

THE QUALITY OF RESEARCH GRANT PROPOSALS IN ENGLISH EDUCATION, LINGUISTICS, AND LITERATURE

Bambang Yudi Cahyono

Jurusan Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Negeri Malang
e-mail: yudic2000@yahoo.com

Abstract: This article reports on the results of a research study on the quality of research grant proposals written by faculty members of the English Department of a university in East Java for the A-2 Competitive Grant Program managed by the Indonesian Directorate General of Higher Education (DGHE). This study is a descriptive research study and it describes the overall quality and the quality of the components of the research proposals. The results show that in general, most of the research proposals were of high quality. However, some of the proposals need moderate or minor revisions dealing with some aspects. Common shortcomings deal with incomplete referencing either as in-text citation or inclusion of the sources in the list of references. Other common weaknesses include the inaccuracy of research design and the unclear procedures for data analysis.

Keywords: competitive grant program, English education, linguistics, literature, research grant proposals.

This research study examined the overall quality and component quality of research grant proposals in English education, linguistics, and literature. The proposals were submitted as part of a larger set of activities designed for the A-2 Program. The A-2 Program, also called the Development of Internal Efficiency Program, is a part of the larger grant scheme called the PHK, *Program Hibah Kompetisi* (the Competitive Grant Program), managed by the *Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi* (the Directorate General of Higher Education/DGHE) of the Ministry of National Education (Depdiknas, 2004). The A-2 program has been implemented since 2004 and is a continuation of the A-1 Program, that is, the Development of Institutional Capacity Program. The A-2 Program aims at developing internal efficiency of a department of a higher education institution through policies and practices with the ultimate goals of reducing the study period of the students and increasing their academic quality (Depdiknas, 2004: 29).

The research grant proposals were written by faculty members of the English Department of a university in East Java as one of the higher-education institutions that have won the multi-year A-2 Program, commencing from the year of 2007. The A-2 Program provides funding for a number of activities which include academic staff development, fa-

cility improvement, temporary employment of external experts, supply of library materials, program development, teaching quality improvement, project management, and research (Depdiknas, 2004). The research grant proposals were submitted to the Department as an effort to win funding from the A-2 Program budget allocation for research. Due to the limited budget allocated for research, the A-2 Program emphasizes internal competition (i.e., competition among faculty members of a department) for the research grants. The A-2 Program also requires that the number of the research proposals that can be funded per year should not exceed 10 percent of the total number of the academic staff in the Department. For example, if a department has 30-40 academic staff, only 3-4 research proposals can be funded per year.

Because of the large number of the research grant proposals submitted by the academic staff of the English Department as mentioned earlier, the Department had to select only a few research proposals. In order to hold a fair evaluation and to raise the competitive nature of the selection process, the Department employed an external reviewer. Thus, this research is the result of the evaluation process conducted by the researcher as an external reviewer in order to help provide the Department with scores that can be used as a basis to select the research

proposals to be funded in the first year implementation of the A-2 Program.

A review of the literature indicates that there are some conventions that need to be fulfilled in order to make a good research proposal. Swales (1990: 141), using an ecological analogy, argues that researchers should be able to establish a territory (claiming centrality → making topic generalization → reviewing items of previous research), establishing a niche (either counter-claiming, indicating a gap, question-raising, or continuing a tradition) and occupying the niche (outlining purposes or announcing present research). In her examination of research grant proposals, Connor (1999) states that grant proposals generally contain three rhetorical appeals: *logos* (what will be done), *pathos* (why it is important to do), and *ethos* (how it will be done and what has been done). Furthermore, Connor (1999) states that these appeals are classified into ten different moves, some of which conform to what Swales (1990) has pointed out. The ten moves are territory, gap, goal, research question, means (e.g., methods, procedures, plans of action, and tasks), importance claim, reporting previous research (or review of related literature), benefits, competence claim (i.e., statements indicating that the proposal author is qualified and experienced), and achievements.

Smith (1998: 29) mentions that research proposal should have a topic specific enough to examine, can lead to research and point researchers toward a problem, and should be provided with data relevant to answering the research problem. Booth, Colomb, and Williams (1995: 94-104) state that research proposal should make strong and substantive claims, use plausible claims to guide specific research, and offer reliable evidence. In this regard, the Indonesian Ministry of National Education issued criteria to be used in evaluating research proposals. The criteria emphasize the importance of research problems, orientation, methods, and products (Depdiknas, 2006).

Relevant to the foregoing discussion, the purpose of this study is to report the results of a review of the research proposals submitted for grants from the A-2 program scheme in terms of overall quality and the quality of the proposal components. This research study will address the following research questions: How is the overall quality of the research grant proposals in English education, linguistics and literature submitted for the A-2 program scheme? How is the quality of the components of the research grant proposals in English education, linguistics, and literature submitted for the A-2 program scheme?

The answer to the first research question will be useful for the English Department mentioned above as a basis for determining which of the research grant proposals will be funded, whereas the answer to the second research question will be useful for the proposal writers or anyone who wish to write research proposals as it will specifically explore the weaknesses of the research grant proposals.

METHOD

This study is a descriptive research study as it is used to “establish the existence of phenomena by explicitly describing them” (Seliger & Shohamy 1989: 125). This study describes the overall quality and the quality of the components of the research proposals submitted for grants within the A-2 Program scheme awarded to the English Department of a university in East Java. The source of data for this research study was a collection of research grant proposals that have been submitted by the academic staff in the Department. There were 36 proposals, covering ten proposals in English education, 15 proposals in linguistics, and 11 proposals in literature. Out of this number, five proposals were categorized as “umbrella proposals” (1 English education, 2 linguistics, and 2 literature proposals), as they will be used as a basis to carry out a number of smaller research projects in the three areas. I received the research grant proposals with some of their original pages taken, leaving the proposals anonymous with no information on administrative components such as budgeting.

In my observation, the proposals seemed to have been written following a customized organization, with the exception of four proposals. The proposals had the following components: background of the research, research problems, literature review, list of references, research purposes, significance of the research, research hypothesis (optional) and research method. Four of the proposals were written following the conventional organization stretching from the introduction, literature review, and research method to the list of references. Regardless of the organization types, all of the proposals were eligible for selection process because they contained all of the required components.

In order to carry out my duty as the reviewer of the proposals, scores ranging from 1 to 100 were used. The scores have four levels: 81-100 (very good), 61-80 (good), 51-60 (fair) and less than 51 (poor). The levels for scoring the research grant proposals are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Levels for Scoring the Research Grant Proposals

Level	Quality
81-100	Very good
61-80	Good
51-60	Fair
<51	Poor

A summary of the report in the form of a table of six columns should be made and submitted to the English Department. In the report the order number of the proposal, title, study area, score, as well as weaknesses and strengths were written. Although there was a useful format to write the scores of the research grant proposals, there was no guideline for scoring the proposals. In order to help the process of evaluation and to give meaningful scores, the following things were conducted:

First, the proposals were divided into four major components. These components were: (1) background of the research and research problems, (2) literature review and list of references, (3) research purposes, significance of the research, and (optional) research hypothesis; and (4) research method. Each of these components has equal scoring proportion of 25 percents, or 100 percents for the four parts altogether.

Next, criteria for scoring and values for marking of each of the components were determined. For this purpose, the evaluation format commonly used to evaluate research proposals submitted for grants in the Indonesian higher education circle was adopted (Depdiknas, 2006) with some modifications due to the customization of the proposals' organization. Accordingly, the background of the research was evaluated on the basis of its relevance to the topic and adequacy of analysis, whereas the research problems were evaluated on the basis of clarity and measurability. Relevance, coherence, and quality of analysis were used as criteria to evaluate the literature review, while recentness, completeness, and accuracy were used to evaluate the table of references. The research purposes were required to be feasible and relevant to the research problems, while significance of the research was judged on the basis of originality and usability of the research outcomes. In addition, research hypothesis, if any, was examined for its degree of relation to the research problems. The quality of the research method was determined on the basis of accuracy in the choice of the research designs, as well as clarity and accuracy in the procedures of data collection and analysis. The components were then given values by consid-

ering their degree of importance or complexity. For example, the determination of the research method was valued 10 and the procedures of data collection and analysis were valued 15 as the maximum scores. The criteria for the evaluation of the research grant proposals are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Criteria of Evaluation for the Research Grant Proposals

No	Components	Criteria	Value
1	Background to the research and research problems (25%)	Relevance of the research back-ground to the topic and adequacy of analysis	15
		Clarity and measurability of the re-search problems	10
2	Literature review and list of references (25%)	Relevance, coher-ence, and quality of analysis of the literature review	15
		Recentness and completeness of the references and accuracy in writing	10
3	Research purposes, significance of the re-search, and hypothe-sis (optional) (25%)	Feasibility and rel-evance of the re-search purposes with the research problems	10
		Originality and us-ability of the re-search outcome, and the relation of the hypothesis to the research prob-lems	15
4	Research method (25%)	Accuracy in the choice the research designs	10
		Clarity and accu-racy in the proce-dures of data col-lection and analysis	15
Total (Maximum Score)			100

Finally, the criteria for evaluation were determined so as to provide a guideline for scoring the research grant proposals. During the process of reading the proposals, the strengths and weaknesses of the proposals were noted, and some recommendations related to the identified shortcomings were written. The results of evaluation of each proposal were presented on a separate piece of paper. For example, one of the research proposals evaluated was entitled, "The use of learning strategies by Indonesian learners of EFL at secondary schools,

universities, and English courses: Multi-case studies". This proposal has generally fulfilled the criteria of a good proposal. The research background was relevant to the topic and it adequately led to the research problems. The research problems were clear and measurable, and the research purposes were relevant to the research problems. These three aspects of the proposal gained the maximum scores, that is, 15-10-10, respectively. However, there were minor weaknesses in the other aspects of the proposal and, therefore, they could not be given maximum scores. Not all in-text references were included in the list of references, the research instrument was not described vividly, respondents were not specified clearly, and the statistics for data analysis was not explained clearly. Regardless of these weaknesses, the proposal was useful to explore some of the ways to become more successful EFL learners. As soon as the results of evaluation of all the thirty-six proposals (the results will be discussed later) were written, the summary of report was completed and the results of this study was sent to the English Department.

For the purpose of investigating the quality of the components of the research grant proposals (Research Question 2), the procedures of data analysis are explained. The data of the study were the scores of the 36 research proposals and notes on the weaknesses and strengths of the proposals. For analysis, the scores of the components were interpreted using five levels. For the components having maximum score of 15, the levels range from 1-3 (very poor), 4-6 (poor), 7-9 (fair), 10-12 (good), to 13-15 (very good), whereas for the components having maximum score of 10, the levels vary from 1-2 (very poor), 3-4 (poor), 5-6 (fair), 7-8 (good), to 9-10 (very good). Table 3 shows the levels for analyzing the scores of the components of the research proposals.

Table 3. Scales for Analyzing the Components of the Research Proposals

Level for Components with Maximum Score of 15	Level for Components with Maximum Score of 10	Quality
13-15	9-10	Very good
10-12	7-8	Good
7-9	5-6	Fair
4-6	3-4	Poor
1-3	1-2	Very Poor

In order to know the quality of the proposal components, the scores of the components of the 36

proposals were tallied and counted. The frequency and proportion of the scores were also shown. Components with low scores will be given more attention and recommendations to improve the quality of the proposal. For example, referring to Proposal No 33 that we have discussed, the quality of this proposal needed improvement. The recommendations given to this proposal focused on the importance of clarifying research instrument to be used in the study and the need to specify the research respondents to be involved in the study.

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in two parts: the overall quality of the research grant proposals and the quality of the components of the same proposals.

The Overall Quality of the Research Grant Proposals

The analysis of the overall scores of the research grant proposals in English education, linguistics, and literature showed that most of the proposals were well written. More specifically, 11 proposals (30.56 percent)—3 proposals in English education, 5 linguistics, and 3 literature—were "very good". Twenty-three proposals (63.88 percent)—6 proposals in English education, 9 linguistics, and 8 literature—were "good". Only two proposals (5.56 percent), one in English education and another in linguistics, were "fair". The results of analysis of the overall scores for the research grant proposals are shown in Table 4. In order to know the strengths and weaknesses of the proposals, further analysis was conducted to examine the quality of the components of the proposals.

Table 4. Overall Scores of the Research Grant Proposals

Field of study	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good
Proposals in English education (N = 10)	-	1	6	3
Proposals in linguistics (N = 15)	-	1	9	5
Proposals in literature (N = 11)	-	-	8	3
Total (36 proposals)	-	2 (5.56%)	23 (63.88%)	11 (30.56%)

The Quality of the Components of the Research Grant Proposals

The analysis of the components of the research grant proposals showed that some of the components (i.e., background of the research, research purposes, research design, as well as data collection and analysis) were written well as indicated by the frequency of scores falling within the “fair” to the “very good” categories. The other four components (i.e., research problems, literature review, list of references, and significance of the research (and hypothesis)) had marks falling within the “very poor” and “fair” categories. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Scores of the Components of the Research Grant Proposals

Aspects of the Components	Very Poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
Background to the research	--	--	1 (2.8)	14 (38.9)	21 (58.3)
Research problems	--	1 (2.8)	5 (13.9)	11 (30.6)	19 (52.8)
Literature review	1 (2.8)	2 (5.6)	5 (13.9)	16 (44.4)	12 (33.3)
List of references	2 (5.6)	4 (11.1)	10 (27.8)	15 (41.7)	5 (13.9)
Research purposes	--	--	6 (16.7)	16 (44.4)	14 (38.9)
Significance of the research (and hypothesis)	--	1 (2.8)	5 (13.9)	21 (58.3)	9 (25)
Research design	--	--	6 (16.7)	21 (58.3)	9 (25)
Data collection and analysis	--	--	11 (30.6)	20 (55.6)	5 (13.9)
Total (288 aspects of the components)	3 (1%)	8 (2.8%)	49 (17%)	134 (46.5%)	94 (32.6%)

This section has presented the results of the analysis of the overall quality and the quality of the components of the research grant proposals. In the following section, the components that had marks falling within three unfavorable categories (i.e., “very poor”, “poor”, and “fair”) will be discussed by focusing on the weaknesses of the components.

DISCUSSION

This section aims to provide answer to the research questions and to relate the results of the research to the purposes in writing research grant proposals. The first research question concerns the overall quality of the research grant proposals. The results of the analysis showed that most of the proposals were either “very good” or “good”. This suggests that, in general, the proposals have fulfilled the criteria to be developed into research, especially if funding are available. However, because the research grant proposals were written for competition, the normative evaluation that a proposal is “good” would not help much for the purpose of winning the competition and gaining research grants. Out of the eleven “very good” proposals (see Table 4), only a few will be granted. Suppose some funding will be awarded to three proposals, the Department may take those achieving the highest scores, regardless of the field of study. The three outstanding proposals are one English education proposal and two linguistics proposals. Another possibility is that the Department will determine one proposal achieving the highest score from each field of study (i.e., one English education proposal, one linguistics proposal, and one literature proposal). Thus, the analysis of the overall quality of proposals suggests that a research grant proposal should not only be “good” or “very good” in quality, but it should also be the best proposal.

The second research question deals with the quality of the components of the research grant proposals. This research question is relevant for the proposal writers who would like to develop their proposals for self-funded research or to revise the proposals for research grants from other sources. The remainder of this section focuses on some of the apparent weaknesses of each component of the research grant proposals in relation to the criteria for evaluation (see Table 2). The codes following statements of weaknesses refer to the order number of the research grant proposals (RGP).

Background of the research and research problems. According to the criteria, research background should be relevant to topic and should provide adequate analysis of the issue. Due to lack of adequacy in analysis of the situation or the issue, some of the proposals were unable to link the situation directly and the problematic issue, a failure in explaining the issue that needs researching (RGPs 5 & 26). Two things are emphasized in the formulation of research problems: clarity and measurability. Some of the proposals have no clear research prob-

lems (RGPs 1 & 29) or the problems are not explicitly stated (RGP 30). In two proposals, the writing of research problems resembles the writing of the research purposes (RGPs 13 & 17).

Literature Review and List of References.

Literature review needs to be relevant to the raised problems and should be written coherently and critically. Some of the proposals lacked sources, resulting in merely presenting arguments cited from other authors rather than providing critical analysis (RGPs 12, 32, & 35). One proposal was for text-based research and the literature review focuses only on the texts to be investigated without referring to other theoretical bases or research findings (RGP 36). With regard to referencing, many proposals lacked complete inclusion of references, which is a primary role in using the work of other people (Booth, et al., 1995: 76). Some of the proposals did not include the year of publication (RGP 4), some other proposals included references that are not discussed in the text or discussed sources without including these sources in the list of references (RGPs 5, 12, 24, & 25).

Research Purposes, Significance of the Research (and Hypothesis). Research purposes are required to be relevant to the research problems. Many of the proposals fulfilled this requirement. However, some of them had research problems that were not directly related to the research problems (RGPs 10, 14 & 25). In two proposals, the writing of research purposes resembles the writing of the research problems (RGPs 13 & 17). In one proposal, there was no clear difference between research purposes and significance of research (RGP 6). In some other proposals, significance of the research was not explicitly stated (RGP 30) and significance of research was not explained logically (RGP 15). Some shortcomings of hypothesis formulation were that the hypothesis had nothing to do with the research problems (RGP 10), thus not giving a clue toward the answer to the research problems.

Research Method. Three important things regarding research method are accuracy in the choice

of research design, how data are collected and how they are analyzed. In some proposals, research design was not stated explicitly (RGPs 17 & 23) or chosen accurately (RGPs 5 & 29). Some proposals had no clear explanation regarding procedures of data collection and data analysis (RGPs 1, 7, 29, 22, & 31).

In the evaluation sheet, the research grant proposals containing weaknesses as explained above were given some recommendations that can be used to improve the quality of the proposals. For example, proposals with no complete referencing system, recommendations focused on the complete inclusion of sources and the discussion of the sources in the text. Proposals whose literature review lacked comprehensive and coherent analysis were given feedback on the necessity to discuss the topic more comprehensively and coherently.

CONCLUSION

This paper reports on the results of review of research grant proposals written by faculty members of the English Department of a university in East Java for the A-2 Competitive Grant Program managed by the Indonesian Directorate General of Higher Education (DGHE). The review suggests that many of the research grant proposals were of high quality. Because of the competitive nature of the selection process and due to the limited budget allocation, not all of these proposals could be granted funding. However, should the writers of the proposals wish to carry out the research study regardless of the availability of funding from the institution, many of these proposals are ready to use as a guidance for research. Some of the proposals need moderate or minor revisions dealing with some components of the proposals. Common shortcomings deal with incomplete referencing either as in-text citation or inclusion of the sources in the list of references. Other common weaknesses include the inaccuracy of research design and the unclear procedures for data analysis.

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