

Research Proposal Development in the Age of Generative AI: Exploring Students' Difficulties and the Emergence of AI-Driven Competence Illusion

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ABSTRACT

This research is motivated by the discovery of various difficulties for students in preparing thesis proposals in the Research Methodology course, both in methodological, academic, and psychological aspects. This condition has an impact on the low quality of student research proposals and the lack of optimal understanding of research methodology. This study aims to analyze the forms of student difficulties, the causative factors, and their implications for the learning of Research Methodology in Islamic private universities. The research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data was obtained through in-depth interviews, learning observations, and analysis of student proposal documents. The research informants consist of fifth-semester students and lecturers in the Research Methodology course at STAI Ali bin Abi Thalib Surabaya. Data analysis was carried out using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The results of the study show that students have difficulties in understanding the concept of research methodology, composing theoretical studies critically, developing coherent academic paragraphs, and applying scientific writing techniques appropriately. In addition, it was found that there was a high level of academic anxiety and low student learning independence. This study also found the phenomenon of *AI-driven competence illusion*, which is a condition when students produce proposals that appear systematic through the help of generative AI, but have not yet understood the substance of the research methodology in depth. The findings of this study provide important implications for the development of research methodology learning strategies that are more contextual, applicative, and oriented towards strengthening student research literacy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education has a strategic role in producing human resources who have critical and scientific analysis skills (Kurniadi, 2025). One of the manifestations of this ability is the preparation of

a thesis as a requirement for graduating from the undergraduate program (S1). A thesis is not just a final project, but a process of proving that students have mastered scientific principles in solving a problem in their scientific field.

The Research Methodology course is one of the core courses in the higher education curriculum, including Islamic Universities, because it functions as an academic foundation for students in developing scientific thinking skills and compiling scientific papers in the form of thesis proposals. Mastery of research methodology requires not only conceptual understanding, but also applicability in formulating problems, choosing research approaches and designs, and preparing proposals systematically and in accordance with scientific principles (Hardway & Stroud, 2014).

Ideally, after taking this course, students are expected to be able to formulate research problems, determine theoretical frameworks, and choose the right research method in the form of a systematic thesis proposal. However, various empirical findings show that students' abilities in preparing thesis proposals are still very diverse, even though most students experience difficulties in fundamental aspects, such as problem formulation, determination of research methods, and integration of theory and data. This phenomenon also occurs in many Islamic private universities, although Research Methodology courses have been systematically delivered according to the curriculum (Silviawati & Yonisa Kurniawan, 2023).

The learning experience in the Research Methodology class shows that students' difficulties are not solely caused by a lack of mastery of the material, but are related to the process of internalizing research methodology concepts, previous learning experiences, and learning approaches applied by lecturers. Students often view writing thesis proposals as a heavy academic burden and cause anxiety, thus having an impact on low academic confidence and learning motivation. This condition, if not handled properly, can have implications for the low quality of the thesis, the length of the study period, and the increased psychological pressure of students at the stage of completing the final project.

Theoretically and empirically, students' difficulties in preparing thesis proposals are influenced by various factors. From the academic aspect of writing, students often experience obstacles in choosing academic vocabulary, formulating research theses, organizing ideas, and composing coherent paragraphs. This difficulty is often influenced by low academic language proficiency, limited resources, and lack of opportunities to practice scientific writing on an ongoing basis (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022). In addition, the preparation of a thesis proposal requires a deep understanding of the relationship between the research objectives, research questions, and methodologies used. Interactive and contextual research methodology teaching strategies have proven to be able to help students understand these relationships better (Christ, 2009).

Learning motivation factors and academic confidence also play an important role in the success of students in preparing thesis proposals. Students with low intrinsic motivation, less effective learning strategies, and poor time management tend to experience serious obstacles in completing research proposals. On the other hand, students who have strong motivation and good time management skills show more optimal academic performance (Amida et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2022). In terms of curriculum, teaching research methodology also faces challenges in integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches holistically. The separation between the two approaches causes students to have difficulty understanding their application integratively in a research design, so that the mixed methods learning approach is seen as relevant to answer these needs (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

In addition, academic language barriers are also a significant factor, especially for students who have additional language backgrounds. Without special assistance and training, students often have difficulty meeting the expected scientific writing standards, so lecturer supervision support and systematic strengthening of academic literacy are needed (Gupta et al., 2022). Teaching experience and active involvement of lecturers in research also contribute positively to improving students' methodological competence, because lecturers are able to transfer research practices in a more applicable and contextual manner (Feldon et al., 2011).

Although various studies have examined students' difficulties in writing theses or research proposals, most previous studies have focused on measuring the level of understanding, learning outcomes, or factors that affect students' abilities in a quantitative and fragmented manner. These studies generally place student difficulties as a measurable variable, so they have not been able to describe in depth the subjective experience of students, the form of difficulties experienced in real life, and the learning context of the research methodology behind it. In addition, research that specifically explores the difficulties of students in preparing thesis proposals in the Research Methodology course in the Islamic private university environment is still very limited, even though the institutional context, student characteristics, and learning approach in Islamic universities have their own peculiarities. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in the effort to qualitatively and holistically reveal students' difficulties in preparing thesis proposals by combining the analysis of student learning experiences, learning practices of research methodologies, as well as academic, methodological, and affective factors that are interrelated in one institutional context. With this approach, the research not only complements the existing literature gap, but also offers a deeper contextual understanding as the basis for the development of more effective and relevant Research Methodology learning.

Based on this description, the research entitled "Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Preparing Thesis Proposals in the Research Methodology Course: Qualitative Studies in Islamic Private Universities" is relevant and urgent to be implemented. This research is directed to analyze in depth

the forms of student difficulties, the causative factors, and their implications for the learning of Research Methodology. The results of the research are expected to make a scientific contribution to the development of research methodology learning studies, as well as practical contributions for lecturers, study programs, and institutions in improving the quality of learning processes and outcomes in Islamic private universities.

2. METHODS

Types and Approaches to Research

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply understand the difficulties of students in writing thesis proposals in the context of the Research Methodology course at STAI Ali Bin Abi Thalib Surabaya. The qualitative method was chosen because of its advantages in exploring phenomena based on the participants' experiences, perceptions, and learning environment contexts, so as to allow for a rich and nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by students in academic writing and research proposal development (Kilbourn, 2006; Klopper, 2008).

Case studies are considered very appropriate for intensive exploration in a certain institutional context, because it allows an in-depth study of how students in this type of university navigate the complex process in the preparation of thesis proposals (Zitha & Lambani, 2024). This approach also recognizes the emergent and process-oriented nature of qualitative research design, thus facilitating a comprehensive understanding and going beyond mere quantitative measures, by capturing the academic realities experienced by students as well as the institutional influences that affect their writing performance and competence (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003).

Research Subject

The subjects of the study were determined using the Purposive Sampling technique. The informants in this study include:

- a. Main Informant: Students (Semester 5 A) with a total of 27 students who are still taking Research Methodology courses with various grade categories (high, medium, low) to see the variation of obstacles.
- b. Supporting Information: Lecturers in the Research Methodology course with a total of 1 lecturer to provide a perspective in terms of teaching and technical evaluation.

Data Sources and Types

This study uses two data sources, namely:

- a. Primary Data
 - 1) In-depth interviews with students
 - 2) Results of observation of the learning process of the Research Methodology course

- 3) Student proposal assignment document
- b. Secondary Data
 - 1) RPS Research Methodology Course
 - 2) Guidelines for writing a thesis
 - 3) Relevant scientific literature and previous research results

Research Stages

This research was carried out through the following stages:

- a. Pre-Field Stage
 - 1) Literature study related to learning, research methodology and student difficulties
 - 2) Preparation of interview guidelines and observation instruments
 - 3) Determination of research informants
- b. Stages of Data Collection
 - 1) In-depth interviews with students
 - 2) Observation of learning Research Methodology
 - 3) Analysis of student thesis proposal assignment documents
- c. Data Analysis Stage
 - 1) Data reduction
 - 2) Data presentation
 - 3) Conclusion drawing and verification
- d. Reporting Stage
 - 1) Preparation of research reports
 - 2) Formulation of academic implications and recommendations

Data Collection Techniques

- a. In-depth Interview

The interview was conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore students' experiences, understandings, and difficulties in preparing thesis proposals
- b. Observations

Observations were made on the learning process of the Research Methodology course to obtain contextual data related to learning strategies and interaction between lecturers and students.
- c. Documentation Studies

Analysis of student thesis proposals is used to identify factual patterns of errors and difficulties.

Data Validity Techniques (Validation)

To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses the following techniques: (Wita & Mursal, 2022)

- a. Triangulation of Sources, by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation
- b. Triangulation Techniques, by using various data collection techniques
- c. Member Check, which is confirming the findings to the informant
- d. Sufficiency of References, using relevant scientific literature as a comparative analysis

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out interactively and continuously with reference to the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana models, which include:

- a. Data Reduction, which is the process of selecting and focusing data according to the focus of the research
- b. Data Presentation, in the form of matrices, thematic narratives, and categorization tables
- c. Drawing Conclusions and Verification, through interpretation of meaning and repeated confirmation of field data.

Foundations of Analysis (Theoretical Concepts)

The data analysis in this study is based on three main theoretical concept foundations.

- a. Constructivist learning theory

First, constructivistic learning theory that places learners at the center of the learning process, where they actively build knowledge through interaction and experience. In this approach, the role of the teacher is as a facilitator who guides students in developing critical thinking, analysis, and information application skills based on previous experience and knowledge. This theory emphasizes a dynamic, learner-centered learning process, allowing them to construct their own understanding in an authentic and relevant learning context (Allen, 2008; Jumaah, 2024).

- b. The concept of research literacy and research competence

Second, the concept of research literacy and research competence is very important as a framework to understand and assess students' ability to carry out effective and meaningful research. Research literacy includes a critical understanding of the research process, the ability to access and evaluate scientific information, and the proper application of research methods. Research competencies are a set of skills that include conceptual, methodological, and technical skills needed to design, implement, and interpret research results. Both contribute to the improvement of the quality of better academic and professional understanding in the context of higher education (Hong, 2025; Yim & Su, 2025).

- c. A framework of learning difficulties that includes conceptual, methodological, technical, academic, and affective aspects.

Third, a learning difficulty framework that integrates conceptual, methodological, academic, and affective aspects identifies the various challenges faced by learners during the learning and research process. The conceptual aspect focuses on the difficulty in understanding and internalizing basic theories and concepts, while the methodological aspect is related to the problem of applying the correct research method. The academic technical aspect includes obstacles in terms of software use, data processing, and other technical skills, while the affective aspect touches on the emotional factors, motivations, and attitudes of students that can affect the learning process. Understanding this framework allows educators and researchers to design more targeted interventions to address the difficulties that arise in each of these aspects (Kharroubi & Elmediouni, 2024).

Overall, this analysis foundation integrates constructivistic learning principles that emphasize active and learner-centered learning, research literacy concepts and research competencies that develop analytical skills and research execution, and a comprehensive learning difficulty framework to identify and address learning challenges across the board. This approach provides a solid foundation for analyzing data in research systematically and contextually.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

1. Interview findings (Student Perceptions and Psychological Barriers)

The results of interviews with students who took the Research Methodology course showed that there were a number of main problems that included academic-technical aspects, scientific literacy skills, and students' psychological conditions during the process of preparing research proposals.

a. Technical Academic Barriers and Writing Coherence

Most students state that they understand the theory of research methodology in general, but have difficulty when it comes to applying them to systematic scientific writing. Dwika Rahmad Wijaya, for example, revealed obstacles in implementing citation techniques, especially the use of *footnotes* and *endnotes* according to the institution's academic writing standards. On the other hand, Nikholas Fawwas conveyed the obstacles in choosing the right scientific diction and arranging relationships between sentences to form coherent and coherent paragraphs.

b. Academic Anxiety

The preparation of thesis proposals is seen by students as an academic activity that causes quite high psychological pressure. Luqman admitted that the task of preparing proposals gave rise

to the fear of failing to understand the research material thoroughly, the fear of getting low scores, and anxiety because they felt that they did not have adequate basic scientific writing skills towards the end of the semester. This condition is exacerbated by the limited access of students to examples of official thesis proposals that can be used as practical references in the preparation process.

c. **Adaptation Strategies through Technology Utilization**

To overcome academic confusion and pressure, students utilize generative artificial intelligence-based technologies such as ChatGPT, Gemini AI, and Claude AI. The application is used to help formulate research ideas, design theoretical frameworks, and check the continuity between parts of the proposal. Although the use of AI is considered effective in quickly improving the structure of writing, the reliance on this technology has the potential to reduce the depth of methodological understanding of students independently.

2. Findings of Field Observation (Dynamics of Learning in the Classroom)

Observation data obtained during the implementation of the Research Methodology lecture showed various real phenomena related to students' behavior and academic readiness in preparing thesis proposals.

a. **Students' Emotional Response to Proposal Assignments**

Observation notes show that from the beginning of lectures, many students show expressions of confusion and emotional pressure when discussing thesis proposal assignments. Research proposals are seen as something scary because they are directly related to graduation requirements, not as a gradual and measurable stage of academic learning.

b. **Low Learning Independence and Time Management**

The ability of students to manage time and study independently is still relatively low. When given proposal preparation exercises in class, only a small percentage of students were able to complete the assignment according to the deadline, while the majority of the others were late in collecting assignments. This condition shows a tendency to procrastinate triggered by confusion in understanding the methodological steps of research.

c. **Understanding Gap during Proposal Presentation**

Student difficulties are increasingly visible when the draft proposal presentation session takes place. Many students seem to lack understanding of the content of the proposals they write themselves, making it difficult to explain the concepts and steps of research operationally. As a result, lecturers must provide intensive direction, fundamental corrections, and re-explanations of the methodological concepts written in student proposals.

d. Lecturers' Pedagogical Strategies in Learning

The results of observations also show that lecturers have implemented a fairly effective and interactive learning strategy. The learning process takes place through two-way discussions, question and answer sessions, and providing concrete examples from published research articles and the lecturer's own research experience. This approach helps students understand methodological concepts in a more contextual way.

3. Document Analysis Findings (Student Proposal Evaluation)

Analysis of the draft proposal of Chapter I-III students that showed various substantial weaknesses and methodological errors that supported the results of interviews and observations.

a. Luqman's Proposal

• Document Description

Luqman prepares a qualitative research proposal with a *library research approach* that discusses the relationship between mastery of Arabic and understanding the meaning of the Qur'an. The theoretical studies used have utilized several cutting-edge references and previous research.

• Methodological Problems

Although the writing structure looks quite neat, weaknesses were found in the research schedule section. In the research table prepared, the entire research process from data collection, analysis, chapter preparation, revision, to thesis completion is planned to be completed in just two months. The planning shows a lack of understanding of the realistic stages of research.

• Linkage with Other Data

The discrepancy in the research schedule strengthened the results of interviews regarding the high academic anxiety of students. The desire to complete research quickly encourages students to focus more on the administrative completion of proposals rather than an in-depth understanding of the methodology.

b. Proposal Iman Hidayat

• Description of the

Proposal Document entitled "*Analysis of Writing Errors of Hamzah Wasl and Hamzah Qath' in Semester 5 Students of the Ali Bin Abi Talib Islamic College Surabaya*" uses a descriptive qualitative approach based on error analysis (*tahlil al-akhtā'*). The theoretical study contains a discussion of language learning, communicative competence, and writing skills.

• Weaknesses of the Proposal Content

The results of the study show that the theoretical foundation part is still compilative. The theory

is compiled in the form of a collection of definitions from the book without any critical analysis, synthesis between concepts, or direct connection to the focus of the research conducted.

- **The relationship with the findings of interviews and observations**

of these conditions shows the low academic literacy ability of students, especially in understanding and processing scientific sources into complete arguments. This also explains why students have difficulty explaining the content of proposals when making presentations in class.

c. Proposal Aulia Ali Cokrokusumo

- **Document Description**

This proposal uses a quantitative experimental research design to test the effectiveness of communicative methods on students' motivation and learning outcomes. The references used are relatively up-to-date and come from the latest electronic journals.

- **Technical Errors in the Thinking**

Framework section, students write a statement that refers to "Figure 2.1 Thinking Framework", but the diagram or chart in question is not included in the document. After that sentence, the document immediately moves to the next subchapter.

- **Relationship with Research Data**

This technical error shows that there is a hasty and less thorough work process. The findings are in line with the results of observations regarding students' weak time management and their difficulties in organizing research ideas systematically.

Discussion (Triangulation and Theoretical Analysis)

Based on the results of triangulation between interview data, observations, and document analysis, several main factors were found that affected students' difficulties in preparing research proposals.

1. The AI-Driven Competence Illusion *Phenomenon*

One of the important findings of this study is the emergence of a gap between the appearance of proposals that look systematic and the actual conceptual abilities of students. The use of AI technology such as ChatGPT, Gemini AI, and Claude AI helps students produce draft proposals that look neat in structure, especially in the introduction and theoretical studies.

However, the use of AI is not able to cover up the weak methodological understanding of students when faced with real problems in research. This can be seen in the unrealistic preparation of the research schedule in Luqman's proposal and the loss of the frame chart in Aulia Ali's proposal. This condition shows the illusion of competence, namely students feel that they have been able to prepare research proposals because they are assisted by AI, even though their conceptual understanding of

research methodology is still low. This phenomenon also explains why students have difficulty explaining the content of their own proposals during presentations in class.

2. The Relationship *between Academic Anxiety* and Academic Procrastination

The research data shows a close relationship between the psychological condition of students and the quality of the proposals produced. Students' perception of proposals as scary triggers high academic anxiety. Fear of failure and fear of getting low grades cause students to experience mental stress during the proposal preparation process.

This anxiety does not encourage students to study more deeply, but rather triggers procrastination behavior. This can be seen from the delay in collecting assignments carried out by most students. As a result, proposals are prepared in a hurry, resulting in various technical errors, inconsistencies in writing, and incomplete parts of the document.

3. Compilative Writing and the Weakness of Critical Synthesis

Analysis of Iman Hidayat's proposal shows that some students still understand the preparation of theoretical studies as an activity of gathering definitions from various sources without conducting scientific synthesis. Students have difficulty in connecting theory with research focus and critically determining research *gaps*.

The difficulty in composing coherent and coherent paragraphs as expressed in the interview data reinforces the tendency of writing that is mechanical and repetitive. As a result, the research background produced is less argumentative and has not been able to show the urgency of the research strongly.

4. Evaluation of Lecturer Learning Strategies

Based on the results of observations, the main obstacles in the preparation of proposals are more likely to come from internal student factors, both in the form of limited understanding of methodology, low reading readability, and academic psychological conditions. The lecturer's learning strategy has actually taken place interactively and contextually through discussions, questions and answers, and the use of real research examples.

However, the effectiveness of this strategy is not optimal because students still have a low level of learning independence. As a result, learning time is used more to discuss basic technical errors, such as citation format and writing structure, than to deepen the substance of the research methodology in a more critical and analytical way.

Table 1. Matrix Table Triangulation of Student Difficulty Data

Obstacle Dimensions	Interview data	Observation Data	Proof of Proposal Documents
Cognitive and Methodological	Students have difficulty determining variables, formulating problems, and connecting research theories.	Students seemed confused and did not understand the content of the proposal during the presentation.	Luqman's research schedule is unrealistic; The foundation of Hidayat's theory is only a collection of definitions.
Technical and Linguistic	Students have difficulty composing coherent paragraphs and applying the academic citation format.	Students need repeated technical guidance during learning.	Aulia Ali's proposal shows a technical error in the form of not including a framework diagram of thinking.
Psychological and Behavioral	College students experience high academic anxiety and rely on generative AI.	Students postpone their assignments and consider proposals as a heavy academic burden.	Various hastily crafted artifacts were found such as incomplete documents and fundamental technical errors.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of data analysis through interviews, observations, and documentation studies of students who took the Research Methodology course at STAI Ali bin Abi Thalib Surabaya, this study found that students' difficulties in preparing thesis proposals were not only derived from weak methodological understanding, but also influenced by psychological factors, academic literacy skills, and low learning independence. The findings of the study show that the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based technology also influences the pattern of student proposal preparation by giving rise to *the phenomenon of AI-driven competence illusion*, which is a condition when proposals look systematic structurally, but students do not fully understand the substance of the research methodology they write.

The results of this study also show that the research objectives have been achieved, namely successfully identifying the forms of student difficulties, the factors that cause them, and their implications for the learning of Research Methodology. The findings also strengthen the theoretical assumption that the difficulty of preparing thesis proposals is closely related to the conceptual, methodological, academic, and affective aspects of students. Based on the formulation of the research problem, the conclusions of the research can be formulated as follows:

1. Students have difficulty in understanding and applying the concept of research methodology into thesis proposals in a systematic manner. These difficulties can be seen in the ability to formulate research problems, determine variables, formulate a framework of thinking, choose research methods, and connect theories with research focuses logically and scientifically.

2. The difficulty of students in preparing thesis proposals is influenced by several main factors, namely low academic literacy, weak theoretical synthesis skills, limited scientific writing skills, low learning independence, and high academic *anxiety*. In addition, the reliance on generative AI technology causes some students to focus more on the final result of the writing than on the conceptual understanding of the content of the proposal that is prepared.
3. The difficulties experienced by students have an impact on the quality of the research proposals produced. This impact can be seen from methodological errors, inconsistencies in writing structures, weak scientific arguments, and various technical errors in student proposals. In addition, this condition causes the learning process to be seized more to discuss basic technical problems than to strengthen students' critical and methodological thinking skills.

The lecturer's learning strategies in the Research Methodology course have basically taken place interactively through discussions, presentations, questions and answers, and the provision of real research examples. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is not optimal because students still have low academic readiness and independent learning ability.

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