UNIT 03

Developing the Research Problem

The heart of every research proposal

This is one of the most important parts of a research proposal.

3.1 What is a research problem?

A research problem is a specific issue, difficulty, contradiction, or gap in knowledge that requires investigation. It explains **why** the research needs to be conducted.

General topic	Research problem
Students' writing difficulties.	Despite receiving writing instruction and teacher feedback, some EFL students continue to experience difficulties organizing ideas and producing coherent paragraphs.

The second statement identifies an educational issue that can actually be investigated.

3.2 Research topic vs. research problem

Research Topic	Research Problem
Identifies the general subject.	Identifies the specific issue to investigate.
What the research is about.	Why the research is needed.
Digital feedback in EFL writing.	Limited understanding of how students use digital feedback to revise and improve their writing.

3.3 What is a research gap?

A research gap is an area that has not been sufficiently explored, explained, or addressed in existing research. A gap does not necessarily mean nobody has ever studied the topic. It may be:

Contextual gap

Studied elsewhere but insufficiently explored in a particular context.

Population gap

Previous studies focused on one group; another population needs investigation.

Methodological gap

Earlier research used certain methods, leaving other approaches unexplored.

Knowledge gap

Some aspects of a phenomenon remain unclear.

Contradictory findings

Previous studies produced different or conflicting results.

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EXAMPLE

Several studies have examined digital feedback in EFL writing. However, limited research may have explored how first-year university students in a particular Algerian context perceive and use such feedback.

This possible contextual gap must be verified through a literature review. Never present it as a fact without evidence.

3.4 How to develop a problem statement

A problem statement moves from a general educational context towards a specific research issue, in four stages:

1	**Introduce the general context** Explain the educational area in which your research is situated. *Example: Writing is an essential skill in English language learning because it enables learners to communicate ideas, demonstrate knowledge, and develop academic competence.*
2	**Identify the specific issue** Describe the difficulty, challenge, or situation that needs investigation. *Example: However, many EFL learners experience difficulties organizing ideas, maintaining coherence, and revising their written work.*
3	**Support the issue with evidence** Use academic studies, classroom observations, preliminary findings, or credible educational reports. Do not rely only on personal opinions.
4	**Explain the need for the study** Identify what remains unclear and explain how your research intends to address it.

3.5 A sample problem statement

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE · NOT ESTABLISHED RESEARCH FINDINGS

Writing is an important component of English language learning, particularly in academic contexts. However, developing effective writing skills remains challenging for many EFL learners. Students may experience difficulties organizing their ideas, maintaining coherence, and identifying weaknesses in their written work. Although teacher feedback plays an important role in writing instruction, digital tools have introduced additional opportunities for providing feedback and supporting revision. Nevertheless, the ways in which students understand, interpret, and use digital feedback to improve their writing deserve further investigation in specific educational contexts. Therefore, this study proposes to explore the role of digital feedback in supporting the writing development of first-year EFL students at an Algerian university.

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3.6 Common mistakes

Mistake	How to improve it
Discussing a very broad issue.	Focus on a specific educational problem.
Making unsupported claims.	Use relevant academic evidence.
Writing only personal opinions.	Support arguments with research and observations.
Presenting solutions without explaining the problem.	Establish the problem before proposing an investigation.
Repeating the title.	Explain the issue behind the title.

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