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EFL STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN WRITING RESEARCH PROPOSALS

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Abstract
This qualitative study delves closely into students' challenges of writing specific sections (i.e., introduction, literature review, and method) of their research proposal and coping strategies to deal with those challenges, specifically in online learning environments amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were garnered from six Indonesian EFL undergraduates taking a research design course at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. Selected based on the intensity sampling technique, these students were involved in an in-depth semi-structured interview session with the researcher to share their voices on the writing challenges and coping strategies as well as parts of the course they found useful and practical suggestions for class improvement. The data analysis results indicated that writing a good research proposal might be challenging for the research participants, considering the various challenges they experienced when writing sections of their research proposal. Different coping strategies to deal with those challenges, useful parts of the course and suggestions for class improvement were presented and discussed in the discourse of the reviewed literature. The paper ends with some directions for future research.

Keywords: challenge, EFL writing, research proposal writing

Introduction
In Indonesian higher education contexts, such as those in English Language Education Programs, writing a research proposal is a prerequisite for undergraduate students to start their actual research, collect their research data, write their thesis, and eventually finish their studies. The research proposal also functions "as a research plan and helps the students gain an important focus of their studies and find the research directions to proceed" (cited in Wang & Yang, 2012, p. 324). However, writing a good proposal might be a challenging task for the students, given their little experience in conducting research (Yeh, 2009) and their difficulties in writing academically in their foreign language, i.e., English (Alharbi, 2019; Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Diasti & Mbato, 2020; Harahap & Syarif, 2022; Jabali, 2018; Zulfikar, 2016). Writing a proposal might be more challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a situation when this study was carried out; the pandemic causes the sudden instructional change from face-to-face to online learning, where students are often confronted with technological

barriers, lack of student-teacher interactions (Hazaea et al., 2021), lack of students' motivation to follow class sessions (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020), high internet costs, noisy and disturbing learning environment at home when following synchronous online class sessions (Rahiem, 2020).

With similar online learning conditions, learners' little experience in doing research, and difficulties in writing academically, in January-April 2022, the researcher had the opportunity to teach a research design course that prepared English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduates to write their research proposal. In this study, the researcher was interested in exploring possible challenges the students encountered in writing sections of their research proposal and any strategies they used to cope with those challenges. Besides, the researcher wanted to hear the students' voices about the most useful parts of their research design course and practical suggestions for future improvement of the course. This paper now continues with a brief literature review on parts of a research proposal, examines previous studies on challenges and coping strategies to deal with those challenges, and informs empirical gaps in the literature as a base to formulate research questions for this study.

Parts of a research proposal

A research proposal discussed in this study focuses on three main parts (following Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, pp. 52, 54, 56). The first one is the *introduction.* It explains the purposes of the study, describes issues or problems to be explored (or called the problem statement), the need for conducting the study (or called the need statement), research questions that will guide the study, and the benefits of conducting the study. The second part is the *literature review.* It is logically organized by subtopics related to the purpose of the study and keywords in the research questions. In each subtopic, the researcher synthesizes findings across previous studies and compares those research findings. The synthesis will then help the researcher highlight empirical gaps, debates, or shortcomings in the literature and provide a rationale for conducting the study. The third part is the *research design.* It describes and justifies the selection of all aspects of the research design and procedures used in the study, such as research setting, research participants, data collection instruments, and data collection and analysis procedures. In the context of this study, these three parts were written following the American Psychological Association (APA) 7th edition format.

Challenges of writing parts of a research proposal

Several research studies have discussed the challenges EFL undergraduates face in writing the parts of their research proposal. For example, in the *introduction* part, some Indonesian researchers teaching in universities (e.g., Harahap & Syarif, 2022; Pardede, 2019; Suryatiningsih, 2019; Zulfikar, 2016) agreed that describing issues or problems to be studied was a challenging task for the students. Another challenge was writing a well-developed and coherent paragraph explaining those research problems (Zulfikar, 2016). Writing a well-developed and coherent paragraph seems to be a typical challenge EFL students face in academic writing (Alharbi, 2019; Bian & Wang, 2016; Husin & Nurbayani, 2017). As what Chinese EFL undergraduate in Bian and Wang's (2016) study said, "I had to keep changing the sequences of paragraphs to ensure

a logical sequence" (p. 25). In a study involving seven Taiwanese college students majoring in English, Yeh (2009) highlighted possible challenges related to students' ability to read for research, including finding useful sources and choosing parts of the sources relevant to their research.

In a more recent year, Pardede (2019) reported that in writing the *literature review* section, the Indonesian EFL undergraduates found it challenging to obtain current and relevant literature related to their research topics and report findings of the previous studies in light of the research questions. Meanwhile, some challenges in writing their *method* section were giving detailed descriptions and justifications on the research paradigm, data collection instruments, and research protocols. That said, Pardede (2019) assumed that "many of the students were unable to implement the concepts they had learned in research methodology textbooks" (p. 121). In terms of the literature review and method sections, what Pardede (2019) found in his study aligned with those of Suryatiningsih's (2019) study.

Strategies to cope with the challenges

Possible strategies to cope with the challenges in writing the proposal were reported in the literature. For example, in writing research problems in the introduction, two Indonesian undergraduates in Zulfikar's (2016) study found it helpful to read other people's work and see patterns used by the authors to write their research problems. Those students said, "I read journal articles to identify the pattern on how to develop research problem (student 1); I see a sample of people's work to look for the pattern, so then I can identify my way of developing research problems (student 2)". Zulfikar (2016) also reported that some students found it helpful to consult their peers and mentors about ways to formulate their research problems. In line with Zulfikar, Wang, and Yang (2012) also reported the essence of providing spaces for students to discuss their research with their classmates. As the social constructivist theory believes, learning is a social activity, and the knowledge growth of students is primarily a result of their interactions with other students (Aljohani, 2017; Mali, 2021b). In dealing with the challenges, Pardede (2019) suggested special training that facilitates the students to produce a sound research proposal; yet, Pardede did not clarify in more detail what kinds of training he meant. Learning from Wang and Yang's (2012) study, seeking support from students' research supervisor might be a possible coping strategy; as a student said, "I am not active enough to discuss my study with my supervisor. I am afraid of wasting her time. But I think a discussion with my supervisor is very important" (p. 337).

Empirical gaps in the literature

The following may be said about the literature reviewed in the previous sections. First, in discussing the challenges and possible coping strategies in writing the research proposal, some studies (e.g., Harahap & Syarif, 2022; Zulfikar, 2016) seemed to focus their exploration only on writing the introduction section. That was perhaps because of the nature of their publication in a conference proceeding where authors usually were required to write fewer words than when they published their article in a journal. A more in-depth study was conducted by Pardede (2019) and Suryatiningsih (2019). They classified their

findings into specific sections of a research proposal, such as challenges in writing the intro, literature review, and method sections. However, the results were mainly in percentages, giving no space for students' voices. Besides, there were no in-depth discussions on the coping strategies that the students could use. The strategies that Pardede (2019); Suryatiningsih (2019) presented at the end of their paper sounded like general ideas without any supporting details. Second, although their research findings might be relevant to the purposes of this study, Alharbi (2019); Bian and Wang (2016); Husin and Nurbayani (2017); Yeh (2009) only talked about EFL undergraduates' experiences in dealing with academic writing in general. Third, the researcher could tell that all the reviewed previous studies were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic when the classroom instructions were still conducted in face-to-face classrooms. The proposal writing experiences might differ from those undertaken amidst the pandemic through an online learning environment. Last, regardless of the similar research objectives and in-depth discussions on the EFL students' experiences in writing their research proposal, Wang and Yang's (2012) study was conducted in a graduate school setting, which might indicate that an in-depth exploration of the EFL challenges in writing a research proposal and coping strategies to deal with the challenges, specifically in undergraduate study context is still limited in number.

Therefore, as an attempt to respond to those empirical gaps and with the backgrounds of the study in mind, the researcher approached this study qualitatively to "understand a particular point of view from the perspectives and experiences of those involved" (Ary et al., 2019, p. 391) and to answer the following research questions:

1. What challenges did EFL Indonesian undergraduates encounter when writing parts (i.e., introduction, literature review, and method) of their research proposal?
2. What strategies did the undergraduates use to cope with those challenges?
3. Which part of the research design course did the undergraduates find most useful? Why?
4. What practical suggestions do the undergraduates have for improving the course in the future?

All these research questions will situate the EFL undergraduates (i.e., the research participants of this study) as "storytellers" (Kozleski, 2017, p. 24) who can share their voices in more detail than the numbers or percentages. Besides, answers to research questions 1 and 2 should enrich what Harahap and Syarif (2022); Pardede (2019); Suryatiningsih (2019); Zulfikar (2016) discussed in their study and benefit EFL lecturers who are supervising EFL undergraduates' proposal writing. As this study's context was in an online learning environment amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, answers to research questions 1 and 2 should also contribute to the conversations in the literature, which mainly discussed the research proposal writing or academic-related experiences before the pandemic. Then, answers to research questions 3 and 4 might be practical inputs for course improvement and the pursuit of quality instructions and necessary support for the students in their proposal writing process, points that were less discussed in the previous studies. Esfandiari et al. (2022) and Probst et al. (2016) believed that

without hearing students' voices and expectations, it is difficult to know how instructors can improve their courses and meet their students' learning needs.

Method

Research context

The researcher conducted this research in his six-credit research design course in the English Language Education Program at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia (henceforth called ELEP). In this course, students learn basic concepts of research (e.g., different types of research, research problems, research question, research method, sampling, and methods for data collection and analysis). At the end of the semester, students must write a research proposal exploring issues in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and education and present it orally to their research proposal supervisor and examiner. More specifically, the course took place on Tuesdays and Wednesdays mornings (i.e., 120 minutes each) for the 16-week semester (January-April 2022) and was joined by fourteen students. Due to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in Central Java, Indonesia, at that time (also reported by Muh, 2022), the regular class sessions were primarily conducted synchronously via Zoom meetings, including the proposal consultation sessions done in Zoom breakout rooms. The face-to-face meetings were only conducted three times approaching the end of the semester to discuss the final format of the research proposal and prepare the students' proposal presentation.

Research participants

Six EFL students in a research design class at ELEP participated in this study (see Table 1). They were in their third year of undergraduate study at ELEP. The participants were selected using intensity sampling (by Ary et al., 2019) as they "exhibit different levels of the phenomenon of interest to the researcher" (p. 383). In this research, three students made good progress in writing their proposals, while the others made slow progress in completing their proposals. This heterogeneous group of students was expected to provide the researcher with rich experiences in the student's research proposal writing process.

Table 1. The demographic information of the participants

No	Name	Sex	Age	Progress
1	Rianti	Female	21	Good
2	Siska	Female	21	
3	Lidwina	Female	20	
4	Laura	Female	21	Slow
5	Sandra	Female	20	
6	Vincent	Male	24	

Note: The researcher used pseudonyms to conceal the participants' real identities.

Data collection instruments and procedures

The researcher used two research instruments. The first one was the students' research proposal written in Google Docs, which was shared with the researcher at the beginning of the semester. With the access, the researcher could give feedback and see the (good/slow) progress (for brief descriptions, see Table

2) that the students made in writing sections of their proposal, such as the *introduction* (submitted on the first week of February), the *literature review* (submitted on the first week of March), the *method* (submitted on the last week of March), and *the first draft of the complete proposal* (submitted on the second week of April).

Table 2. The students' progress when writing their research proposal

Sections	**Good Progress**	**Slow Progress**
	Qualities that the researcher observed:	
Introduction	It has clear descriptions of global-local related issues/problems around the research topic, research goals, why the research needs to be conducted, research question(s) to explore, and benefits of the study; relevant literature was used to support arguments made in this section; has minor grammatical errors.	Vice-versa
Literature Review	It is related to the problem statement, purpose, and research question(s); is logically organized subtopics; it synthesizes findings across previous studies and compares various research findings; highlights empirical gaps, debates, or shortcomings in the literature; has minor grammatical errors.	Vice-versa; additionally, some reviewed literature was not related to the purpose of the study and the formulated research question(s).
Method	It describes and justifies the selection of the research design, such as research setting, research participants, data collection instruments, and data collection and analysis procedures; relevant literature was used to support the justifications; it has minor grammatical errors.	Vice-versa

Note. Descriptions presented in this table were adapted from Bloomberg and Volpe (2019, pp. 52, 54, 56).

The second research instrument was a semi-structured interview, which enabled researchers to gain insight into their participants' experiences (Aydin & Yildiz, 2014; Mali & Salsbury, 2021). Before the interview session, in the first week of April 2022, the researcher emailed the participants to briefly explain the purpose of this study and invite them to participate in the interview. In the email, the researcher presented a list of questions to discuss in the interview so that the participants had some time to see the questions and prepare their answers days before the interview session.

The actual interview was conducted in the second week of April 2022 with strict health protocol, such as maintaining social distancing and wearing masks during the interview session. Each participant interview lasted around 20 minutes. Following the previous researchers (e.g., Abdurahman & Rizqi, 2020; Mali & Salsbury, 2021; Puspita & Mambu, 2020), the interview was conducted in the participants' first language (i.e., *Bahasa Indonesia*) so that they could answer the interview questions in detail without experiencing any language barriers. With the

permission of the interviewees, the interview was audio-recorded using a smartphone and transcribed verbatim for content analysis. To ensure the truthfulness of the research findings (as believed by Ary et al., 2019), the researcher emailed the interview transcript (i.e., in a Microsoft Word file) to each participant and let him/her review the transcript, identify any inaccuracies, add some answers, or delete some words, if necessary. All the participants responded to the email and confirmed that the transcript was what they wanted to say. No revisions were required.

Data analysis procedures

The researcher used Dawson's (2009) content analysis method to analyze the interview data. At first, the researcher read the interview transcript carefully (i.e., around 3500 words, presented in a Microsoft Word file) several times to be immersed in the data. Secondly, the researcher highlighted and coded the relevant texts related to the research questions. Following Mali's (2017); Safdari's (2021) content analysis results, the researcher then organized the codes into some tables as answers to the research questions. Some interview excerpts related to the codes were also presented as supporting data. The researcher translated those reported interview excerpts from Indonesian into English. Finally, some commonalities of the good and slow-progress students' experiences in writing their research proposal were discussed and placed in the discourse of the reviewed literature.

Limitations of the study

The findings presented in the next section should be considered given these limitations. This study might be biased as the research participants were the researcher's students in the research design class. With this student-teacher relationship, the participants probably felt uneasy about giving *too honest* answers or necessary criticisms (e.g., for improving the course) during the interview session. Therefore, some stories might remain untold. Besides, the researcher did not aim to generalize the findings of this study to broader contexts, as this study was based on a relatively small number of research participants from an English department at one university in an Indonesian EFL context.

Findings

The findings will be presented in order of the research questions. The code, *IW,* in the interview excerpts means an *interview.*

Challenges that EFL students face when writing parts of their research proposal

The students faced various challenges when writing their research proposal. As shown in Table 3, most students regarded organizing writing ideas coherently as the main challenge in writing the introduction. Lidwina and Laura, for example, said:

> I know what to say, but I cannot organize my ideas well. I find it challenging to do it. (Lidwina, IW)
> When I write my introduction section, my ideas are not well connected. I am confused about how I can write them coherently. (Laura, IW)

Another main challenge was to find relevant references to support their arguments written in the introduction session. Vincent reported:

> The hard thing is to find relevant sources to support what I write in the introduction. At first, I felt that some articles were related to my topic, but they were not. (Vincent, IW)

Some other challenges mentioned in the interview session were finding a research topic, issues/ problems around that topic, and justifying why students need to study that topic.

Table 3. The most common challenges when writing sections of the research proposal

No	***Sections/ Challenges* (*arranged in ranked order)***
	Introduction
1	Organizing writing ideas coherently
2	Finding supporting references
3	Finding a research topic
4	Writing a problem statement
5	Writing a need statement
No	**Literature Review**
1	Finding supporting references
2	Understanding the content of articles
3	Motivation to write
No	**Method**
1	Not sure about which research method to use
2	Lack of background knowledge about the research method
3	Deciding the number of research participants
4	Deciding the research instruments to use

Meanwhile, for the literature review section, finding supporting references was perceived to be the main challenge, as Laura, Lidwina, and Siska said:

> It is not easy to find a specific definition of a term. I need to spend hours finding some articles that I can use to define that term. (Laura, IW)
> My challenge is to find previous studies related to my topic of online listening. I think that is a pretty new topic that many researchers have not discussed frequently. (Lidwina, IW)
> I find it challenging to get articles that are related to all definitions that are in my study. Another issue was looking for previous studies specifically relevant to my research. My study is in an EFL context; after I read many parts of an article, I discovered that the article's context is in ESL. I have found many articles, but the contexts are different from my study. (Siska, IW)

Another challenge was also to understand the contents of articles that the students read, as what Vincent and Sandra experienced:

> Sometimes, I feel confused when reading ideas written by the authors. The ideas are difficult to understand, and the authors use too advanced vocabulary. (Vincent, IW)
> I read some articles that use complex language; what does the author want to say? (Sandra, IW)

The motivation to write was another challenge when writing the literature review part. Siska clarified her situation:

> When I wrote my literature review part, I once informed you that my work might be interrupted by external factors that affected my writing motivation. I did not open my file for around two weeks. Even two days before I consulted with you, I had not written anything in my literature review part. It was still empty. (Siska, IW)

Dealing with the method section, the researcher found that the main challenge was unsure which research method to use. Vincent, for example, had this question in mind: "Should I approach my study quantitatively or qualitatively?" (Vincent, IW). Another challenge was due to a lack of background knowledge about the research method, as Siska said:

> The biggest challenge was because of my lack of knowledge. I do not have any basics of the research method. Many terms about research methods sound new and unfamiliar to me. I have not heard anything about them. Therefore, when I write the method section, I get confused, such as when writing my research characteristics, sampling, and instruments. I am not sure about them. (Siska, IW).

Meanwhile, another challenge was deciding the number of research participants and instruments.

How EFL students deal with those challenges

In dealing with the challenges in writing the sections of the research proposal mentioned in the previous part, the students said several possible strategies in the interview session; all of them are listed in Table 4 below.

Table 4. The strategies to deal with the challenges in writing sections of the research proposal

No	Sections/ Challenges Introduction	Possible Strategies
1	Organizing writing ideas coherently	Reading journal articles to see how authors write their intro section, including academic vocabulary, phrases they use Receiving the lecturer's feedback about what to include in the intro section Looking at seniors' thesis as a writing model
2	Finding supporting references	Looking for articles in the free-access database
3	Finding a research topic	Having a thesis consultation with the lecturer to talk about possible topics students have in mind

4	Writing a problem statement	Reading journal articles to see how authors write their problem statement Receiving the lecturer's feedback to explore possible problems around the student's particular research topic Obtain examples of problems statements from the lecturer
5	Writing a need statement	Reading journal articles to see how authors write their needs statement Obtain examples of need statements from the lecturer
No	**Literature Review**	**Possible Strategies**
1	Finding supporting references	Exploring more various databases (i.e., other than Google Scholar) Receiving the lecturer's feedback about which articles to review in the previous study sections Using a website that enables a student to download an article for free Looking at an incoming email from campus telling journals and databases subscribed by the university Sharing references with friends Discussing with classmates about keywords to use when searching for articles on the Internet Spending more time finding relevant articles
2	Understanding the content of articles	Finding other articles that are easier to read Translating the text (i.e., using Google Translate) Reading the articles several times
3	Motivation to write	Finding support from friends Finding support from family members
No	**Method**	**Possible Strategies**
1	Not sure about which research method to use	Reading related references to learn the method used by previous researchers Discussing with classmates about what method to use Having a thesis consultation with the lecturer to talk about the method
2	Lack of background knowledge about the research method	Reading related references to learn the method used by previous researchers
3	Deciding the number of research participants	Having a thesis consultation with the lecturer to talk about the participants Discussing with classmates about the research participants Discussing with classmates what method they use
4	Deciding the research instruments to use	Having a thesis consultation with the lecturer to talk about the instruments

The most useful parts of the course

As shown in Table 5, the students favored face-to-face classroom sessions in the first place. When asked about the reasons, they said:

- I could ask questions to my friends sitting next to me directly (Lidwina, IW);
- I could be more focused on writing my proposal during the class session without any distractions from my smartphone (Siska, IW);

- We can have more time to ask questions to the lecturer and get immediate feedback from the lecturer (Rianti, IW);
- I feel more confident when talking and asking questions directly to my lecturer face-to-face; in the zoom session, I was not comfortable asking questions as some of my friends might think why I asked those simple questions (Laura, IW);
- We can ensure that all students listen to the lecturer's classroom presentations and understand what to do with their proposal (Sandra, IW).

Table 5 The most useful parts of the course

No	The most useful parts of the course (arranged in rank order)
1	Having a face-to-face (offline) classroom session
2	Having a consultation session with the lecturer
3	The lecturer asks students to pay attention to writing accuracy (e.g., punctuation, the use of capital or small letter)
4	Discussing feedback given to students' work in a classroom session

Some students found it helpful to have a consultation session with their lecturer. Lidwina and Rianti, for example, said:

> In the consultation session, we are free to ask our lecturer about things to improve our proposal. Our lecturer can then provide personalized feedback on our questions or challenges. (Lidwina, IW)

> The consultation time allows us to talk to our lecturer openly about our problems when writing the proposal and discuss possible solutions for those problems. (Rianti, IW)

Meanwhile, Vincent found it helpful when the lecturer asked his students to pay attention carefully to their writing accuracy in the research proposal, such as punctuation and the use of capital or small letter when writing certain words (Vincent, IW). Another useful part of the course was discussing the feedback in a classroom session, as it enables the students to learn from each other's mistakes and then recheck their research proposal (Rianti, IW).

Practical suggestions for future course improvement

Most commonly, the students suggested that the future research design course be held face-to-face. Another thing was to provide writing templates for students. Lidwina, for instance, reported how the writing template helped her to write the method:

> The lecturer gave us a writing template displayed on his PowerPoint slides. Given this template, I can develop my writing more easily when finding ideas from journal articles later. Just paraphrase some sentences from the journals and combine them with the template. (Lidwina, IW)

Sandra also said:

> I feel helpful when I can see the writing template. I do hope that my lecturer can provide us with that template. Not all students can understand when my lecturer explains what to write in our proposal. Some might still be confused about what to write. Looking at the template might help us. (Sandra, IW)

As shown in Table 6, other suggestions were for the lecturer to explain the learning materials slowly and *not* discuss the same thing repeatedly (e.g., ways to write end-text references following APA 7th format).

Table 6 The practical suggestions for the course

No	Suggestions for future course improvement (arranged in rank order)
1	Having face-to-face class sessions
2	Providing writing templates for students
3	Explaining the materials slowly
4	Not discussing the same thing repeatedly
5	Reminding students taking the course not to be too busy with non-academic activities outside the class

Additionally, the lecturer can remind his students not to be busy with non-academic activities outside the class when taking the research design course. Lidwina confessed:

> I cried several times during this semester. There are many activities from the students' organization: attending meetings and preparing presentation slides for the meetings. I feel so tired and stressed. I cried. I hope you can tell students to do fewer non-academic-related activities outside the class when taking this course. (Lidwina, IW)

Discussion

The findings indicate that writing a research proposal might not be easy, considering the students' challenges. For example, in writing the introduction section, organizing writing ideas coherently becomes the primary challenge revealed in the interview session. This finding accords with that of Alharbi (2019); Bian and Wang (2016); Husin and Nurbayani (2017) about challenges in writing a well-developed and coherent paragraph. Finding supporting references is another challenge commonly faced by students when writing literature review sections, as Pardede (2019) found in his study. Therefore, Yeh's (2009) concerns about students' challenges in finding useful sources are still relevant today. Meanwhile, when writing their method section, the students commonly felt unsure about which research method to use, the number of research participants, and the research instruments to use. These findings were similar to EFL undergraduates' challenges in writing the method section, as revealed in Pardede's (2019) and Suryatiningsih's (2019) study. Reflecting on all of these findings, the researcher could say that the challenges in writing parts of the research proposal in a face-to-face and online learning environment are alike, except for the low motivation to write the literature review sections during that pandemic situation and online learning as what Siska mentioned in the interview.

While the study has revealed many strategies the students used to deal with the challenges, the researcher would like to highlight some commonalities. First and foremost, students need writing models or templates to guide them in writing sections of their research proposal. As frequently mentioned in the interview, the writing models might be obtained from journal articles related to the student's research topic. Reading the templates might enable the students to learn how the writers, for example, write their intro section and follow writing organizations and "patterns" (Zulfikar, 2016, p. 181) that the writers use to talk about problems related to their topic and why they need to conduct their study.

Secondly, a thesis supervisor, as also discussed in Wang and Yang's (2012) study, has a crucial role in the success of the student's proposal writing as the students need sufficient time to talk to their supervisor individually, share their writing problems, and expect personalized feedback and solutions for their problems. This feedback is vital because "it helps undergraduates know their current level and think of what they should do to progress in their research-relevant knowledge" (cited in Saeed et al., 2021, p. 1). Therefore, to ensure quality conversations and feedback for the students, the researcher supports Altınmakas and Bayyurt's (2019); Wang and Yang's (2012) view that those teaching the research proposal class should be the ones who have background experiences related to academic writing, research, and publications to help EFL students grasp the academic English writing conventions.

Thirdly, the findings indicated the essential place of technology in the student's writing process, such as using databases (e.g., Google Scholar, EBSCO) and websites to search for related articles and Google Translate to translate some texts that are difficult to comprehend. As observed in the previous studies, technology integration in research proposal writing seemed to be missing. Therefore, the findings of this study might be a starting point for further discussion in the literature about how far and what types of technology can support EFL undergraduates in writing their research proposal. That discussion should respond to Iglesias-Pradas et al.'s (2021) view about the need to integrate digital technologies into educational processes, especially after the pandemic is over when there will be exponential changes in practices and aspects of teaching and learning.

Last, in support of Zulfikar's (2016) and Wang and Yang's (2012) arguments, the students might need external support from friends and family members to enhance their motivation to write their research proposal. As revealed in the interview, friends become someone with whom the students can share references, discuss issues they have in writing the proposal, boost their motivation to write, and ask for feedback on what they write. Spaces for having a supportive conversation with classmates should be given more attention in the context of research proposal writing. That said, writing a good research proposal is not a solo effort of a student.

Considering the various challenges in writing their proposal, the students find having face-to-face class sessions helpful. Why? They can focus more on listening to the lecturer's classroom talk and experience a more supportive learning environment than those in online sessions. They can also discuss with friends and have the lecturer's presence to give immediate feedback for their

questions. Can these qualities also be present in an online synchronous class to support EFL students in writing their research proposals?

Conclusion

In conclusion, writing a research proposal seems to be a challenging task to do by the six EFL undergraduates involved in this research. However, they have used various coping strategies to deal with those challenges. As also concluded from this study, to complete the research proposal successfully, the students need to make multiple efforts (see also Mali, 2021a) to work on their proposal, maximize the potential of technology, and have emotional support from and supportive interactions with their lecturer, friends, and family members. This study also highlights the place of technology in the student's proposal writing process.

Based on the findings and discussions of this study, the researcher would like to propose the following recommendations for lecturers teaching a similar course. First, talk openly to your students and emphasize the essence of effort (e.g., can be seen in Table 4) as a key to writing their research proposal well; that said, "downplay the role of intelligence, memory, and luck" (Peacock, 2010, p. 191). Second, provide various writing templates for your students. The templates are in the form of writing excerpts that your students can follow, for example, on how to justify why they should conduct their research, summarize and synthesize findings of the previous studies, and explain their method. The excerpts can be taken from articles you have read, your publications, undergraduate theses written by your previous students (i.e., who got an A for their thesis), or some websites. For some references, you might find the following sources helpful in developing writing templates for your students:

- Telling problems and need statements of research (see Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017, p. 145); Mali, 2021b, pp. 6-8; 77-78; Widodo & Rozak, 2016, p. 229)
- Writing research purposes, research benefits, and research questions (see Renandya et al., 1999, pp. 37-41)
- Summarizing and synthesizing results of the previous studies (see Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009, pp. 33-36)
- Writing the method section (see Newcomer, 2017, pp. 5-7; Pratiwi, 2018, pp. 18-23)
- Looking at a collection of academic phrases (read Graff & Birkenstein, 2007 or visit https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/)

Third, spend sufficient time with each of your supervisees so they can talk to you personally about their research proposal writing progress and receive your support and personalized feedback on any of their questions or concerns. To do so, you might consider using regular class sessions more to have that individual conversation with your students. Your presentation on classroom materials can be video-recorded (e.g., using *Zoom* or *Screencast-o-Matic*) and watched outside the class sessions by the students at their convenient time. Fourth, use some class sessions to practice using technology that can support the writing process, such as

how to search for relevant articles in Google Scholar or databases more efficiently. Perhaps, some students might also want to practice some applications to help them minimize grammatical mistakes in their writing (e.g., using *Grammarly*, *ProWritingAid*), analyze their research data (e.g., using *Atlas. Ti*), and generate end-citations following APA 7th format (e.g., using *Mendeley*). That said, lecturers teaching research design courses should also be willing to explore and learn various techniques that might help their students in their proposal writing process. Last, try to create a supportive learning environment where students can feel safe when asking questions during class sessions and see their interactions with the lecturer and classmates as opportunities to improve their proposal.

In closing, the researcher would like to propose the following directions for future research to follow up on the present study. Exploring factors that motivate students to write and complete the research proposal with their best effort amidst the COVID-19 pandemic might be worth conducting. It will also be fruitful to explore the extent to which the lecturers' personalized instructions and conversations with their students impact the progress of students' proposal writing. Besides, as this study was only joined by six EFL undergraduate students in a private university in Indonesia, a more extensive dataset involving lecturers teaching a research design course and more EFL students from different universities in Indonesia or overseas or different educational levels (e.g., master or doctoral students) to answer the same research questions would improve this research. This study has revealed a list of strategies to deal with challenges when the students write their proposals (see Table 4). However, it remains unknown which strategies work best. It might be answered by conducting survey research with a close-ended questionnaire and a follow-up in-depth interview. With an awareness of the writing challenges and an understanding of the right strategies to deal with those challenges, research proposal writing should be an enjoyable process for students.

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