



Undergraduate thesis proposal writing: Problems and causes

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ABSTRACT

Writing a research proposal is one of the requirements for university students to be able to write an undergraduate thesis. It requires high academic writing skills that most students find challenging. Even so, this skill can still be taught as long as lecturers have knowledge of students' abilities and difficulties in writing. This qualitative study is conducted to serve this purpose. They involve two data collection methods: document analysis and Focused Group Discussion (FGD). This case-study research investigated problems and causes in writing a research proposal faced by students studying Program Japanese Language at a public university in Bandung in writing a research proposal. The results were analyzed from general and specific factors as follows: generally, their problems lie in the lack of students' knowledge of systematicity, components, and elements supporting the components of a research proposal. Further, three factors were responsible for the causes of the problems, including low-quality references, insufficient information provided in the teaching materials and the teaching, and less exposure and effort on readings. The results of identifying the problems and causes will be used as a reference for developing teaching materials for writing research proposals in the Research Methodology Course.

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ABSTRAK

Sebagian besar mahasiswa jenjang pendidikan Sarjana menganggap penulisan proposal cukup menantang karena membutuhkan keterampilan menulis akademis yang tinggi. Pengetahuan tentang menulis akademik memegang peranan penting untuk membantu mahasiswa mengembangkan kemampuan dan meminimalisir kesulitan mereka dalam menulis proposal penelitian skripsi. Penelitian ini adalah penelitian kualitatif dengan melibatkan dua jenis metode pengumpulan data yaitu analisis dokumen (dokumen proposal penelitian) dan Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Penelitian studi kasus ini menyelidiki apa yang menjadi penyebab permasalahan dalam penulisan proposal penelitian yang dihadapi mahasiswa Program Studi Bahasa Jepang di salah satu perguruan tinggi negeri di Bandung. Dokumen dan data FGD dianalisis berdasarkan faktor umum dan faktor khusus, dan memiliki hasil sebagai berikut; permasalahan secara umum terletak pada kurangnya pengetahuan mahasiswa mengenai sistematika, komponen, dan unsur pendukung komponen proposal penelitian; sedangkan permasalahan khusus yang ditemukan adalah kesulitan mahasiswa dalam menentukan tema atau topik, mengorganisasikan ide dan teks, dan menggunakan fitur-fitur kebahasaan. Lebih jauh lagi, terdapat tiga faktor yang menjadi penyebab permasalahan-permasalahan tersebut, yaitu rendahnya kualitas referensi, kurangnya informasi yang diberikan dalam bahan ajar dan pengajaran, serta kurangnya upaya dalam membaca. Hasil identifikasi masalah dan penyebab yang didapat dari penelitian ini akan dijadikan acuan pengembangan bahan ajar penulisan proposal penelitian pada Mata Kuliah Metodologi Penelitian.

Kata Kunci: Proposal penelitian; masalah; mata kuliah metodologi penelitian; menulis; skripsi.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is one of the major skills learned by students in university. It is particular because of its formal style, objective consistency, and precise characteristics. Thus, this type of writing is notable as one of the most important skills students need to develop at the tertiary level. Students who learn academic writing, either as a subject or an assignment of a subject, generally understand that there are different kinds of academic writing, among others are research papers or articles, research proposals, journals, and final reports such as undergraduate thesis, thesis, and dissertation (Hadi, 2021).

One type of academic writing that becomes the focus of this research is a research proposal written before students working on an undergraduate thesis. In the Indonesian setting, this type of writing is called *proposal skripsi* or *proskrip*. This document is an embryo, a crucial element, and a significant step of the whole process defining the success of undergraduate thesis writing that contains the plan and design of research (Randolph, 2019). Similarly, this type of text does not appear to be something that comes naturally, learned not only by example but also by the reactions and suggestions of supervisors. If it is accepted, the research can be conducted. The final report (undergraduate thesis, thesis, or dissertation) can be written.

Further, in Indonesian settings, both in undergraduate and postgraduate programs, a research proposal is generally written after students complete all courses required. Most students consider this genre difficult yet important in their lives. Even so, research proposal writing can still be taught, and the lecturers' knowledge of students' abilities and difficulties is important in providing appropriate steps and guidance to help them develop their skills and minimize their challenges in writing undergraduate thesis research proposals. In other words, to be able to assist students in developing their skills in writing better research proposals, lecturers need to be able to identify students' problems and their causes when writing research proposals. This is the main focus of the research: investigating students' issues and their causes in writing research proposals at one Japanese Language Education Program of Study at one public university in Bandung, Indonesia (Alsaywid, 2019).

Studies on students' problems in writing undergraduate thesis research proposals in an Indonesian setting have been noted by many researchers, among others are Daniel and Taneo (2019) and Noermanzah (2020). Despite different methodology uses, including setting, participants, and data collection method, most research yielded similar results. Most focused on several aspects, such as the components (Introduction, Literature Review, and Methodology) and elements supporting the components or moves of a research proposal, the determination of the topic to investigate, the organization of the ideas, the writing of references, and the use of linguistic features.

Regarding the topic to investigate, all studies described that all students found that deciding on the topic they will explore is the hardest part of research. Either they kept changing the topic, or they did not even see one, or they even confused between the "title" and "theme/ topic" of the research (Daniel & Taneo, 2019; Noermanzah, 2020). As mentioned above, most studies center on the problems found in the main component of a research proposal (introduction, literature review, methodology) and references. The little study is focused on the whole aspects of the research proposal viewing systematics and the parts, including (1) the identity parts (cover, legal section, plagiarism statement, abstract); (2) the main component of the research proposal (introduction, literature review, and methodology, and (3) the closing part (references and appendices (if any)). Based on the results of previous research, this research will investigate students' problems and their causes in writing research proposals for undergraduate thesis by seeing its systematics and the whole parts of the component of the research proposal. The results of the identification of the problems and causes can be used as a basis for students' skill development in writing better research proposals (Lim, 2022).

This research concerns the problems and causes of university students of the Japanese Language Education Study Program in writing a research proposal for an undergraduate thesis at a state university in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. It is a preliminary study, conducted as a part of a need analysis before teaching material/ handout centering on the writing of research proposal for undergraduate thesis particularly used in Kenkyu Dezain is developed. This initial study aims to figure out the problems and causes of students in writing research proposals in the hope that the result can be used as one of the bases for the teaching materials/ handout development in Kenkyu Dezain's class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Writing

Academic writing is a fundamental skill needed in the academic world to facilitate and communicate research findings so that these results can contribute to various fields of knowledge in the academic community (Ansarifar et al., 2018). Academic writing is guided by clarity, coherence, and accuracy in communicating ideas and research results (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021). Therefore, all academics involved must understand these basic principles to write scientific papers well and by existing rules. Academic writing consists of various genres and types, including research papers, essays, reviews, theses, and dissertations. Each genre and type has a different structure, purpose, and context (Ansarifar et al., 2018). Especially for writing a thesis, which is divided into undergraduate thesis, master thesis, and doctoral thesis (dissertation), which is a requirement for completing studies and graduating students from university, special components must be considered in this type of academic writing. The three types of theses have more or less the same academic writing components. Still, this research will focus on writing an undergraduate thesis because an undergraduate thesis is the first step for students as novice researchers to communicate the results of research findings. It is hoped that if students have mastered the academic writing skills of an undergraduate thesis, these skills will equip them to write master theses and doctoral theses dissertations (Shahsavari, 2020).

Students' Ability to Write Research Proposals

Students who are writing an undergraduate thesis are required to have the ability to write scientific papers in the form of research proposals (Vikalina, 2020). Writing a research proposal requires skills and knowledge about how to write systematically (Liriwati, 2023; Mustikasari et al., 2023; Sukanti, 2023), according to the guidelines set by each university. Respect to the components of a research proposal, for example, most studies revealed some following points; (1) in terms of Introduction section, most problems lie in the incapability of students in writing background of the research (what and how to write), formulating research problems/ questions, and connecting the paradigm of the variables involved; (2) in relation to the literature review, students have little knowledge on providing what and how to write literature review, deciding what theories that are theoretically suitable for their own context of research, describing clearly the theory used in their research, relating the theory used to their context of research, analyzing the theory as they just list and describe the theory, and presenting what aspects cover the literature review; (3) with regard to research methodology, most research revealed that students have difficulty in finding the most suitable design for their context of research and in presenting the description of methodology (what to write and how to write) as they tend to just list the definition without giving further description on the connection with the research (Daniel & Taneo, 2019; Noermanzah, 2020).

To this, of all components of the research proposal, Zuriati (2017) further found that the most difficult element to write is the introduction section, particularly the research background (69.4%), which is also in line with Emilia and Swales, and Feak stating that writing a good introduction section always seems like a

battle hard won, or as Plato remarked that “the beginning is half of the whole.” Further, about the elements of the components or move, most studies found that most students have little knowledge of the organization of the structure. In the introduction section, for example, they do not recognize what element to start, where to describe the previous research, how to connect the last research to the research, and where to state the gap of research. Another instance is in the methodology section, where students do not justify the choice of oversampling or design, or in another case. Students do not elaborate on the data analysis. Concerning the organization of the ideas, most studies revealed that students have difficulties putting their ideas into language and organizing them into a good text (Daniel & Taneo, 2019). In the aspect of writing references, most studies discovered that most students do not follow the rules that have been set in the guidelines given. For example, the writing order is wrong, the writing is not based on alphabetical order, and the rules for writing types of sources for references are wrong or overlapped. Finally, for the use of linguistic features, most studies revealed that most students fail to create coherent and cohesive paragraphs, effectively use Indonesian sentences, use correct punctuations and spellings, and correctly apply Indonesian language structure (Juntunen, 2021).

METHODS

This study utilized the qualitative case-study method to identify problems and causes when writing a research proposal. The study was conducted in one Japanese Language Study Program at a public university in Bandung, Indonesia. The data were collected using document analysis and focused group discussion (Hennik, 2022). Thirty research proposals written by students from different batches were analyzed by referring to the guidelines published by the university and by the study program. Apart from that, one database informing the title of the undergraduate thesis was also analyzed to see the tendency of themes written by students. Meanwhile, the focused group discussion involved three parties: five lecturers, students’ supervisors, 30 who wrote the research proposals, and five alumni from different batches. This was used to confirm the results of analyses from the documents and to seek the causes contributing to the problems. The questions were semi-structured and recorded, allowing the interviewer and interviewee to discuss more topics in detail. The research proposals were analyzed from general and specific aspects. The general aspects, systematicities, components, and elements supporting the components and move were analyzed; meanwhile, particular aspects, all related to the texts, including topics/themes, organization of ideas and texts, and Indonesian linguistic features, were investigated.

Further, as mentioned above, the analyses were done by referring to several academic writing guidelines and theories incongruent with the research context. Firstly, to analyze the systematicities, components, and elements of the components, two guidelines for writing final reports (undergraduate thesis, thesis, and dissertation) published by the university and the Study Program of Japanese Language Education were used. Secondly, within the main component of each chapter, an analysis of metatexts included at the beginning of the chapters was also seen. This paragraph linking section plays a significant role in informing readers what is generally inside each chapter, making it easier and faster to find out what they want from the chapters. Therefore, several academic writing theories were employed apart from those two guidelines. These theories align with the research proposal's components under the guidelines published by the university, particularly for the elements supporting the components and the move. About the Indonesian Linguistic features, *Ejaan Yang Disempurnakan* (The Perfected Spelling System) 5 was used as the reference, looking at syntactic language, including sentence structure, clause pattern, linking device, correct vocabulary, punctuation, and spellings (Busetto, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As earlier stated, this research investigated the problems and causes of Japanese Language Education Study Program students at one public university in Bandung, Indonesia in writing a research proposal for an undergraduate thesis. The data analysis was done by seeing the general and specific factors causing the problems. The general issues were seen from three aspects: systematicities, components, and elements supporting the components. At the same time, the particular factors covered topics/themes, organization of ideas and texts, and Indonesian linguistic features. Each is illustrated below.

Problems in Writing Research Proposal

The overall systematicity of the research proposal under investigation was similar. It covers (1) the identity section that includes the cover page, validation page, abstract, table of contents, list of tables, list of figures (if any), and list of appendices (if any); (2) the main section, including chapter 1 Introduction, chapter 2 Literature Review, and chapter 3 Research Methodology; and (3) the closing section, namely references and appendices (if any). This aligns with the systematicity outlined in the guidelines of final report writing published by the university and the study program. Therefore, it indicates that, in general, most students have good knowledge of the systematicity of a research proposal. However, there were also some differences in terms of systematicity found in these three coverages, as explained below.

The Identity Section. The format of the identity section in each research proposal was not the same, especially in the parts of the 'abstract' and 'table of contents.' In some research proposals, the abstract was written by including 'research results and conclusions' even though it is still a research proposal. Similarly, some proposals included a 'table of contents' and 'list of figures'; however, the formats do not comply with the guidelines.

The Main Section. The systematicity in the main section of the research proposal varied. For example, in Chapter 1 of the Introduction, some wrote 'Limitation of the Problem' after 'Research Question,' but others also wrote 'Research Objectives' after 'Research Question.' In Chapter 3 on Research Methodology, some wrote 'Research Participants' after 'Research Methods,' and others wrote 'Research Methods' followed by 'Research Participants and Settings.'

The Closing Section. Some students who included the references in their research proposal did not write them in alphabetical order; some of them were not yet completed, and most reference writing did not comply with the rules as cited in the guidelines. This is quite similar, stating that most students do not follow the guidelines' reference writing rules. For example, the order in the writing is wrong, the writing is not based on alphabetical order, and the rules for writing types of sources for references are wrong or overlapped.

The distinction of systematicity within the sections of the research proposal may indicate that students were unaware of the guidelines to follow, probably because they have little or no information regarding it or the information did not get to them. Making students aware of the procedures to follow and including them in the materials are alternatives to minimize students' difficulties in writing research proposals. as also describes that a lecturer's knowledge of students' abilities and difficulties holds an important role in providing appropriate steps and guidance to help them develop their skills and minimize their challenges in writing undergraduate thesis research proposal (Rasuli, 2019).

Components, The Main Section, and Metatext. In general concerning components, most research proposals do not have complete components, particularly in the main and closing sections. The main section comprises metatext, Chapter 1 Introduction, Chapter 2 Literature Review, and Chapter 3 Research Method. All research proposals did not contain metatexts in each of the main chapters. Even though they

are optional, they are highly recommended because they make it easier for readers to understand the general content of each chapter. That metatext is a paragraph linking section that plays a significant role in informing readers what is generally inside each chapter, making it easier and faster to find out what they want from the chapters. However, the data from the interview confirmed the reason, illustrating that the absence of the metatexts in every chapter of the main section was due to the following reasons: (1) students did not know that they had to write metatexts before starting writing the main components in each chapter because the model they had referred to did not write any meta text. In this case, the model they imitated was an undergraduate thesis written by their seniors and was accessed either in the university or in the Study Program libraries; (2) There were different opinions from one lecturer to another about the importance of metatext in the proposal or thesis in which most agreed that the inclusion of meta text is not mandatory; (3) The alumni also confirmed that the metatext was not written in their thesis they had written while they were in university because they were not aware of the component, the model they referred to did not include the component and the supervisor did not give any comment on it, giving a thought that their thesis was acceptable to even without the metatext in it.

Chapter 1 Introduction. Most students included the components of the first chapter, covering seven main elements, including background, research question, aims, scopes, significance, and organization, as the university guidelines also outlined. All students did not include the 'Thesis Organization' component in their proposal. The interview results revealed that students did not know this component must be included in their research proposal and thought it must be added later when writing the thesis. Further, a few students did not write research significance or scopes because they did not recognize what to write and what constitutes these two components. Some admitted that they forgot to include it as they had limited time to write the proposal (two days before the deadline) and had no time to re-check. The incompleteness of this section indicates that not all students have good knowledge of what constitutes the components of Chapter 1 Introduction. The interview results also supported this, as students stated that they imitated the thesis written by their seniors when writing research proposals.

Further, students have problems writing their research background regarding the move/ elements or the content/ ideas. It is strengthened by most students in the interview revealing that writing research background is the most difficult for them because they do not know what to write, what comes first and last, and how long they should write (Leite, 2019). This describes that writing a good introduction section always seems like a battle hard won, or as Plato remarked, "the beginning is half of the whole." Furthermore, this study confirmed research conducted by Zuriati (2017), who found that the most difficult component to write is the introduction section, particularly the research background (69.4%). In line with it, concerning in-text citations, particularly in the research background, some students did not include references to the parts where their writings are based on quotations or needed citations. Even if there was any, the way of citing was wrong. Some students did not have any citations in the research background.

Some students had problems formulating research questions in that they wrote either only one question with two aims or conversely, or they had issues with the formulation, messing up between the independent and dependent variables. These problems have been addressed in research by Daniel & Taneo, 2019, Noermanzah, 2020, and Zuriati, 2017. In particular to this study, all students wrote components such as research questions and aims without providing any introductory sentences. Instead, they directly list the questions or aims under the sub-title. It may indicate that students need guidance on what and how to write these two components. Knowing students' problems while writing research proposals will allow teachers to guide them correctly to minimize the issues (Tanaka, 2020).

Chapter 2 Literature Review. There were three main problems in the literature review. First, there were different terms in the use of the title of chapter 2. Some students wrote 'Kajian Pustaka' or 'Kajian Literatur,' while others wrote 'Reviu Literatur' or 'Reviu Pustaka.' Second, all students did not complete the writing of the literature study. All of them just listed the subtitle with no content in it. Third, students who wrote

literature reviews, apart from being incomplete, also included unnecessary topics. For example, in a research proposal entitled “Analisis Kontrastif Fukugoudoushi ~Au dalam Bahasa Jepang dan Kata Saling dalam Bahasa Indonesia,” literature on contrastive analysis was also included, even though it is not necessary. Several research proposals included literature on pragmatics and its branches simply because the discussion or topic of study fell under the science of pragmatics.

Apart from that, most research proposals did not include mandatory components, for example, the connection between previous research and the research being studied. Another problem in this chapter was that some research proposals only provided descriptive literature, describing definitions, characteristics, and principles of relevant theories used as the framework without including the methodological literature and illustrating procedures, techniques, and strategies of the theories used in the research. This is not in line with the guidelines of the university that require students to write both descriptive and methodological literature in the second chapter (Firza, 2018).

The interview results showed that students imitated the model (thesis written by their seniors) they referred to when writing a literature review, indicating that they were unaware of what components and how to write them in the chapter. This problem is also similar to that researched by Zuriati (2017), Daniel & Taneo (2019), and Noermanzah (2020), illustrating that students have little knowledge of providing what and how to write a literature review, deciding what theories are theoretically suitable for their context of research, describing clearly the theory used in their study, relating the theory used to their context of research, analyzing the theory as they just list and describe the theory, and presenting what aspects cover the literature review.

Chapter 3 Research Method. The sections often wrong with the elements supporting the component in most of the research proposals under investigation were the components of 'research methods,' 'research participants and place,' 'data collection tools', and 'data analysis.' Further, similar to the Literature Review and Introduction sections, this chapter explains definitions only. For example, if the research was qualitative, the definition of qualitative was explained in the research methods section, so this chapter was more like a qualitative research summary assignment. Overall, there was no element of 'justification' in any element described in Chapter 3 on Research Methods. Apart from that, some students were still confused by the difference between the definitions of 'method' and 'methodology' of research. These problems have also been addressed in studies whose results showed that in the methodology section, students do not justify the choice of oversampling or design; in another case, students do not elaborate on the data analysis.

The problems in elements of supporting components indicate that students are likely to have limited knowledge regarding the structure of an organization or the move of each element of a research proposal. This is also confirmed by the results of interviews with students, stating that they did not know about the move of any research proposal component. When writing the research proposal, they just read the thesis their seniors wrote, chose similar themes, and then followed what their seniors wrote by adjusting to the context of their research (Hernawan, 2017).

Students in the interview also confirmed two things. First, they stated that writing a research proposal is an arduous task. This also explains that the research proposal is a difficult genre yet important in their lives. Second, they explained that they did not have enough support from their lecturers as supervisors or other sources to write a research proposal. Those also reveal problems that students face when writing a research proposal, and understanding students' problems in writing an undergraduate thesis, including the research proposal, holds an important role for lecturers since it provides appropriate steps and guidance to help them develop their abilities and minimize their difficulties (Huerta, 2017).

The Closing Section. The problems in this section were from the references and appendices (if any). For reference, there were three main problems found. First, the references provided in the paper were

incomplete. Second, the writing of the references was not aligned with the rules set in the guidelines. Either the order was wrong, or the way of the writing itself was not accurate. Third, there was no reference in the research proposal. These problems were also discussed, stating that in the aspect of writing references, the problems showed that most students do not follow the rules set in the guidelines. For example, the order in the writing is wrong, the writing is not based on alphabetical order, and the rules for writing types of sources for references are wrong or overlapped. About the appendices, some students wrote in the main section, particularly in Chapter 3, Research Methods, that some questionnaires or examples of documents were provided in the appendices. However, those data were absent.

Elements Supporting the Components

Apart from the systematicity and the components, problems in writing the research proposal were found in the elements supporting the components. Compared to the two aspects, this part can be considered the poorest problem, indicating urgent help for students writing research proposals. In line with it, these elements refer to the move (what to start and to follow then to end) or organizational structure of a text. The data revealed that most research proposals had unstructured moves and those were reflected in the research proposal components they wrote. Some instances can be seen in the research proposal's identity and main sections.

The Identity Section. Most problems were found in the move of the Abstract. Most students did not write 'research focus' or 'research objectives' in this part. Some included 'research results' and 'research conclusions' whereas it was Abstract for Research Proposal.

The Main Section.

Chapter 1 Introduction. Most students wrote four to five pages of research background. Yet, none of them complied with the guidelines as none of them followed the move required in a research background, that is, by pointing out the area of research and its significance in general, reviewing previous research, building their context of research by indicating gap, and by explaining own context of research (focus of research, aims of research and the value of research). What could be seen from their research proposal, particularly in the research background, was that they began by defining 'language' or 'communication,' and these definitions were taken from the dictionary. Even, in the case where the field of research was language teaching methodology, students started their background research by providing definitions either of language or of communication. Furthermore, some students wrote previous research. However, they just listed this research without linking or connecting the ideas with the research under study, and thus, there was no 'gap' of research found in their research background. Similar problems were also found in the studies that described that most students did not recognize what element to start, where to explain the previous research, how to connect the last research to the research, and where to state the gap of research. Finally, most research proposals did not specify the research position, so the research's significance was not visible. Students immediately wrote the research position without identifying the problem or the need to conduct the research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review. Two major elements were lacking in the literature review section, including the absence of methodological literature and only the existence of topic/ descriptive literature with very minimal supporting elements in this section. Therefore, the overall elements supporting the component in most research proposals were lacking. Further, students considered that a literature review is a collection or series of expert statements related to the research topic but not related to the focus of the research being studied.

Chapter 3 Research Methods. The sections that were often wrong concerning the elements supporting the component in most of the research proposals under investigation were the components of 'research methods,' 'research participants and place,' 'data collection tools,' and 'data analysis.' Further, similar to the Literature Review and Introduction sections, this chapter explains definitions only. For example, if the research was of a qualitative type, the definition of qualitative was explained in the research methods section, so this chapter was more like a qualitative research summary assignment. Overall, there was no element of 'justification' in any element described in Chapter 3 on Research Methods. Apart from that, some students were still confused by the difference between the definitions of 'method' and 'methodology' of research. These problems have also been addressed in studies whose results showed that in the methodology section, students do not justify the choice of oversampling or design; in another case, students do not elaborate on the data analysis.

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Students in the interview also confirmed two things. First, they stated that writing a research proposal is an arduous task. This also explains that the research proposal is a difficult genre, yet it is important in their lives. Second, they explained that they did not have enough support from their lecturers as supervisors or other sources to write a research proposal. Those also reveal problems that students face when writing a research proposal; understanding students' problems in writing an undergraduate thesis, including the research proposal, holds an important role for lecturers since it provides appropriate steps and guidance to help them develop their abilities and minimize their difficulties (Mulianah, 2015).

Specific Factors: Ideas, organization of the concepts, linguistic features

Ideas refer to topics of research students want to investigate. The data analysis revealed that there were four major problems found with ideas. First, 95% of the topics or themes written in research proposals for undergraduate theses are in linguistic studies, the remaining 4% are in the teaching field, and 1% are in the field of Cross-Cultural Communication (because they are still relatively new). It indicates an imbalance among the three topics. Second, students were confused about determining a topic or theme for their research. They did not know where and how to start looking for ideas or topics since they had very limited or no supervisor guidance. They admitted that the research ideas were based on their seniors' thesis and were not sure whether it was okay to do that, but they were still doing that since the supervisors did not say anything about it. Some students who already had topics for research could not hold on to this topic, so they kept changing the topic as they found better ideas. Third, students could not distinguish between 'research title' and 'research topic.' Thus, it added to the problems as students felt more burdened thinking that finding the topic meant having a fixed title for their undergraduate thesis, and having this 'fixed' as the title indicates, they must also decide on what to write on the main section of a research proposal and it was difficult for them. Finally, as aforementioned, most students' themes for research were determined by looking at examples of upperclassman theses and research themes that were used as references revealed that much research conducted was in the field of linguistic studies, and thus most research proposals under analysis were also in the field of linguistic studies (Berdanier, 2021). In line with the ideas and problems investigated in this study, most previous studies revealed that deciding the research topics is another hardest part apart from writing the research background. All studies addressed the issues related to the topics of the research that were usually either kept changing the topic, or they did not even find one,

or even confused between “title” and “theme/ topic” of research (Daniel & Taneo, 2019; Noermanzah, 2020; Zuriati, 2017).

Organization of the Ideas

In this research, two main problems were associated with the organization of the ideas. First, students seemed to have limited knowledge of how to put ideas into language as the ideas they mapped into written form were far from effective; it was complex and hard to follow. Second, students had little help from the materials used as their sources in developing their research proposal, and it was due to one particular reason: the materials were limited to a description only of the components to include in writing a research proposal. It did not elaborate on what constitutes each component, what moves are needed to elaborate the component, and how to put into language those moves. There were no examples of how the research proposal was developed or ‘skeletal phrases’ used to describe each component and each move. This problem also stated that students have difficulties putting their ideas into language and organizing them into a good text because limited or no examples were given to the students to follow (Singh, 2016).

Linguistic Features

In this study, linguistic features refer to syntactic language, including sentence structure, clause pattern, linking device, correct vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling. There were three main problems found in the research associated with linguistic features. First, the language they used did not meet a good standard of academic language, as highlighted that academic writing is objective, consistent, formal, and effective. Regarding sentence structure, most sentences were too long and complex or, conversely, too short or unfinished, confusing the readers. In the clause pattern, some sentences had no subject or verb. Some linking devices and punctuations were misused, and misspellings were seen almost everywhere. Most students had used correct vocabulary and only some needed help in diction. Finally, students seemed to have limited knowledge of Indonesian grammar. The most visible and common mistake seen almost everywhere in the research proposal was the incorrect use of ‘di’ as a preposition and as a verb. Similar problems were found in studies revealing that most students fail to create coherent and cohesive paragraphs, effectively use Indonesian sentences, correct punctuation, and spelling, and correctly apply Indonesian language structure (Staples, 2016).

Causes of both problems. Both data analyses showed several causes according to systematicity and components, elements supporting the components, and ideas/ topics. Most students don't know that there are writing guides from universities. They also don't understand the elements and components of research proposals. Students also have limited knowledge about what ideas/topics can be raised in research proposals. More details. The causes of the problem can be seen in the following explanation.

Systematicity and Components. Several lecturers admitted that they did not explain explicitly that thesis writing must follow the guidelines for writing scientific papers issued by the university because they thought that students already knew about these rules. Likewise, several other lecturers admitted that they directed students to look at upperclassmen's theses but did not tell them which ones were considered good to reference. Further, most students and alums did not know that when writing a thesis or research proposal, there are guidelines that direct them in the writing process. Finally, a few students and alums know there are guidelines for writing scientific papers, not from their lecturers but from friends from the same department. Still, they do not read these guidelines and rely more on information from their supervisors.

Elements Supporting the Components. Some students knew that there were elements supporting components appearing in research proposals from textbooks on research design, but they did not understand the meaning of these elements. Textbooks do not provide examples of how these elements

are realized in language. Further, most students just copy what their seniors wrote in their thesis and adapt it to their chosen research theme.

Ideas/ Topics. Themes or topics were dominant in the field of Linguistics studies because examples of research given in the textbook only focus on that field. Students did not have the idea to write about themes outside their field of study because the field of study in the thesis they use as a reference is also about linguistics. In other words, the causes of the problems involved low-quality references, insufficient information provided in the teaching materials and the teaching, and less exposure and effort on readings. These lead to some recommendations as follows: (1) It is necessary to create a handout or special material about writing a research proposal that explains (1) the systematics and components of the research proposal, (2) the elements contained in each component, (3) the move or organizational structure of the text and its language.; (2) It is necessary to create handouts or special material about writing research proposals that provide a lot of exposure and examples of areas of study that are particular to the Japanese Education study program that has systematics and components by the surrounding style, whose moves or organizational structure and discussion are considered correct and acceptable; and (3) There is a need for a teaching approach that can minimize the problems and causes of students' issues related to writing research proposals that (1) provide much exposure to topic/theme knowledge that provides inspiration for them to write, and (2) provide knowledge about the text of writing a proposal including how move and discussion.

Discussion

The analysis results show that there are general and specific problems. General problems regarding the systematics, components, and supporting elements of the components of research proposal writing carried out by students (Leo, 2019). General issues found based on the analysis results are related to the main section and closing section. In the main section, all students write proposal components without providing an introductory sentence, directly state the question or research objective without explaining the problem, and do not include connections between previous research and the research being researched (Lubis, 2023). In the closing section, the issues found were writing references and attachments that did not comply with the rules of good writing. The general problems found in this research are the findings of Zuriati (2017), who stated that these problems occurred because of students' difficulties in processing introductory sentences, formulating research questions, describing and relating theories, and following the rules for writing references and citations.

Specific problems found in this research include topics/themes, arrangement of ideas and texts, and linguistic features. Students have difficulty determining issues/themes that suit their interests and fields of knowledge, are not adept at expressing thoughts and ideas in text form, and do not understand the grammatical functions of the Indonesian language properly and correctly (Yudiawan, 2023). These problems are similar to the findings of those who explained that determining the topic or theme is the most difficult part of scientific writing. Apart from topics/themes, these findings also show that the difficulties experienced by students when expressing ideas or thoughts in text are caused by limited knowledge of language and writing steps. The problems found in this research are indeed similar to previous research findings (Sitompul et al., 2024). However, the striking difference in the findings of this research is that problems are presented into two types, namely general issues and specific problems. It is hoped that the results of identifying problems found through research can become a reference and basis for developing teaching materials for writing research proposals in the Research Methodology Course (Sobirin et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

When writing a research proposal, this research has outlined the problems and causes of Japanese Language Study Program students at one public university in Bandung, Indonesia. The study involved the analysis of 30 research proposals written by students from different batches that were analyzed by referring to the guidelines published by the university and the study program. Apart from that, one database informing the title of the undergraduate thesis was also analyzed to see the tendency of themes written by students. Further, the analysis also sought information from three parties: five lecturers, students' supervisors, 30 students who wrote the research proposals, and five alums from different batches. This was used to confirm the results of analyses from the documents and to seek the causes contributing to the problems. The research proposals were analyzed from general and specific aspects. Within general aspects, systematicities, components, and elements supporting the components and move were analyzed; meanwhile, within specific aspects, all related to the texts, including topics/themes, organization of ideas and texts, and Indonesian linguistic features, were investigated. The results show that generally, students' problems lie in the lack of students' knowledge on systematicity, components, and elements supporting the components of a research proposal. In contrast, students have issues deciding on themes or topics, organizing ideas and texts, and using linguistic features. Further, three factors were responsible for the causes of the problems, including low-quality references, insufficient information provided in the teaching materials and the teaching, and less exposure and effort on readings. The study recommends two things, including the conduct of training in research proposal writing as one alternative to minimize students' problems in research proposal writing and the inclusion of the guideline of research proposal writing as one of the topics discussed in the classroom relevant to the subject and as one of the chapters in the teaching materials

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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