

COMMON FLAWS IN STUDENTS' RESEARCH PROPOSALS

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Abstract

Many novice proposal writers do not realize that what is written in their proposals is a reflection of what they will produce. A carelessly-designed and written proposal will result in questionable findings in terms of the validity and reliability. The paper aims at revealing common flaws found in research proposals.

As many as 30 proposals written by educational research class takers were analyzed. The analysis was focused on what constitutes an effective research proposal, that is, the presence or absence of necessary moves in the introductory section, consistence, diction, grammar and tenses, quoting and citing techniques, methods, and justification.

The result shows that only less than 7% of the proposals can be categorized as effective and flawless, in the sense that they meet all the above requirements, while the rest contain either minor or serious flaws. The absence of obligatory moves dominated the problem, 26 proposals in total failed in this category. Lack of vocabulary mastery dominated the diction problem, resulting in unnecessary redundancies and repeated use of general words instead of technical terms related to research methodology. Grammatical mistakes occurred mostly in the wrong use of tenses, verb phrases, passives, and parts of speech. The flawed respondents did not seem to understand the quotation and citation rules. The methodological flaws were incomplete designs, wrong techniques of data analysis, and failure to answer the research questions.

Key words: *flaws, obligatory moves, research methodology*

A. Introduction

A large number of students taking educational research course at the English education department find it difficult to write an effective research proposal. The research proposal is an end product that the students must make after attending a series of lectures and workshops on research proposal writing. The forms and formats of a research proposal can vary according to the convention and rules developed by the users or institutions, but, as a general rule, the format follows or is derived from a standard developed by boards of researchers such as the one developed by the American Psychological Association (APA).

A research proposal is normally in the written form. The purpose is to convince a funding source, reviewers, or other parties that the researcher can deliver a product, i.e.,

answer the research questions. Ross (2006) states that a researcher through his written proposal has to be able to convince others that he understands the issue, is familiar with what has been done in that area, can identify what is missing, and can do the work and deliver a high quality product. Those points characterize a good proposal, in the sense that it reflects a logic, methodologically correct, and easy-to-follow flow of research from the beginning to the final stage.

A corpus-based study of research abstracts conducted by Feng (2006) provides some useful insight for novice proposal writers by integrating lexical, pragmatic analysis and rhetorical move analysis. Feng's results show that the respondents use various ways in writing their abstracts, and that the absence or presence of a certain rhetorical move influences the readability of the abstracts.

This paper investigates common flaws --mistakes, errors, and deviations-- made by students of English Education Department of Yogyakarta State University (YSU) in their research proposal writing. The flaws can be used as a reflection of students' competence in composing a research proposal. The research project was a preliminary examination of students' work after attending a set of discussions and workshops on research methodology. The data concerning students' ability in writing a research proposal and the problems that they are usually facing will be used later to develop integrated materials for the educational research coursework.

The research focused on providing suitable answers to the research questions, i.e., what are the flaws in research proposals written by educational research class takers and what necessary topics should be included and emphasized in designing educational research materials for such class takers. Figuring out what the educational research class takers really need serves as a needs analysis stage, an important basis in developing the teaching materials. The so called problem-based approach to needs analysis --an approach focusing on the empirical data about the real hindrances faced during the research proposal writing-- aims at providing a precise description of the real needs in a more defensible and justifiable manner.

B. Aspects in a Research Proposal

The organization of a research proposal is vital. In order to write a well-organized proposal, a researcher needs to consider what to be included in the proposal and how it should be developed. What to be included in a research proposal may vary, but at least it should mention two sections. A section introduces the research topic or area and at least a question worthy of careful, thorough research. The next section should tell how the question will be answered. This section is the method section, in which any necessary procedure is proposed in order to prepare justifiable findings.

A researcher should begin his project with the introduction section. An introduction should contain all necessary descriptions of what a researcher wants to do and why he wants to do it. Swales and Feak (2004) propose moves to be included in an effective introduction paper. The moves are establishing a research territory, establishing a *niche*, and occupying the *niche*. The term *niche* is defined as a context where a particular piece of research makes particularly good sense. When a researcher is establishing his research territory, he needs to introduce and review items of previous research in the area, which is obligatory, and show that the research area is important, central, problematic, or relevant. He then should continue to establish a *niche*, either by indicating a gap or extending the previous knowledge. Occupying the niche can be done by outlining the purpose, listing research questions, announcing principal findings, stating the value of the present research, and indicating the structure of the research.

The method section should cover any necessary step and requirements needed to answer the research questions. It should describe the proposed method of the research, including who the participants will be, what equipment will be used, and which procedure will be followed (Roland, 2000). Specifying variables involved in the research is also necessary. A clearly structured method section is very important as a guide for the researcher in doing the steps of the whole procedure. The method tells how the researchers will attempt to resolve the research issue.

C. Evaluating Research Proposals

Evaluating a research proposal can be done from a number of different perspectives. The first and perhaps the most important side is the content, which focuses

on the methodology, i.e. the presence of all necessary parts in order to gain justifiable results. This includes the analysis of functional units of a proposal (Feng, 2006). The analysis can be focused on the moves contained in the introduction, the presence of adequate reasoning and relevant theories, and the clarity of the method.

The publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001) also provides a useful checklist to evaluate the content of a paper. The first five questions on the list focus on the content included in a research proposal. They are 1). is the research question significant, and is the work original and important, 2). have the instruments been demonstrated to have satisfactory validity and reliability, 3). are the outcome measures clearly related to the variables with which the investigation is concerned, 4). does the research design fully and unambiguously test the hypothesis, and 5) are the participants representative of the population to which generalizations are made? The answers to the above questions will lead to a conclusion whether a research proposal is feasible, whether the results can be trusted, and whether the project contains methodological weaknesses. A questionable output resulted from weak research may lead to a seriously flawed, misleading conclusion. The snowball effect will bring the condition worse when other researchers, practitioners, or research result users then take the conclusion for their own project or work.

Another important aspect is the language. This includes the grammatical aspects, diction, spelling, and the use of jargons. Grammatical errors, inconsistencies, and spelling errors reflect that the proposal writer is careless in the preparation stage of his project, and is therefore suspected that he will also be careless in conducting the research. A too technical research proposal containing too many jargons or technical terms is sometimes unacceptable, particularly because it will become quite difficult to understand by most readers and therefore limit the potential users. On the other hand, the use of too general terms may reflect that the proposal writer has very limited knowledge about the subject matter and is therefore judged to be incompetent.

Roland (2000) emphasizes the important role of methodological aspects. Methods are the heart of a research project, and a flawed method may lead to a biased result and conclusion. Insufficient methodological details will fail to convince anyone who reads and uses the product of the research. Data analysis techniques used in a research study

play a vital role in determining the feasibility of the study, and a mistaken technique employed in a study will make all the results useless.

D. Method

Students taking Educational Research classes at YSU were asked to participate in the study. The subjects were 30 students, each writing a research proposal, making a total of 30 proposals. The subjects had attended 12 intensive discussions and classes of how to conduct quantitative research projects. Any related aspect in this research study had been discussed in the class.

The research proposals written by the respondents after taking a one-semester course on conducting educational research were collected as the data of this research study. The category of the proposals is as follows.

Table 1. The Proposals

No	Design	Number of Proposal
1	Pre-experimental	4
2	Experimental	9
3	Quasi-experimental	8
4	Ex-post facto	9
Total		30

The analysis was focused on the presence or absence of necessary moves in the introductory section, consistence, diction, grammar and tenses, quoting and citing techniques, methodology, methods, and justification. The results were reported quantitatively in percentage. An additional discussion of the common flaws was given to give a clearer description of the data. The following table lists the focus of the analysis.

Table 2. Features to be analyzed

No	Feature
1	The move of establishing territory
2	The move of establishing a niche
3	The move of occupying the niche
4	Grammatical mistakes
5	Diction

6	Reference adequacy
7	Quoting technique
8	Sampling procedure
9	Technique of data analysis

E. Results and Discussions

The analysis shows that 28 proposals (93.3%) contain flaws in one or more aspects, and only 2 were regarded effective proposals. The flaws existed in various degrees, from a light, minor mistake to serious multiple errors. The following gives a more detailed description of the flaws.

1. Flaws in the introduction sections

a. The move of establishing territory

The analysis focused on whether the proposal contains this move, that is that the research is important, interesting, problematic, and that items of previous research in the area are mentioned. Almost all proposals (27) mentioned that the proposed research was problematic and important, and only 3 missed the move. However, 15 writers did not look at and use previous research studies in the same area as their starting point, which makes their proposals look like a totally new and the first research in the area. This flaw weakens the claim that the research is ‘important or problematic’.

b. The move of establishing a *niche*

The *niche* is established by indicating a gap in the previous research or by extending previous knowledge in some way. Almost all writers (26 proposals) mentioned in the introduction that there were gaps which lead them to conduct their proposed research. However, the gaps that they wrote were mostly the ones between ideal conditions and the reality, and only 2 had used the weaknesses or results of a previous study in the area as a starting point of their proposals. Gaps that confront ideal conditions with the observed situations will look weak or mild, particularly because they do not convince board of other researchers who think that only empirical, scientific evidence can support ideas.

c. The move of occupying the niche

This move is done by outlining the purposes or stating the nature of the study, by listing research questions, and by proposing the value of the research. All proposals contained this move, although some of them were incomplete.

In general, the absence of the above three obligatory moves dominated the problem, 26 proposals in total failed in this category (8 missed 1 move, 12 missed 2 moves, and 6 missed all moves). Because the first move becomes the basis for the second and the second to the third, the absence of the first and the second makes the purposes stated in the proposals less convincing. Those writers who missed the first moves then looked like “the first in their area”, nobody else has been in the area before, and they started from their own intuition and observation, no one has observed the area before them. Suriasumantri (1996) states that in order to step ahead, a researcher must step on other researchers’ shoulders. To keep the research on the right track, the researcher must use the result of previously conducted research as his starting point.

The way how a proposal writer lays out the argument in the opening sections is influential. No matter how well a researcher conducts the research steps, when he fails to convince others that the research has strong reasoning, the good result will become less acknowledged. Making a convincing introduction should be put as one of the central points in proposal writing steps and the teaching of proposal writing.

2. Language and form flaws

Grammatical mistakes occurred mostly in the use of wrong tenses, verb phrases, passives, and parts of speech. Grammatical mistakes were found in 22 proposals: agreement problems –most common flaws--, 143 cases in 22 proposals, run-on sentences (8 cases in 6 proposals) and fragments (22 cases in 16 proposals). Other cases are inappropriate or missing articles (57 cases in 22 proposals), wrong pronoun reference (34 in 13), pronoun shifts, i.e. using the researcher, him, I, and my interchangeably to refer to the same single person (8 proposals).

The lack of vocabulary dominated the diction problem, resulting in unnecessary redundancies and repeated use of general words instead of technical terms related to

research methodology. The problems concerning the use of substituting words for technical terms commonly used in research were the use of aspects to mean variables, do to mean carry-out, look to mean investigate, and way to mean method.

Reference inadequacy is another problem found in the proposals. As many as 23 proposals fell in this category. There were 6 proposals that did not give any reference of theoretical review to one of the variables involved in the research, 7 gave irrelevant theoretical backgrounds, and 10 gave inadequate reference.

Quoting technique was another serious flaw. The problems concerning this aspect included quotation exceeding the maximum permitted length, monotonous sentence forms, inaccurate paraphrases, and irrelevant citation. It was found that 24 proposals had excessively quoted from books or other references. The writers simply cut and pasted 2, 3 or even 9 paragraphs from the source and make them their own. The respondents did not seem to understand the quotation and citation rules. Instead of using different ways or structures, 7 used monotonous expressions ‘according to...’ and ‘... states’. Inaccurate paraphrasing technique resulted in unclear statements and biased meaning (6 proposals). One proposal had a serious flaw, because the quotation did not support the stated proposition.

Because the language used by a researcher influences his intended meaning, sometimes grammar flaws blur or even ruin the communication. Language aspects need to be considered because this is the main means of communicating the results of the project. People sometimes judge the quality of a research project from the way how the intended meaning is expressed in the research report, a full-of-mistakes piece of writing reflects the incapability of the writer in doing anything else, including doing the research. Even if the research project offers fascinating findings, the readers will still think of the connection between bad language organization and bad research skills.

3. Flaws in method section

Flaws in sampling procedure were inappropriate number of sample and selection technique. The problems were too small number of sample (5 proposals), and nonrandom technique for analysis requiring parametric statistics (9 proposals).

Technique of data analysis was another commonly mistaken part. There were 15 proposals using inappropriate techniques for analyzing the data. The flaw varied from incomplete procedures of data analysis to wrong choices of techniques. The methodological flaws were incomplete designs (6 cases), wrong techniques of data analysis, and failure to answer the research questions. In research involving experiments (9 proposals) all had used questionable research designs, 4 used wrong assumptions, and 2 were even had a wrong design. The techniques of data analysis written in the proposals varied, 50% of which had been incorrectly used.

The clarity of the method section serves as the guide for both the researcher and the readers or users. It can lead the researcher to resolve the research issues and keep him on the right way in preparing the correct answer in a correct way. For the users, it can be used to trace back how a research result has been achieved. The flaws found in the proposals bring them to a questionable procedure and, if the research is then actually carried out following those flawed proposals, the results will become useless essays, statements, and numbers.

F. Conclusion

The research proposal writing skills of the respondents were still below the expectation. A considerable number of flaws existed in all evaluated features. The most serious flaws were in the failure to write a supportive reasoning of why the research is necessary, the inappropriate techniques of constructing quotation, and the mistaken steps and wrong choice of statistical techniques of data analysis.

It does not mean that other features not mentioned above were flawless. To a certain extent, attention must be given to each feature investigated in the research study. To develop suitable teaching materials, this problem-based investigation can be taken into consideration.

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