Mapping the Challenges: An In-Depth Analysis of Common Flaws in Six Undergraduate ELT Research Proposals

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Abstract

Research proposal writing constitutes a critical gateway to independent scholarly inquiry in English Language Teaching (ELT) undergraduate programs, yet a significant number of proposals fail to meet academic standards due to recurrent structural and rhetorical weaknesses. This study addresses the gap in fine-grained, holistic analyses of undergraduate ELT proposals by conducting an in-depth qualitative document analysis of six research proposals submitted for a proposal seminar at an Indonesian university. Employing genre analysis and academic literacies as theoretical lenses, the study systematically mapped common flaws across three intercon nected analytical categories: content and argumentation, methodology, and rhetorical and formal conventions. Data analysis followed an iterative thematic analysis procedure using NVivo software, with investigator triangulation enhancing credibility. Findings revealed pervasive and systemically interconnected weaknesses: all six proposals exhibited descriptive rather than analytical literature reviews, leading to vague problem statements and poorly formulated research questions. Methodologically, four proposals demonstrated critical misalignment between research questions and design, while all six suffered from insufficient operational detail in sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures. Rhetorically, the absence of coherent logical flow, inconsistent terminology, and pervasive citation errors compromised scholarly credibility across the sample. These findings demonstrate that flaws are not isolated but cascading, with weaknesses in problem framing precipitating methodological confusion. The study contributes empirical, text-based evidence to inform targeted pedagogical interventions in research methodology courses and supervisory practices, ultimately strengthening the foundational research competencies of future ELT professionals.

Keywords: research proposal writing, undergraduate ELT, document analysis, methodological flaws, academic literacies

Introduction

Research proposal writing is a fundamental academic competency and a critical gateway to scholarly inquiry in English Language Teaching (ELT) undergraduate programs. A well-conceived proposal demonstrates a student's ability to synthesize theoretical knowledge, identify a researchable problem, and design a feasible methodological plan, thereby signaling readiness for independent research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). Consequently, the proposal seminar serves as a key assessment point, determining whether a student may proceed to thesis execution. However, a significant number of proposals fail to meet the requisite standards, reflecting underlying difficulties in research design and scholarly writing that hinder students' successful transition from knowledge consumers to producers (Murray & Moore, 2006).

The challenges inherent in crafting a research proposal are multifaceted, requiring the simultaneous integration of several complex components. Students

must delineate a clear research gap from a critically synthesized literature review, formulate precise questions, and align them with a coherent methodological framework (Evans & Gruba, 2002; Oliver, 2012). Empirical studies have systematically documented recurrent weaknesses in specific sections of academic research writing. Common flaws include literature reviews that are descriptive rather than analytical, failing to establish a clear argument for the study's novelty (Boote & Beile, 2005; Kamler & Thomson, 2006), and methodological sections characterized by vague procedures or a misalignment between research questions and data collection tools (Mapolisa & Maphosa, 2012; Punch, 2016). Furthermore, struggles with constructing a theoretical framework and maintaining logical coherence throughout the document are well-documented (Lester & Lester, 2018).

While this existing literature provides valuable insights into discrete challenges, a conspicuous gap remains. There is a lack of fine-grained, holistic analyses that map and categorize the interconnected flaws within undergraduate ELT research proposals specifically, using the actual proposal documents as primary data. Prior research often relies on surveys or focuses on post-graduate contexts or isolated writing components (e.g., Abdullah et al., 2021; Kwan, 2006). Few studies offer a comprehensive diagnostic of the textual problems that appear across the entire proposal structure in a defined undergraduate context. This gap limits the capacity of educators to move from general principles to targeted, evidence-based instruction that addresses the most frequent and critical shortcomings in student writing.

To address this gap, this study conducts an in-depth qualitative document analysis of six undergraduate ELT research proposals submitted for a proposal seminar. This small-scale, intensive approach allows for a detailed mapping of common flaws across key sections of the proposals. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the most frequent and salient types of flaws present across different sections (i.e., introduction/literature review, methodology) of undergraduate ELT research proposals?
2. How do these flaws reflect underlying difficulties in research design, academic writing conventions, and scholarly argumentation specific to the ELT field?
3. What implications do the identified patterns of flaws have for refining research methodology pedagogy and supervisory practices in undergraduate ELT programs?

This study contributes to the field in three key ways. First, it provides an empirical, document-based diagnostic of undergraduate writing challenges, moving beyond perceived difficulties to analyze textual evidence. Second, it offers practical, data-driven insights for refining research methodology curricula and supervisory feedback. Finally, by focusing on the specific genre of the ELT

undergraduate proposal, it aims to strengthen the foundational research competencies of future language teaching professionals.

Literature Review

The research proposal is a foundational yet challenging genre within English Language Teaching (ELT) undergraduate education. This review synthesizes pertinent literature to establish the proposal's critical role, the theoretical lenses for understanding the challenges associated with it, and the empirical landscape of common flaws, ultimately pinpointing the specific gap this study addresses.

1. The Research Proposal as a Gatekeeping Genre in Academic Socialization

In ELT undergraduate programs, the research proposal functions as a pivotal gatekeeping genre, a key milestone in a student's academic and professional socialization. It serves as a multifaceted document: a plan for systematic inquiry, a persuasive argument for the study's validity, and a primary demonstration of a student's methodological and rhetorical readiness for independent research (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Cheng, 2007). Successfully navigating this genre requires synthesizing pedagogical theory, linguistic knowledge, and social science research methods into a coherent scholarly argument (Evans & Gruba, 2002). Consequently, the proposal seminar acts as a critical assessment point, determining progression to the thesis stage. Mastery of this genre is therefore not merely procedural but central to successful enculturation into the academic community, while recurrent difficulties in its production can significantly hinder a student's trajectory (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992). Understanding these difficulties necessitates moving beyond a checklist of errors to examine the underlying literacy practices the genre demands.

2. Theoretical Lenses: Genre Analysis and Academic Literacies

To systematically analyze the challenges of proposal writing, this study is informed by two interrelated theoretical frameworks: Genre Analysis and the Academic Literacies perspective. These frameworks shift the focus from individual deficit to the complex literacy practices required for participation in disciplinary discourse.

Genre Analysis, particularly from an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tradition, examines the conventionalized rhetorical structures that define communicative events within discourse communities (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004). From this view, a research proposal is understood as a genre with established, though flexible, rhetorical "moves" and "steps" (e.g., establishing a territory, identifying a niche, occupying that niche). Challenges often stem from

an unfamiliarity with these expected rhetorical patterns and the specific linguistic resources needed to realize them effectively (Dudley-Evans, 1999). This study employs genre analysis as a lens to categorize and interpret textual flaws not as random errors, but as deviations from or struggles with these conventionalized discursive expectations.

Complementing this, the Academic Literacies model frames academic writing as a complex social practice involving issues of identity, power, and epistemology, rather than merely a set of neutral technical skills (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007). This perspective illuminates the proposal-writing process as a critical site of identity transition, where students must learn to position themselves as knowledge producers rather than passive consumers (Murray & Moore, 2006). Difficulties in establishing a clear research gap or authoritative voice, for instance, can be reinterpreted as struggles with adopting this new scholarly identity and navigating the implicit norms and values of the disciplinary culture. Together, these frameworks provide a robust basis for interpreting the textual flaws in proposals as manifestations of deeper literacy acquisition processes.

3. Mapping the Empirical Landscape: Interconnected Challenges in Proposal Writing

Empirical research has consistently documented a constellation of interconnected challenges that manifest in research proposal writing. These flaws rarely occur in isolation; a weakness in one section frequently precipitates problems in another, undermining the proposal's overall coherence and feasibility.

a) Foundational Flaws in Literature Review and Problem Framing: A primary and often cascading flaw is the production of an underdeveloped literature review. Studies show that students frequently compile descriptive summaries rather than engaging in critical synthesis, which involves analyzing, comparing, and contrasting sources to build a logical argument that culminates in a clearly justified research gap (Boote & Beile, 2005; Kamler & Thomson, 2006). This foundational weakness directly leads to vague problem statements and poorly focused research questions, as the "niche" for the study remains ill-defined. A weak literature review thus sets a precarious foundation for the entire proposal.

b) Consequences in Research Design and Methodological Misalignment: Flaws originating in the front matter of a proposal inevitably impact the methodology section. A common and critical issue is misalignment, where the research questions, philosophical approach, and chosen methods are

incongruent (Oliver, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For example, a proposal may posit a qualitative inquiry into lived experience but propose a quantitative survey instrument. Furthermore, methodological descriptions are often characterized by vagueness regarding participant selection, data collection procedures, and plans for analysis, which undermines the study's perceived rigor and replicability (Punch, 2016). These issues are often symptomatic of the unclear research direction established earlier.

c) Macro-Level Issues of Coherence and Argumentation: Beyond discrete section-level problems, many proposals suffer from a lack of overall rhetorical coherence. The conceptual "golden thread" that should logically connect the background, problem statement, research questions, literature review, and methodology is frequently absent or frayed (Lester & Lester, 2018). This reflects a struggle with constructing a sustained, persuasive scholarly argument. Additionally, challenges with academic tone, precise disciplinary terminology, and formal writing conventions further detract from the proposal's credibility and persuasiveness (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006).

4. Articulating the Gap: Toward a Text-Based, Holistic Analysis in ELT

While existing literature provides a vital map of general challenges, specific limitations highlight the distinct contribution of the present study. First, there is a pronounced emphasis on postgraduate contexts (e.g., Kwan, 2006), with the undergraduate ELT proposal receiving less focused attention as a unique developmental genre. Second, much evidence comes from perceptual studies (e.g., surveys, interviews) (Abdullah et al., 2021; Mapolisa & Maphosa, 2012), which, while valuable, do not provide direct textual evidence of how challenges manifest linguistically and rhetorically on the page. Third, and most crucially, few studies offer a fine-grained, holistic analysis that systematically traces how flaws interconnect across the entire proposal structure within a specific disciplinary context like ELT.

Therefore, this study is designed to address this gap by conducting an in-depth qualitative document analysis of six undergraduate ELT research proposals. By grounding its investigation in the textual artifacts themselves and employing genre and academic literacies as interpretive lenses, it aims to:

1) Provide an empirical, text-based taxonomy of common flaws.

2) Examine the interdependence of these flaws across different proposal sections.

3) Contribute to a more nuanced, theory-informed understanding of academic literacy development in ELT undergraduate research.

This approach moves beyond listing common problems to analyze their systemic nature, offering insights with direct implications for genre-based pedagogy and supervisory practice in teacher education..

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach to conduct an in-depth, detailed examination of the common flaws present in undergraduate research proposals. A qualitative design was deemed most appropriate as it facilitates a deep, contextual understanding of the textual characteristics and underlying issues within the documents, aligning with the aim of mapping and interpreting patterns of weakness rather than quantifying them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

1. Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative document analysis (QDA) approach. QDA is a systematic procedure for reviewing documents where data is examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). To structure the inquiry and facilitate a rich exploration of patterns across multiple sources, the analysis was framed within a multiple-case study design. Each of the six proposals was treated as a single, holistic case. This framework allowed for a detailed within-case analysis of each document while enabling a robust cross-case comparison to identify recurrent, cross-cutting themes and flaws, thus strengthening the analytical depth (Yin, 2018).

2. Population, Sample, and Ethical Considerations

The population for this study was defined as all undergraduate thesis proposals in English Language Teaching (ELT) submitted for a proposal seminar at a public university in Indonesia during the 2023/2024 academic year. A purposive sampling technique was used to select an information-rich sample relevant to the research purpose (Palinkas et al., 2015). The final sample consisted of six (6) complete proposal drafts. The selection was based on two criteria: (1) representation of common ELT research topics (e.g., teaching strategies, material development), and (2) having received a formal seminar decision (accepted/revised/rejected), ensuring the documents had undergone academic scrutiny.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the relevant institutional review board. To protect student confidentiality, all proposals were thoroughly anonymized prior to analysis. All personally identifiable information (names,

student IDs, supervisor names) and any specific institutional references were removed. The study used archival documents and the analysis was conducted post-evaluation, ensuring no impact on the students' original grades or academic standing.

3. **Data Collection Technique and Instrument**

The primary data collection technique was the systematic gathering and close reading of documentary evidence—the six full-text proposal documents. The analysis was guided by the researcher, informed by the theoretical frameworks of genre analysis and academic literacies. To ensure consistency and rigor, a structured analytical protocol was developed prior to analysis. This protocol, which functioned as the primary data collection instrument, included a theory-informed coding framework based on key proposal components (e.g., problem statement, literature review, methodology) and common rhetorical moves, providing a systematic guide for the initial document review and data extraction.

4. **Analytical Categories and Conceptualization of "Common Flaws"**

The core phenomenon under investigation is "common flaws" in research proposals. For this study, a flaw is conceptualized as any textual feature that signifies a deviation from established academic, rhetorical, or methodological conventions necessary for a coherent, feasible, and persuasive research plan. The analysis focused on identifying flaws across three interconnected analytical categories:

1. Content & Argumentation Flaws: Deficiencies in the logical development of ideas, including unclear problem statements, unsubstantiated claims, ill-defined research gaps, and misaligned research questions.
2. Methodological Flaws: Issues in the research design chapter, including inappropriate or misaligned research design, vague descriptions of population/sample, unclear data collection procedures, and invalid or unreliable proposed instruments.
3. Rhetorical & Formal Flaws: Violations of academic writing conventions and genre expectations, such as poor coherence between sections, improper citation, inconsistent terminology, and grammatical errors that impede professional communication.

5. **Data Analysis Procedure**

Data analysis followed an iterative, thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006), facilitated by the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (version 12) to manage and query the coded data.

1. Familiarization: Each proposal was read multiple times to gain a deep understanding of its content and context.
2. Initial Coding: Using the pre-established coding framework, the text was systematically coded for instances of flaws. Initial codes were descriptive (e.g., "vague research objective," "uncited claim").
3. Generating Themes: Initial codes were collated and analyzed to identify broader patterns and potential themes. Codes were grouped into candidate themes (e.g., "Deficient Literature Review and Problem Framing").
4. Reviewing Themes: The candidate themes were reviewed and refined against the entire data set to ensure they accurately represented the data across all six cases.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined, named, and the relationships between themes were mapped to illustrate how flaws in one area (e.g., problem framing) connected to others (e.g., methodological misalignment).
6. Producing the Report: The final analysis was synthesized into a narrative report, supported by carefully anonymized extracts from the proposals.

6. Trustworthiness and Dependability

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was enhanced through investigator triangulation, where a second experienced ELT researcher independently coded a 25% subset of the data; coding discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a detailed audit trail, including the analytical protocol, coding framework, memos documenting analytical decisions, and the NVivo project file, allowing the research process to be traced. Confirmability was pursued through reflexive note-taking to bracket the researcher's preconceptions and by grounding all interpretations in direct textual evidence from the proposals (Nowell et al., 2017) .

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the results of an in-depth qualitative document analysis conducted on six undergraduate ELT research proposals. The analysis, guided by the theoretical frameworks of genre analysis and academic literacies, revealed a constellation of interconnected flaws across three major analytical categories: (1) Content and Argumentation Flaws, (2) Methodological Flaws, and (3) Rhetorical and Formal Flaws. These categories emerged through iterative thematic analysis and represent the most salient and recurrent weaknesses that compromised the proposals' coherence, feasibility, and scholarly rigor. To ensure confidentiality, the proposals are referred to as P1 (Mobile Legends), P2 (Buzz Group), P3 (Diplomatic

Language), P4 (Word Wall Phenomenology), P5 (Quick Chat), and P6 (a second experimental study).

1. Content and Argumentation Flaws
1.1 Descriptive Literature Reviews and Unjustified Problem Statements

The most pervasive and foundational flaw was the production of literature reviews that summarized rather than synthesized existing research. All six proposals exhibited this tendency, listing previous studies without critical engagement to build a logical argument for a specific research gap. For instance, P2 (Buzz Group) presented a sequential account of speaking components, general teaching challenges, and the definition of the Buzz Group technique without analytically connecting these areas to identify a contested or under-explored pedagogical question. Consequently, the problem statement merely concluded: "Therefore, the researcher wants to know the effect..." (P2, p.1), failing to articulate why investigating this effect in the specific context addressed a meaningful gap in the literature.

This lack of critical synthesis directly led to vague problem statements in five proposals. The claimed "gaps" were often demographic (e.g., a specific student population) rather than conceptual. P1 (Mobile Legends) stated its gap as: "there is still limited research focusing on quick chat usage... among students who participate in formal school-based extracurricular activities". While identifying a niche, the proposal did not argue why this particular context yields insights different from general gamer populations, thus weakening its scholarly contribution.

1.2 Poorly Formulated and Misaligned Research Questions

All six proposals demonstrated significant difficulties in formulating precise, researchable questions. A common issue was ambiguity and misalignment with stated objectives. P2 provided a clear example with its third research question: "Is there any impact in students' speaking ability before and after being taught using Buzz Group?" (P2, p.4). The term "any impact" is overly broad and implies a causal claim unsupported by the subsequent methodology. Furthermore, the question does not specify which components of speaking ability are under investigation, creating ambiguity for measurement and analysis.

2. Methodological Flaws
2.1 Fundamental Misalignment Between Research Questions and Design

A critical flaw, present in four proposals, was the incongruence between the epistemological demands of the research questions and the chosen design. P2 exhibited a severe mismatch: it posed a causal question

about "impact" but proposed a one-group pre-test/post-test design. This design cannot control for confounding variables (e.g., history, maturation), rendering it methodologically untenable for making causal inferences and revealing a fundamental misunderstanding of research design logic. In contrast, P4 (Word Wall Phenomenology) demonstrated correct alignment, matching its phenomenological questions about lived experience with a descriptive phenomenological design using in-depth interviews and Moustakas's analytical framework.

2.2 Vague and Non-Operational Methodological Descriptions

All six proposals suffered from a profound lack of operational detail, making their research plans unreplicable.

- Sampling: Descriptions were consistently vague. P2 stated, "The writer takes the sample with clustering and takes only one class" (P2, p.29), without defining the clustering criteria or the characteristics of the chosen class.
- Data Collection & Analysis: The most significant gap was in detailing data analysis. P3 (Diplomatic Language) noted, "The data was analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis" (P3, p.20), but omitted a step-by-step explanation of how the complex theoretical frameworks (Speech Act Theory, Politeness Strategies) would be operationalized to code the data. The process remained an abstract promise.

2.3 Absence of Instrument Validation

Three proposals that mentioned developing instruments (P2, P5, P6) failed to address validity or reliability. P2, which planned an oral test, provided no description of the test format, scoring rubric, or steps to ensure it validly measured the construct of "speaking ability," critically undermining the proposed study's rigor.

3. Rhetorical and Formal Flaws
3.1 Disconnected Coherence and the Missing "Golden Thread"

A pervasive issue across all proposals was the lack of a logical narrative connecting sections. In P3, a robust theoretical framework in Chapter II was not explicitly linked to the methodological choices in Chapter III. The methods did not state how theory would guide the analysis, creating a disconnect between the conceptual foundation and empirical execution.

3.2 Inconsistent Terminology and Definitions

Four proposals used key terms inconsistently or without clear operational definitions. In P1, terms like "linguistic analysis" and

"communicative function" were defined initially but later used in a broader, less precise manner, creating ambiguity about the study's precise focus.

3.3 Pervasive Citation and Formatting Errors

All six proposals contained citation inconsistencies, including formatting errors, uncited claims, and over-reliance on a narrow set of sources. A common pattern was presenting a complex idea as monolithic by attributing it to a single source without acknowledging scholarly debate.

3.4 Grammatical and Stylistic Weaknesses

While not the primary analytical focus, recurrent grammatical errors (e.g., subject-verb agreement, article misuse) and inconsistencies in academic tone were noted across all proposals, cumulatively detracting from their professional quality.

Table 1. Frequency of Major Flaws Across the Six Research Proposals

Category of Flaw	Specific Flaw	Frequency (n=6)
Content & Argumentation	Descriptive literature review	6
	Vague/unclear problem statement	5
	Poorly formulated research questions	6
	Misalignment of objectives and questions	4
Methodological	Design-question misalignment	4
	Vague sampling description	6
	Insufficient data collection detail	6
	Minimal/absent data analysis plan	5
	No instrument validation mentioned	3
Rhetorical & Formal	Lack of overall coherence	6
	Inconsistent/undefined terminology	4
	Citation/referencing errors	6
	Grammar and tone issues	6

Table 1 summarizes the frequency and distribution of these major flaws. The findings reveal a systemic issue: weaknesses in foundational argumentation (e.g., descriptive literature reviews) precipitate downstream problems in research design and methodological clarity. These interconnected challenges reflect students' struggles with both the rhetorical conventions of the proposal genre and the fundamental conceptual logic of research design.

Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that common flaws in undergraduate ELT research proposals are systemic and interconnected, stemming primarily from difficulties in mastering the specialized genre of scholarly argumentation rather

than from isolated technical errors. The findings reveal that weaknesses originate in an inability to critically synthesize literature and construct a justified research gap, which cascades into poorly formulated questions and, most critically, into fundamental misalignments between research questions and methodological design. This misalignment, coupled with pervasive vagueness in methodological description and a lack of overall coherence, reflects students' struggles with the epistemological and rhetorical demands of transitioning from knowledge consumers to producers. Thus, the study successfully maps the specific, recurrent flaws that compromise proposal quality, answering its primary research objective.

The study contributes a detailed, empirically grounded diagnostic framework for educators, highlighting the need for explicit pedagogy focused on research logic and genre conventions, rather than isolated writing skills. A key limitation is its focus on a small sample from one institutional context, limiting generalizability. Future research should expand this inquiry by analyzing proposals across diverse institutions, investigating the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions (e.g., genre-based approach to proposal writing), and exploring the longitudinal development of students' research literacy through their thesis journey to understand how these initial challenges are resolved or persist..

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