Towards understanding EFL Research: Developing a well-designed teaching material
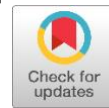
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how English as Foreign Language (EFL) research can be better understood by developing well-designed teaching materials that support students' research literacy. Grounded in the need to enhance novice EFL researchers' capacity to conceptualize, plan, and conduct research, this study explores the essential components of effective instructional materials and how these materials can scaffold students' engagement with EFL research processes. Data were generated through focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted across three universities, involving a total of 15 participants comprising lecturers teaching research methodology in ELT. The FGDs examined participants' experiences, challenges, and expectations regarding current research-related teaching materials. Thematic analysis revealed that students often struggle with identifying research problems, understanding methodological choices, and connecting theories to research practices, largely due to fragmented or overly theoretical materials. Participants emphasized the importance of structured, practice-oriented, and contextually relevant teaching materials that guide learners step-by-step through research tasks. Based on these insights, this study proposes a framework for designing pedagogically robust EFL research materials that integrate clear explanations, worked examples, reflective tasks, and opportunities for guided practice. The findings contribute to improving research pedagogy in EFL contexts and highlight the value of collaboratively informed material development to enhance students' research competence.

1. Introduction

Conducting research is a fundamental requirement for university students as part of the graduation process. To fulfill this requirement, final-year students are typically expected to complete an independent research project (Mbato & Cendra, 2019; Lipson, 2005). From an academic perspective, the ability to conduct research and produce a well-structured research report is important for at least two main reasons. First, research enables students to investigate issues and seek answers to specific questions, thereby contributing to the generation of new knowledge (Kendal, 2015; Lapan et al., 2012; Lodico et al., 2006; Mirrhoseini, 2020). In this regard, research is widely defined as a systematic and scholarly process aimed at inquiry and problem-solving (Anderson, 2002; Cropley, 2002; Mackey & Gass, 2005; Cohen et al., 2020). Furthermore, Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2016) and Gonzalez-DeHass, et al., (2021) emphasize

that universities bear the responsibility of ensuring that graduates acquire the competencies necessary to conduct research effectively.

Second, research not only generates new insights but also supports the preservation and advancement of existing knowledge. In addition, the requirement to conduct research and produce a formal research report can help students develop critical analytical thinking and academic writing skills. In addition, research allows students to scrutinize issues related to their field of interests as they are to read and review previous relevant literature; and through research, students are able to contribute to the existing literature by writing and publishing their research findings. Wu and Buripakdi (2022) also underscore that the development of these competencies is essential as students prepare for their future professional careers.

Given the central role of thesis writing in higher education, universities are expected to equip students with adequate research competencies. To achieve this objective, universities commonly offer research methodology courses that provide systematic guidance in the preparation of research projects. For example, prior to commencing their thesis, students in the Department of English Language Education at a state Islamic university in Banda Aceh are required to complete three research-related courses: *Research Methodology in Education*, *Introduction to Research Methods in ELT*, and *Practical Research in ELT*. Other State Islamic universities, such as Imam Bonjol State Islamic University, Syarif Hidayatyullah State Islamic university and other state Islamic universities in Indonesia, offer research methodology as the core subject. These courses are designed to enhance students' research skills and adequately prepare them for the successful completion of their final research papers. It is also important to add credit hours for research methodology to provide more research exposure.

Despite having completed those research-oriented courses, many students continue to experience significant difficulties in writing their theses. They often struggle to identify the essential characteristics of academic research and to navigate the complexities inherent in the research process. The most commonly reported challenges include formulating a clear research problem, examining the underlying factors contributing to that problem, and successfully completing the writing process (Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011; Murray, 2011; Paltridge, 1997; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Parsaiyan & Gholami, 2023). In addition, inexperienced researchers, particularly undergraduate students, frequently encounter difficulties in identifying and selecting research topics that are both methodologically appropriate and aligned with their academic interests

Griffee (2012) argues that researchers at different levels of experience tend to generate research problems in distinct ways. Less-experienced researchers (LERs), for instance, often rely on their lecturers for guidance when developing research ideas. During coursework, students commonly derive potential research questions from issues raised in classroom discussions. In addition to consulting peers, some LERs turn to relevant literature, such as academic books and textbooks, to address research-related challenges. In contrast, highly experienced researchers (HERs) employ a broader range of strategies to identify research problems. Professionals, for example in the field of human resource development, frequently formulate research ideas through participation in seminars, workshops, and conferences. Moreover, HERs often review prior studies to identify significant gaps that warrant further investigation. Novice researchers, however, may struggle to articulate or "problematize" a research issue, commonly referred to as a problem statement. Terrell (2015) suggests that such difficulties stem from a limited ability to recognize and clearly define researchable problems.

Considering the inherent difficulty associated with composing a thesis, it is of utmost importance for academics to do research that explores the perspectives of lecturers in relation to the 'so called' effective teaching modules for teaching research to help students succeed in doing research and write the report, in term of the thesis. Although many kinds of research textbooks have been published; some of them are too complicated for students to comprehend due to its complexities in the depth and the width of the contents. For example, some textbooks offer too many learning topics beyond students' ability to comprehend; while others provide a wide range of topics, which are not always relevant to students' immediate needs. Tomlinson (2012, 2015, 2016, 2023) argue that teaching materials designed worldwide are not always fitted to the specific contexts. For that reason, it is believed that students require a well-designed teaching module appropriate for their level of knowledge. For that reason alone, all pre-designed textbooks should be adapted and modified to meet students' needs because the textbooks are meant to help students learn effectively (Al-Mousawi, 2020; Mohseni & Rahmanpanah, 2020; Timmis, et al., 2022; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2010, 2017).

To produce high impact teaching materials, material developers ought to follow certain principles for effective teaching material design: contextualization, interaction, skill building, authenticity, and flexibility (Abduraimova, 2022; Minto, 2024; Tomlinson, 2014, 2016b). In addition to these principles, Material developers need to follow some stages starting from need analysis, design and production, evaluation and feedback, adaptation and revisions (Bao, 2016; Minto, 2024; Tomlinson, 2020, 2023). In addition, technology integrated teaching materials are becoming popular in the present times (Reinders & White, 2010), which allow material developers to become more creative in developing teaching materials. In the present times, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and other kinds of Learning Management System (LMS) are commonplace in current instructional process (Benyo, 2020; Madill, 2014; Kilickaya, 2007; Rachmawati, 2016).

Textbooks and other kinds of printed materials are believed to give impacts for students' learning. However, most impactful teaching materials should be contextualized as global teaching materials are not always relevant to students' contexts (Garton & Graves, 2024;, Darici & Tomlinson 2016; Tomlinson, 2013, 2016a, 2023). Given the significant benefits of printed materials, this particular study seeks to explore how university lecturers perceive attributes of high impact teaching materials, especially upon teaching EFL research. The following questions would be the basis of our inquiries: What do EFL research lecturers identify as the essential components of an effective research teaching module? What pedagogical principles and formats do they believe should underpin the design of such materials? The aforementioned inquiries were thoroughly examined through qualitative research, which will be expounded upon in greater detail in the subsequent subsection. This research is significant as previous relevant studies are limited.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore lecturers' perspectives on what constitutes effective research teaching materials. Qualitative inquiry is widely regarded as an appropriate approach for investigating perception-based phenomena, as it enables researchers to capture participants' meanings, interpretations, and experiences in depth (Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2018; Leavy, 2014; Glesne, 2014; Zulfikar, 2014, 2019). This approach is particularly suitable because qualitative research seeks to develop a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of a phenomenon, in this particular context, we refer to the phenomenon related to understanding research modules (Hsiung, 2018). Accordingly, a qualitative case study was employed in the present study to facilitate an in-depth examination of the participants' perspectives.

2.1. Participants and Research Settings

Participants in this study were drawn from four universities: two located in Aceh (SK-U and AR-U) and two in Surabaya (SR-U and SA-U), all of which are pseudonyms. We identified those four universities in different settings, two in Aceh and in Java, for specific purpose to examine how research contexts shape ways of perceiving certain issues. Accordingly, careful consideration was given to participant selection to ensure alignment with the aims of the study (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2014), and thus recruitment was facilitated through institutional gatekeepers who provided the names of potential participants. These individuals were subsequently contacted to confirm their availability and to invite them to participate in the study. The participant cohort comprised professors, senior lecturers, and department chairs, all of whom had extensive experience in teaching research methods and supervising undergraduate and postgraduate theses, we could refer them to expert interviewees. In line with qualitative research principles, participants were purposively selected based on their expertise and capacity to provide rich, relevant insights addressing the research questions.

2.2. Methods of data collection and analysis

The study adopted a qualitative research design, employing focus group discussions (FGDs) to elicit department chairs' and lecturers' perspectives on effective teaching materials, such as the textbooks and modules. The FGDs of 6 members were selected because of their capacity to capture participants' subjective experiences and emotions. As noted by Cassell, Cunliffe and Grandy (2018), interviews in the FGDs are widely regarded as an effective means of gaining insight into individuals' viewpoints. However, the effectiveness of interviews in the FGDs depends on the interviewer's mastery of appropriate strategies and techniques (Glesne, 2014; Hesse et al., 2019; Lune, 2017).

To analyze the data, we used coding procedures. The study followed Bryman's (2016) three-stage coding framework. First, open coding was used to identify data relevant to the research question. In the second stage, axial coding was conducted to refine and organize the initial codes. Finally, selective coding was applied to integrate the data into coherent thematic categories. Each participant was assigned a code in the format "P," followed by a number; for instance, participant 1 is labeled P1, and this convention is applied consistently across all participants.

3. Findings and Discussion

The focus group discussions (FGDs) yielded important insights into the characteristics of what participants perceived as effective research teaching modules. The findings indicate that seven key content areas should be incorporated into such modules. Across the four FGDs, participants consistently agreed that research modules should include: clear research guidelines; explanations of key and technical terms; guidance on identifying novel research topics; strategies for generating research problems; overviews of appropriate research methodologies; and instruction in effective research communication.

3.1. Research Guidelines and Clear Sample

The focus group discussions (FGDs) centered on the inclusion of research guidelines within teaching materials. Participants across all participating universities unanimously agreed that clear and explicit research guidelines should be integrated into research teaching modules. They emphasized that the modules should provide comprehensive guidance on how to conduct research, particularly to support students throughout the research process. For instance, one lecturer from SK-U stated that:

> *Most students like to copy or imitate the work of their colleagues, for example, some students in fact, see the work of their friends; some of them, for instance conduct experimental research because they can copy from their friends' thesis; So I believe that if we provide a clear guideline on how to conduct research and write research report, that would be beneficial for students* (a lecturer of SK-U).

Other lecturers of SR-U also argue that students prefer to examine the sample of research report, and then imitate it for their benefits. Booth, et al. (2016); Lipson (2005); Griffee (2012) and Mckay (2006) provide such research samples for students to gain insights in their respective textbook. One of the lecturers states that 'most students would rather grab the work of their colleagues where they could imitate the styles and the layout of the research report than learn themselves the research strategies' (a lecturer of SR-U). In addition, a lecturer of SK-U stated that:

> *we have already designed guidelines describing various types of methodology and students can choose among those methodologies; we should design a textbook consisting a certain type of methodology. We should prepare the textbook that contains information on experimental research* (FGD at SK-U).

This finding suggests that, in addition to having clear research guidelines, research students benefit from being provided with a hands-on research module. Such a module enables students to readily identify applicable research guidelines and to model the structure and layout of a research report. This finding is highly consistent with the fundamental principles of teaching material development, which emphasize responsiveness to learners' needs (Partington, 2001; Tomlinson, 2013, 2020).

3.2. Describing Specific Terms

In line with Tomlinson (2012a, 2015), Maley et al. (2017), and Mohseni and Rahmanpanah (2020), who emphasize that textbooks and teaching materials should provide clear content specifications, the FGDs revealed that affective research modules need to include explicit explanations of key research terminology. Terms such as *problem statement*, *research questions*, *hypotheses*, *terminology*, *methods*, *methodology*, and *research instruments* were identified as sources of conceptual difficulty for novice researchers (Booth et al., 2016). Consequently, FGD participants agreed that research modules should incorporate a dedicated section that provides clear definitions and detailed descriptions of these terms. This view is reflected in the remarks of participants from SA-U and AR-U, who stated that

> *most students feel it difficult to understand complicated terms, especially for students who are do not have any research experience whatsoever; most of them in fact feel it difficult to*

understand specific terms commonly used in research. I therefore believe that research modules should contain information and description on specific terms (a lecturer of SA-U)

Other participants also agreed that information on specific terms related to research should be included in the module, as stated by one of the participants in AR-U:

I think a good research module should be comprehensive; it should include information on specific issues helping students to do research. In my experience as the the lecturer teaching research in ELT, I found that most students are struggling to understand specific term in research, such as the term validity, reliability, hypothesis and other such specific term (a lecturer of AR-U)

Other FGD participants from both SR-U and SK-U also emphasized the importance of providing clear descriptions of specific research terms. Such descriptions are believed to enhance students' understanding of the nature of research and, consequently, enable them to derive maximum benefit from the teaching materials, as noted by several scholars (Abduraimova, 2022; Timmis et al., 2022; Tomlinson, 2023).

3.3. Strategies to Generate Novel Topics

The findings indicate that one of the most important topics to be included in a research module is guidance on strategies for identifying novel research topics. Identifying under-researched areas is widely acknowledged as both challenging and complex (Bryman, 2016; Snyder, 2019), and this difficulty applies to both novice and experienced researchers alike (Griffee, 2012). For this reason, FGD participants across all research settings agreed that explicit instruction on identifying novel research topics should be a core component of research teaching. This view is reflected in the remarks of senior researchers from SK-U and SR-U, who suggested that:

Finding research gaps is so much challenging for all researcher; we too-calling ourselves experienced researchers find it difficult to draw gaps for our research topics. This is even more challenging when it comes to students-considering themselves as novice researchers. For that reason alone, I see it important for material developers to include a specific topic, if not chapter, related to strategies finding novel research topics (a lecturer of SK-U).

Consistent with earlier FGD findings, participants at SR-U further emphasized that the ability to identify a research gap is as crucial as the ability to write a research report. They noted that supporting students in recognizing gaps in the literature is essential for fostering the development of novel research topics. To address this need, SR-U offers a dedicated proposal-writing course in which lecturers explicitly guide students in identifying originality and establishing the "newness" of their proposed studies. This emphasis on gap identification is also shared by participants at AR-U, who similarly highlighted the importance of structured guidance in helping students conceptualize innovative research topics, stating that:

My experience teaching research and supervising students' thesis, I found that one of the most difficult challenges faced by students is drawing research gaps; and for that reason, incorporate a specific topic in my class related to finding newness in the research topics. So, talking about a well designed research module, I believe that material developers should include a topic or so discussing strategies to identify novel research topics (a lecturer of AR-U)

It is important to note that researchers should avoid "reinventing the wheel" (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014; Teitelbaum, 1994), namely conducting studies that merely replicate existing research without offering new insights. Given this imperative, a well-developed research module should explicitly address strategies for identifying research gaps in order to support the development of research novelty. This finding aligns with the views of Minto (2024), Harwood (2022), and Tomlinson (2013), who argue that teaching materials should be designed to maximize students' learning benefits.

3.4. Generating Research Problems

One of the most important topics in a research module is strategies for generating research problems, as this constitutes the first and foundational step in the research process. Prior to conducting any study, all researchers, both novice and experienced, must be able to identify and formulate research problems (Booth et al., 2016; Griffee, 2016; McKay, 2006; Randolph, 2009). This underscores the necessity of explicitly including a dedicated topic on research problem generation in research modules. Participants in the FGDs across all four universities agreed on the importance of incorporating this topic, noting that:

In all research process, researchers should be able to identify research problems-this is so as this is the first step in conducting research. To my experience, students found it difficult to generate research problems-most of them even do not know the nature of research problems; some of them in fact argue that finding research problems is one of the most difficult things to do in research, and that what prevent them to graduate on time. For this reason, I suggest that the topic on generating research problems be included in the research module (a lecturer of SA-U)

This finding suggests that a specific topic focusing on strategies for identifying research problems should be explicitly included in research teaching materials. This emphasis is highly consistent with the nature of research itself, as formulating research problems and identifying research gaps are among the most challenging skills faced by academics at all levels (Glesne, 2014; Murray, 2011; Zulfikar, 2014). Consequently, research teaching materials should deliberately incorporate structured guidance on developing research problems to better support students' research learning needs.

3.5. Various types of Methodologies

The study also reveals that research modules should include comprehensive information on various types of research methodologies. Participants emphasized that students need to be well informed about the range of research methodologies available so that they can select and appropriately apply methods suited to their studies (McKay, 2006; Mackey & Gass, 2005). For instance, the characteristics of case studies, experimental research, introspective research, ethnography, and other methodologies commonly employed in EFL research should be clearly explained in the research module. All participants regarded this topic as essential to include in the module, as reflected in the following remark:

There are many types of research methodologies for students to use such as case study, experimental research and other popular methodologies; and to avoid misunderstanding on these many methodologies, research modules should cater detailed information on these methodologies along with simple example of each methodology (a lecturer at AR-U).

It is essential to familiarize students with the range of available research methodologies from which they may draw. Each methodology possesses distinct characteristics and underlying assumptions (Zulfikar, 2019). For example, case study and experimental research rely on different types of data and therefore require different approaches to data collection. The FGD at SK-U also reveal similar point, where "a handy research textbook would offer information on specific research methodologies for students to enable them learn from specific methodologies.

3.6. Communication Strategies

All participants in the FGDs found it important to include a specific topic on communication strategies. These lecturers agree that students should be well trained on how to communicate with their thesis supervisors. Lipson (2005) sees that giving insights to students regarding communication strategies should become a significant topic provided for students. All of the participants suggest that for students to succeed in their thesis writing, they should have developed both research skills and communication skills. Participants of SK-U stated that:

I do believe that students should be equipped with the skills to communicate well with supervisors; this is because students sometimes are not able to communicate effectively with their lecturers and also thesis supervisors. An effective communication skill is as important as the research skill; and this suggests that the research module should contain a specific topic on communication strategies during research supervision (a lecture at SK-U)

The other participant, in fact reiterate that due to its significance, communication skills should be included in the module; he emphasizes that there should be a specific module discussing a communication skill. This is so since effective communication skills are very important to succeed in doing research and writing thesis.

Other FGD participants at all universities also believe that the module should provide list the Dos and the Don'ts that students should pay attention, and this is relevant to how Lipson (2005); Paltridge and Starfield (2007); and Zulfikar's (2019) arguments that students should be well advised on how to engage in healthy communication with their supervisors. This is important to provide guidelines for student in communicating with their supervisors. However, some participants at SK-U state that "communication skill should address both to supervisors and also to students. We see that most supervisors also do not

engage in healthy communication". In addition, the module would be better of if it provides a section on 'frequently asked questions and also the section on tips and trick', this section is important to allow students consult issues need explanation (Booth, et al., 2016; Lipson, 2005; Zulfikar, 2019).

4. Conclusion

Doing research and writing thesis are two pre-requisites for graduation from university. All students in their Senior Year should do their best to engage in research and write thesis as the research report. However, research and thesis writing are two most complicated tasks for students to do, which require certain intervention from their institutions: lecturers and thesis supervisors; and one of the important interventions is to provide a well-designed research module, which help students write thesis easily. This article, therefore reveals important information generated from lecturers and thesis supervisors participated in four different universities regarding effective research module for university students. FGDs with four group of lecturers and thesis supervisors at two universities in Aceh and Surabaya uncovers several characteristics of research module. According to these scholars, research module should contain specific topics: research guidelines; descriptions of specific terms; strategies to generate novel research topics; identification of research problems; description of research methodologies; and most important topic is communication skills. These topics are believed to be significant in helping students conduct research and write thesis. This research reveals significant information on significant components of the research modules as perceived by lecturers and supervisors. However, the study can be improved by future researchers through strengthening research fieldwork, in which more research participants are recruited and research settings are broadened for richness understanding.

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