

Preparing a research proposal

[Literature](#)



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Research students at the University are expected to present a research proposal within three semesters after commencement. The proposal is presented at a seminar attended by fellow students, supervisors and other assessors. Assessors are selected by the Faculty for their understanding of the field and the research involved. The purpose of a research proposal is to set out a plan for conducting the research and writing the thesis within the available time. It should take account of the availability and guidance of the supervisor.

The starting point for a research proposal is the topic, which is the field of interest in which the research is to be carried out. In introducing the topic, the proposal should clarify the field that it falls into, and the specific part of that field which the research will explore. It should clarify why the topic area is of interest and importance, and how the proposed research will contribute to the area. The proposal should clarify the research questions, ensuring that these are specific and answerable.

It is important to show how these questions relate to the topic area, and how they will advance the student's contribution. The proposal should detail the research to be carried out, and clarify the research methods, the timeframe and the reasons for selecting particular methods. Where a period of literature review should precede any empirical research, this should be factored in as part of the research. The research activity must usually be approved by the Faculty Research Committee (FRC) in advance. The research proposal consists of an oral presentation and a written document, covering the above points.

At least three copies will be required by the Faculty, one for each of the assessors. The oral presentation will be approximately 20-30 minutes in duration, followed by questions and discussion. You are encouraged to use visual aids in the form of overhead transparencies, hand-outs photocopied onto paper, or 'Powerpoint' presentations. If you intend to use a computer and data projector you must ensure that you have booked the necessary equipment, and that it will operate in situ, in plenty of time for the seminar.

The first step, of course, is developing a topic. This is a continuing process, beginning with the proposal you must provide when enrolling. You may find that you define and redefine your topic several times. The topic you choose and the approach you take to it will be strongly influenced by the purpose of your research. People may choose topics in TEFL department for the sake of pure knowledge, to make improvements in particular methods, or to find better ways to improve teaching/learning environment or to develop better materials.

TEFL research, like other areas of social sciences, must come to terms with its aims because it is embedded in our educational system and our social values. Before we can begin to research a topic, we must work out what we need to find out. This is the stage of developing research questions. These questions will arise out of the topic, and will help to determine the sort of methods you will need to use. Above all, they must be answerable! Only after clarifying the topic and purposes of your research, and your research questions, can you begin to consider the research methods you will use.

Once you decide what methods to use, you will need to learn how to use them well. The resources are designed to give you an overview of some of <https://assignbuster.com/preparing-a-research-proposal/>

the methods which may be available, so you can make an informed choice. There is a lot of mystique surrounding research methodology, and of course some of the techniques you will use are quite technically sophisticated. But research methods are not an end in themselves. We use them to find out information which will contribute to answering our research questions, and to develop the reasoned arguments which will sustain our thesis (in both senses of the term!).

Obviously these are the barest overview of the research issues facing postgraduate students. There is a lot more material in the resources, including further readings, particularly on various research methods. The resources on Inference, which cover the use of numbers, statistical and other forms of generalisation and probability, are also of great importance. This will be discussed at the end of this paper. New or established students wishing to explore these issues further should work through the resources, attend the seminars, and approach the coordinator and fellow students to discuss further issues on topics of interest.

Developing a Topic

You would not be entitled to do your research unless you already had some idea of the topic you want to research. However, the topic you first consider is very likely to be revised as you keep getting more information on the field of interest. Topics develop as you get further into them. Apart from anything else, they get narrower! It is not surprising that if you have read 2 articles about a topic, it will appear broader than when you have read 20. That is one way in which topics get narrower: you find out more about the variables.

You have to limit the variables to make your research manageable. This is a universal experience of students who do a graduate or post graduate research project. If you have had that experience, you will probably recall having to be ruthless in limiting the size and scope of your topic. You will also need to limit your topic for a Research Masters. However, since for a Masters or PhD you have rather more time, you do not need to start slashing and discarding interesting aspects of your topic immediately.

You should start out (at least for two or three months) by being fairly relaxed about how big the topic might get. You have enough time to whittle it down when you have a better idea of what is involved. If you are working towards an MA or PhD, in particular, you need to familiarise yourself with the broader, theoretical aspects of your topic. What area of TEFL does it fit into? What is the research attraction in that area? Catch up with the latest theories.

If you are working in an interdisciplinary field you will need to expand your theoretical horizon to include a wider range of writings. Once you go up to the heights of theory and speculation, you may come down with a new perspective on the nuts and bolts of your topic. You will need to come down again in time to present a research proposal, so this gives you a limited time in the beginning to explore the extent of your topic. If necessary, build in more time to read and consider theory as part of your substantive research.

Before writing a research proposal, you need to be able to write down your topic. Some of the books suggest you should be able to write it in one sentence. After all, if you can't write it in one sentence, maybe you don't really know what it is. As Stevens and Asmar write, your topic must, above all, be interesting enough to sustain your commitment for the months it will

take. One aspect of that interest is the purpose for which you want to do it. We consider that in the next resource.

Purposes & Styles of Research

A lot of university research is carried out simply in order to advance knowledge: to challenge or support a particular scientific theory, for instance. Other research may be practical or applied: finding out new or better ways of doing things. Research in TEFL may have elements of both these purposes. There are many ways of cutting into the diversity of research approaches. 'Style' is one way; 'purpose' another.

Style '

My colleagues in the social sciences talk a great deal about methodology. I prefer to call it style. ' Freeman J. Dyson, physicist (quoted John Brewer and Albert Hunter. *Multimethod Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989.) Research styles, even in the sciences, may be classified as generalising or specifying. Some researchers look for underlying laws of nature or, as physicists say these days, 'a general theory of everything'.

Other researchers study detail. Aristotle identified five ways of thinking to arrive at truth. The 'Athenian' style of scientific knowledge is 'episteme'; then there is technical skill (techne), practical wisdom or prudence (phronesis), intelligence or intuition (nous), and wisdom, combining science and intelligence (sophia).

Relating these categories to the divisions of university research that I began with, it is not hard to see that pure sciences correspond with episteme, and technical fields like engineering fit, by definition, techne. What about TEFL? I

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link it to phronesis, or practical wisdom. - Aristotle. Ethics. Translated by J. A. K. Thomson ('practical wisdom' substituted as a translation of 'phronesis' here - RM).

Research Questions

Research involves a process of finding out. You would not set out on a research project if you already knew all the answers. So the very beginning of the research enterprise is jotting down all the things you need to find out. These should arise out of your topic and the reasons you want to do it.

You may need to read quite a lot before you even know what you don't know. And you may find that many of your questions may be answered by further reading. Don't worry about that at this stage. You need to think what you want to know before you can work out how to find out. The critical point to remember at this stage is that your questions must be-in principle-answerable.

Questions or hypothesis?

People often ask whether research must test a hypothesis. This all depends on the style of research you are engaged in. A hypothesis is simply a way of generating research questions within the argument structure of a particular type of inquiry. Other types of inquiry generate their questions out of other sorts of arguments. We consider two different types of argument/question structures below. Why do people test hypotheses? This is usually related to the 'hypothetico-deductive method', typical of some of the 'pure' sciences.

The idea behind this method is that we are trying to improve a theory of the general laws of nature. From the theory we may deduce that 'x' will happen

under certain circumstances, so that becomes a hypothesis. If 'x' does happen as expected, then we have disproved the 'null hypothesis' and the theory is strengthened. However, in TEFL and related research we are less likely to be interested in testing a grand theory.

As discussed in regard to the Purposes of Research, we are more often interested in some improvement of teaching/learning arrangements, or exploring ways of advancing present methods, or developing new methods and techniques/strategies. In this type of research you still need research questions, but you develop them within a different argument framework. Two of the most difficult sorts of questions are hypotheticals and questions of quality. We need to discuss these because of their difficulty. They also serve very well to illustrate two of the ways in which questions typical of TEFL research may fit into the structure of an argument.

Of these, hypotheticals are the most difficult, so I deal with them first. A hypothetical question asks what ... if...? For instance: If we increase penalties for undone home assignments, would that increase class participation? Now, unless we actually do it as an experiment, this question is technically unanswerable. Questions of quality ask 'how good?' or 'which is better?' These are not so difficult as long as we know how we are defining 'good' or 'better'. Such questions are typical of evaluation research, where we need to find out whether a particular program is achieving its aims (or perhaps some others).

Questions of quality are absolutely central to many TEFL fields, and must be very clear about the criteria they use to determine what is 'better' or 'worse'. Here again, we are framing our questions within a set of arguments about

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what is a good method/ technique/program/strategy, or a better one. By clarifying what constitutes 'good' or better' within a reasoned argument, we can then develop questions which research can answer. For instance, if we were evaluating EFL achievement in a classroom setting, we may have a number of criteria, including the listening comprehension.

In this case, we could quantify listening comprehension, but would still need to do more work to find out how the 'comprehension' could be measured. Once we have worked out a valid measure for these variables, then research questions could be framed in those terms. Validity and reliability are two very important issues to deal with in this regard. (Note: 'validity' means measuring what we set out to measure; 'reliability' means that if we measure the same thing several times, we should get consistent results.

There is a useful literature on evaluation research, and since it is particularly helpful in framing questions of quality, it is referred to here. Michael Q. Patton has written a comprehensive, sometimes amusing, but not very thought provoking book on evaluation, *Practical Evaluation* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1982). Yoland Wadsworth has written one of her well illustrated and readable handbooks on evaluation (*Everyday Evaluation on the Run*. Melbourne: Action Research Issues Centre, 1991), though hers is a specific form of self-evaluation, which may not be suited to all research purposes.

William Shadish gives a good overview of the field, telling us of the historical policy context in which it arose, and relating evaluation research to such everyday and common sense decisions as what sort of car to buy. Michael Scriven asks what criteria we should use in an evaluation, and goes so far as to suggest we may be able to look beyond the stated goals of a program to <https://assignbuster.com/preparing-a-research-proposal/>

see what other benefits or disadvantages may come with it ("goal free evaluation").

Your questions.

This discussion of hypothetical and evaluative questions is intended to give examples only. You do not have to use these sorts of questions any more than you have to test hypotheses. But you do need questions which are specific and answerable, and which will provide data or backing for your arguments (discussed further in that section). Organise your questions in hierarchies if necessary.

For instance, one unanswerable question may be broken down into a number of answerable questions, linked by a chain of argument. This exercise may take several pages, but it is advisable to be inclusive, even if many of the questions may have self evident answers. Once you can see all your questions, lined up according to their contribution to your topic and their place in your argument, then you are in a better position to work out what methods you can use to answer them.

Research methods are simply ways of answering research questions. They do not have a life of their own, but must fit into the structure of topic, purposes, questions and arguments which go to make up a good thesis. The first step is to choose what methods you need to use. Methods are only as good as the answers they give to research questions. So the methods you choose will depend on the questions you want to answer. In any relevant or practical research it is usually essential to use several types of research methods, even if one or two finish up taking up the bulk of the research time.

Of course, we may apply any research methods with various different emphases or styles. People often distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research. The former involves more explicit judgment or interpretation, while the latter involves more counting and calculating (see Inference). Other ways of classifying methods may refer to particular disciplines, such as historical, sociological or ethnographic research. You should search out courses, books and advisers that may help you do these better.

This page on research methods, like the pages on each of the specific methods, is only an overview of the possibilities which you need to take into account in designing your research, and choosing your method. You must become competent in their application before using them. To do this, consult the further readings, other courses, your supervisor and the postgraduate coordinator. There are thousands of books on research methods, most of them focusing on a particular disciplinary range (eg social research, TEFL research, communications research).