

# Undergraduate Students' Difficulties In Writing A Research Proposal: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to investigate the problems faced by the students of English Educational Study Program at one of private university in Jambi City. This study was also particularly conducted to find out the real difficulties that appeared when the students were in the process of writing a thesis proposal as the final compulsory to complete the study. Some previous studies focused on the common mistakes, possible problems, and grammatical problems made by the students who learn English as a Foreign Language, whereas lack of data has been found on the factors that appears when the students write a thesis. There were 12 participants chosen purposely at one of private university in Jambi City at eighth semester. The study was designed as a qualitative case study and involved a demographic questioner and face-to-face interviews for data collection. The result revealed that there are four factors which faced by the students when writing a thesis proposal, they are psychological, socio-cultural, linguistics, and cognitive factors became main problems. As the solution, students should prepare their readiness and ability before writing a research proposal for thesis. Suggestions for further research are also discussed.

**Index Terms:** cognitive, linguistics, proposal, psychological, socio-cultural

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a part of research paper which is often written by people seeking grant funding for a research project or students planning to make a thesis or dissertation as a key requirement to earn an academic title such as a bachelor or a master's degree (Belwal, 2016). While writing a research proposal for thesis is an activity of writing using scientific and systematic way aiming at finding, proofing, and developing knowledge and also purposely to plan and evaluate something to convince the readers and making them believe with the solution offered by the researcher. Unfortunately, it is quite possible for second language learners to find the problems in generating ideas for writing for a particular topic. Raimes (2015) states that when the students complain about how difficult it is to write in a second language which is not only of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also difficult of finding and expressing ideas in second or foreign language. Meanwhile Payne and Turner (1999), and Strickland (2002) explain that students with writing difficulties to communicate their ideas in writing sentences, using punctuation in sentences and using grammatically accepted vocabulary and paragraph organization. This research was conducted to answer the students' difficulties in writing a thesis proposal at English educational study program. Yusuf (2013) in his research found that there are three elements of research proposal which become serious problems for the students in writing thesis proposal. The three elements are writing methodology, review of literature, and introduction. Another factor hinders the students writing thesis proposal is a lack of reference which causes unrelevant topic, poor in theories, unclear statement of the problem, ignorance about limitations, and tend to have plagiarism (Peter, 2015). While Wang (2012) found that the students encountered such problems as lack of theoretical knowledge and logical organization, lack of ability to synthesize literature, and lack of critical thinking in the process of writing.

With the process of doing assignments for the academic writing course, the participants gradually learned to negotiate with their supervisors and interact with their peers. The critical comments and suggestions they obtained from their supervisors and peers helped them narrow down their research topics, design feasible research plans, and eventually complete the proposals. This case study research utilized an interview protocol in finding out students' difficulties in composing a thesis proposal. While research question was "What are the main factors of difficulties faced by the students in composing a research proposal?"

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Payne and Turner (1999) and Strickland et al. (2002) explained in Josephine (2012) students with writing problem have difficulties in writing to communicate their ideas. They may present difficulties in making sentences, using punctuation in sentences and using grammatically accepted vocabulary and paragraph organization. It may be difficult for someone to read their handwriting as some of them write letters upside down or mirror writing. Most of them have many spelling mistakes in their writing. With these problems, they are always faced with poor academic achievement. Many undergraduate students might have had some problems and difficulties that they faced in writing a research proposal for thesis, beside English as second/foreign language may encounter them difficult to write a research proposal for thesis also that is might their first experience as an undergraduate. Raimes in Ibrahim (2015) thinks that when students complain about how difficult it is to write in a second language, they are talking not only about the difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing ideas in another language. The major problems areas in students' attempts at academic writing are shown below, which have been identified by the psychologist Williams J. Lamberg (as cited in Aragón et al. 2013) as follows:

- 1) They lack self-management skills. Symptoms include a history of incomplete courses, turning in papers late, and not knowing specifics details of the assignments such as due date or amount required.
- 2) They lack a strategy for composing and have no set of procedures for working through a writing assignment from beginning to end.

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- 3) They fail to understand and follow directions. They may write good papers but do not follow the instructor's assignment.
- 4) They write poorly organized papers and sometimes fail to select a topic. They have many errors and patterns of errors; in other words, they lack a system of proofreading.
- 5) Their papers lack introductions.
- 6) They have problems in understanding and accepting the teachers' criticism.

## 2.1 Research Proposal Writing

Nicholas (2011) suggests that research is a very general term for an activity that involves finding out, in a more or less systematic way, things you did not know. A more academic interpretation is that research involves finding out about things that no-one else knew either. It is about advancing the frontiers of knowledge. The researcher concluded kind of this research refers to academic research because using scientific and systematic way aim to finding, proofing, and developing knowledge. Accessed in [www.sc.edu.doc](http://www.sc.edu/doc) research proposals are informative and persuasive writing because they attempt to educate the reader and to convince that reader to do something. The goal of the writer is not only to persuade the reader to do what is being requested, but also to make the reader believe that the solution is practical and appropriate. In persuasive proposal writing, the case is built by the demonstration of logic and reason in the approach taken in the solution. The effectiveness of a proposal will depend on the ability to explain the nature, context and scope of your project.

## 2.2 Students' Problems in Writing a Research Proposal

In higher education especially in English academic, student not only demand to master listening, speaking and reading but also demand able to write specifically in writing a paper, a research proposal and thesis/dissertation. In fact, in real life many of students do not write very often and most what they write just they do in classroom or if lecturer asked them to make an assignment. Excerpted in *oxford dictionary*, problem (*n*) refers to thing that is difficult to deal with or understand. In other words, problem is a situation that not expected or a factors cause confusing situation. Problems in writing will appear if students' not yet mastered in another English skill, moreover they not just write what they like but writing with English form and following certain rules in research proposal design of course this become their problems and barrier in writing a research proposal for thesis. Payne and Turner (1999) and Strickland, et.al (2002) explained in Josephine (2012) students with writing problem have difficulties in writing to communicate their ideas. They may present difficulties in making sentences, using punctuation in sentences and using grammatically accepted vocabulary and paragraph organization. It may be difficult for someone to read their handwriting as some of them write letters upside down or mirror writing. Most of them have many spelling mistakes in their writing. With these problems, they are always faced with poor academic achievement. Many undergraduate students might have had some problems and difficulties that they faced in writing a research proposal for thesis, beside English as second/foreign language may encounter them difficult to write a research proposal for thesis also that is might their first experience as an undergraduate. Raimes in Ibrahim (2015) thinks that when students complain about how difficult it is to

write in a second language, they are talking not only about the difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing ideas in a new language. The researcher thought the basic factors faced by the students' in writing a research proposal is English as a foreign language for them so it make them hard to understand the regulation how to write and how to express their idea in a research proposal for thesis. However, the researcher also inserted another factors excerpted by experts in some research. The major problems areas in students' attempts at academic writing are shown below, which have been identified by the psychologist Williams J. Lamberg in Aragón et. al (2013) as follows:

- 1) They lack self-management skills. Symptoms include a history of incomplete courses, turning in papers late, and not knowing specifics details of the assignments such as due date or amount required.
- 2) They lack a strategy for composing and have no set of procedures for working through a writing assignment from beginning to end.
- 3) They fail to understand and follow directions. They may write good papers but do not follow the instructor's assignment.
- 4) They write poorly organized papers and sometimes fail to select a topic. They have many errors and patterns of errors; in other words, they lack a system of proofreading.
- 5) Their papers lack introductions.
- 6) They have problems in understanding and accepting the teachers' criticism.

While Ibrahim (2015) explains that there are two problems that hamper students to effective writing in English. Firstly, linguistics problems includes grammatical problems such as verbs take different forms depending on tense and subject they used with, they create problems for second language writing students (Tyner, 1987). Sentence structure problems such as incapable learners use run-on, incorrect, and fragmented sentences (West, 1983), and problem of word choice such as when the writer practices the choice of vocabulary that would reflect a concern for the reader and the purpose of writing, the composition written by the the students would become sensible to his/her reader (Reid, 1983). Secondly, cognitive problems includes problems of punctuation such as students' writing encounter punctuation problems as there are no universal rules of punctuation (Carol and Wilson, 1995). The problems appears such as capitalization in rules of capitalization and classifying nouns as proper and common nouns is difficult for students (Gowere et.al, 1995). Spelling problems due to the influence of other languages, variant pronunciations and other historical reasons, the English spelling system which has become inconsistent is complex for students (Gowere et al., 1995). Content problems appears as learners of English as a second or foreign language when the students exploring ideas and thought to communicate with others (Clifford, 1987). Organization problem appears as learners have in structuring the paragraph, topic development of a paragraph, structuring the whole discourse and a theme in a discourse (Khurma, 1986). Furthermore, Ibrahim (2015) adds the causes of learners' problems in writing such as the nature of writing process, lack motivation, inadequate time, lack of practice, and teacher's feedback. On the other hand, Fareed, Ashraf,

and Bilal (2016 quoted from Hyland (2003) and Haider (2012) stated that students writers face various writing problems at different stages of their learning. Generally, these problems can be classified into linguistic, psychological, cognitive and pedagogical categories. Similarly, Dwihandini, Mahaeni, and Suarnajaya (2012) formulated the factors affecting undergraduate students' difficulties in writing thesis in English language, those factors raised by Brown (2007) as psychological factor, socio-cultural factor, and linguistic factor. Based on the whole explanation, the researcher formulates the students' problems in writing a research proposal for thesis as follows:

### 1) Psychological Factors

The factors relates to the writers' internal factors can also be known as the psychological factor which mentioned by Brown quoted in Dwihandini, Marheni, and Suarnajaya (2013) affected the decision of a learner to create the objective of a research, the data for the research, findings of the research, and the whole research based on the proved ratio. Motivation as a part of important factor for students English as a second or foreign language in writing a research proposal (Brown, 2007). So, motivation becomes the most important factor for students in conducting a research proposal as stated in Ibrahim (2015). Another problem in psychological factors adopted from the psychologist Williams J. Lamberg in Aragón et al. (2013) above includes; lack self-management skills, lack a strategy for composing and have no set of procedures for working through a writing assignment from beginning to end, fail to understand and follow directions, write poorly organized papers and sometimes fail to select a topic, their papers lack introductions, and they have problems in understanding and accepting the teachers' criticism.

### 2) Socio-cultural Factors

Since language cannot be separated from culture, it is also important to analyze the difficulties in writing thesis through the eyes of the socio-cultural factors. Brown (2007) claims that culture becomes strongly important thing in the the learning of a second or foreign language. Quoted from Dwihandini, Marhaeni, and Suarnajaya (2013) the focus factor on socio-cultural arises to the students' problems in writing thesis. There are three aspects of socio-cultural in writing a thesis, (a) the social distance among each students, and the relationship between undergraduate students and their lecturers; (b) the culture in the language classroom of the undergraduate students, and, (c) the communicative competence among each undergraduate students, and the communicative competence between undergraduate students and their lecturers.

### 3) Linguistic Factors

As Hedge in Ibrahim (2015) thought that so as the writer to compensate the absence of the prosodic features in writing, he/she has to write with high degree of organization, careful choice of vocabulary and using complex grammatical devices. In this linguistic factor that hamper students' effective writing in English includes grammatical problems, sentence structure problems and problem of word choice (diction).

### 4) Cognitive Factors

Lastly is cognitive factor, adopted from Ibrahim's (2015) research in cognitive factor that affecting students' problems in

writing a research proposal includes punctuation, capitalization, spelling, content, sample and taking sampling. In this research, the researcher was choosing purposive sampling as a technique of sampling to select the sample of participants. Jack and Norman (2009) said purposive sampling is rather use judgment to select a sample that the researcher believes, based on prior information, will provide the data needs. While, Louis, Lawrence and Keith (2007) said in purposive sampling, often (but by no means exclusively) a feature of qualitative research, researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgment of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs. In this research, the researcher just chooses Twelve (12) students as samples from 54 participants as Adler and Adler in Sarah and Rosalind (2012) advise graduate students to sample between 12 and 60, with 30 being the mean; and Ragin suggests that a glib answer is 20s for an M.A. thesis and 50s for a Ph.D. dissertation'. Similarly, Guest, Bruce, and Johnson (2006) in John (2000, 2018) said that saturation often occurred around 12 participants (sample size) in homogenous groups. The researcher also will establishing some criteria, such as: students who registered as the eighth semester of English Education Study Program in regular class in academic year 2017/2018 and finished the subject seminar on English Language Teaching, from the subject score wastook students who got low score as samples, students' who ready and have time to be interviewing, students' who already wrote a research proposal for thesis, and students' who ready to give real not fake information its mean not based on their artificial information.

## 3. METHODS

The research is a qualitative with a case study approach (Mukminin, Kamil, Muazza, & Haryanto, 2017), and supported by Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that the goal of conducting a qualitative study has historically been "to explore, explain, or describe the phenomenon of interest" (p. 33) and a case study is one of the qualitative traditions in qualitative research. It is supported by Creswell (1994) states that it is commonly used to understand people's experiences and to express their perspective. This study was conducted in order to gain more in-depth information concerning the factors causing difficulties in writing thesis proposal faced by students at one private university in Jambi City.

### 3. 1 Research Sites, Access, and Participants

The site for study was one of private university in Jambi City which English Educational Study Program students was taken as the sample. There were 54 students from two classes A and B at study program which purposedly 12 students taken as the sample in academic year 2017/2018. All the participants are in the eighth semester who take thesis as a final assignment to complete their study. Sampling procedure of this research was purposive sampling. Johnson & Christensen (2008) states that purposive sampling is specified the characteristics of a population of interest and then tried to locate individuals who have those characteristics. The participants in this research included two regular classes (A and B) at the eighth semester students of English Educational Study Program at one private university in Jambi City in academic year 2017/2018. The subject chose due to

academically had registered a seminar subject while writing proposal was also proposed as thesis title at the end of program. The problems analyzed through interview relating to the case and to keep the students' identity, they were referred by pseudonym.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Lawrence and Keith (2007) said that the interview is a flexible tool for data collection, enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard. The order of the interview may be controlled while still giving space for spontaneity, and the interviewee can press not only for complete answers but also for responses about complex and deep issues. The researcher first carried out demographic questionnaire, and then continued to conduct the interview to the participants. The place of doing the interview depended on the participants. Sometimes, the participants did not have the time in the school; therefore we interviewed the participant in their dormitory. For doing this interview, it took around 15-30 minutes, while it depended with the participant's answer. If they did not give much comment, it only need a few minutes. In doing this interview, we used Indonesian language in order to avoid misunderstanding. After having interviews the researcher wrote all data into English language.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

In this research we used *semi-structured* form and face to face one by one *in-depth interview* with the participants as means to gain a deeper understanding of students' problem in writing a research proposal for thesis. In the interview the researchers ask follow-up questions and also ask things related to the explanations that have been presented to get detailed information on the subject matter. To achieve goal of this research, the focus questions for the interview adapted from related discussion about student's problems in writing a research proposal for thesis in chapter II and the form questions adopted from a research by Shagia (2016) *Writing Problems of Non-English Major Undergraduate Students in Bangladesh: an Observation*.

### 3.3 Trustworthiness

In this research, to establish the "trustworthiness" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 300 in Mukminin, 2012a) or to verify the accuracy of data, findings, and interpretations (Creswell 1998), the researcher completed the following procedures. First, our research undertook prolonged engagement and repeated interviews (Creswell 1998 & Merriam 1998). The researcher conducted individual interviews lasting between 15 and 20 minutes. Second, the researcher triangulated data through multiple interviews. According to Perry (2005), triangulation is "a procedure using multiple sources of data to see whether they converge to provide evidence for validating interpretations of results" (p. 251). Third, member checks were used in order to get participant feedback on the accuracy and credibility of the data, findings, interpretations, and conclusions. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314) explain that "the most critical technique for establishing credibility." To increase the dependability of the findings, we provided rich and thick description (Mukminin, Haryanto, Makmur, Failasofah, Fajaryani, Thabran, & Suyadi, 2013).

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purposes of the study was to investigate the students' difficulties in writing a thesis proposal at eighth semester students of University of Batanghari Jambi academic year 2017/2018. The results are displayed as the following. The researchers had collected the data to twelfth (12) students' as the interviewee, the researcher found the data. In order to measure the percentage of the students' problem in writing a research proposal for thesis the researchers adopted the data display form from a research by Shagia (2016). The results show the percentage of the students' problem in writing a research proposal for thesis, included four (4) factors; psychological factor, socio-cultural factor, linguistic factor and cognitive factor. In addition, beside the percentage of the students' problems in four (4) factors the researcher also found another finding.

**Table 1. Psychological factors**

Psychological Factors	Problems	Percentage
Motivation	Easy-give up minded	33.3
Self-Management	Schramble schedule	91.7
Type of Research	Not confidence	58.3
Titling	Not sure with title	58.3
Receiving Critics	Pesimism	25

In this psychological factor finding, the researchers adopted from the factors that affecting in second language acquisition raised by Brown (2007) and from the psychologist Williams J. Lambert in Aragón et. al (2013), the factors that has been adapted as the interview questions including problems in motivation, lack self-management skill, directions/rules, select the topic or title and understanding and accepting the teachers' criticism.

**Table 2. Socio-cultural factors**

Socio-Cultural Factors	Problems	Percentage
Learning the Related Subject	Not focusing on the subject	58.3
Among Students' Relationship	sharing knowledge is not happened	58.3
Students-Lecturer Relationship	unharmony relationship	41.7
Students-Advisor Relationship	time management is not matched	16.7

In this socio-cultural factor finding, the researcher adopted from the factors excerpted in Dwihandini, Marhaeni, and Suarnajaya (2013), the factors that has been adapted as the interview questions including problems when learned the related subject, relationship and communication among each student, relationship and communication with the lecturer and relationship and communication with the advisers. The researchers argue that to be more accepting and understanding the material provided by the lecturer, students are expected to actively present to the class, so there is no missing material discussion about writing a research proposal for thesis. Unfortunately, from the interview result there were seven (7) students or 58,3 % from the samples inactive came to the class. So, of course this will be the first problem for these students in socio-cultural factors.

**Table 3. Linguistic Factors**

Linguistics Problems	Problems	Percentage
Grammatical	Writing experts' opinion	75
Sentence Structure	paraphrasing experts' ideas	75
Diction	using the certain word	83.3

In this linguistic factor finding, the researcher adopted from the factors excerpted in Ibrahim (2015), the factors that has been adapted as the interview questions including problems in grammatical, sentence structure and word choices (diction). From the result of students' interview responses above, it can be seen in linguistic factor, 83,3 % who had problem of word choices (vocabulary) in writing a research proposal for thesis, they usually ask to their friends, using dictionary and an application such as "Google Translate" to translating their words in scientific language.

**Table 4. Cognitive Factors**

Cognitive Factors	Problems	Percentage
Punctuation	colon, full stop, quotation	33.3
Capitalization	proper noun, common noun	25
Spelling	with, whit	41.7
Content	paraphrasing, tying between paragraph to	75
Organization	paragraph	58.3
Resources	getting resources	8.3

In this Cognitive Factor finding, the researcher adopted from the factors excerpted in Ibrahim (2015), the factors that has been adapted as the interview questions including problems in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, correct content and organization. From the students' response above, it can be seen that she has another problem besides the factors provided by the researcher. The problems are difficult in understanding Chapter III and she has difficulties to find resources. As the solution, she tried to understand it by reading peoples thesis.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In order to answers the research question, as results there are four (4) the students' problem factors in writing a research proposal for thesis, those factors included; psychological factor, socio-cultural factor, linguistic factor and cognitive factor. The psychological factor, there are five students' problems in writing a research proposal for thesis, included; motivation, lack self-management skill, directions/rules, select the topic (title) and understanding and accepting the teachers' criticism. As a result, from the findings and discussions before the researcher found the major problem in this factor is problem in lack of self-management skill. The socio-cultural factor, there are four students' problems in writing a research proposal for thesis, included; problems when learned the related subject, relationship and communication among each students, relationship and communication with the lecturer and relationship and communication with the tutor/adviser. As a result, from the findings and discussion before the researcher

found the major problem in this factor is problem when learned the related subject. The linguistic factor, there are three students' problem in writing a research proposal for thesis, included; problems in grammatical, sentence structure and word choices (vocabulary). As a result, from the findings and discussions before the researcher found the major problem in this factor is problem of word choices (vocabulary). The cognitive factor, there are five students' problem in writing a research proposal for thesis, included; problems in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, correct content and organization. As a result, from the findings and discussions before the researcher found the major problem in this factor is problem in writing with correct content. In addition to the four (4) student's problem factors in writing a research proposal for thesis the researcher also found another problem, the problem is difficult to find resources. The student said lack of resources in the library. Based on the researcher experienced, to solve this problem the researcher usually tried to find resources by searching on the internet because so many resources we could finds, such as journal, e-books, e-thesis, etc.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

From the student's problem factors above, the researcher concluded the main problem factor faced by the students' in writing a research proposal for thesis at the eighth semester of English education study program at one private university in Jambi City academic year 2017/2018 is problem that mostly came from themselves or psychological factor or the inner problems. Another problems came from advisor or lecturer is only lack of communication which resulted to misunderstanding of the materials given.

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