in constructing strong and relevant arguments (Sari, A. W., & Wahyuni, 2020). Moreover, providing facts that support and explain the gap between theory and reality is also a challenge for learners. This indicates the need for a deeper understanding of how to integrate literature and field data in their writing (Tran, T. H., & Duong, 2020).

Concerning the learners' solutions in solving their difficulties are as follows. Learners suggest reading more references related to their topic. This can help them understand various writing approaches and enrich their knowledge of the topics discussed (Ajayi, 2019). Involve lecturers and friends in discussions to get input and feedback. This interaction can provide new perspectives and clarification about the difficulties faced (Chien, 2020). Moreover, leverage technology, such as search engines and AI, to search for proposal examples and get writing guidance. This technology can be an effective tool in overcoming writing difficulties (Zhao, Y., & Jiang, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The researchers conclude that the learners' neutral feelings about the difficulty in writing the introduction section of a research proposal reflected confusion, uncertainty, or a lack of confidence in their writing skills. The most important aspects that the learners found were in developing the origins of the problem or topic in their introduction section and in providing an explanation regarding the gap. They have some of the best ways to solve their difficulties, such as by reading a lot of related references, discussing them with the lecturer, friends, or others, and using technology. By providing more guidance, support, and relevant resources, it is hoped that learners can overcome these difficulties and improve their writing skills.

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