
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Challenges in Undergraduate Research Proposal Writing: Evidence from a Capstone Course in an EFL Department in Bahrain

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| ABSTRACT

Research proposal writing is a critical academic competency, yet it remains one of the most challenging tasks for undergraduate EFL students. This paper investigates the common challenges encountered by Arab EFL undergraduate students in writing research proposals within a capstone course context at a Gulf university. Drawing on qualitative document analysis of 30 Stage 1 proposals submitted during the second semester of the 2025–2026 academic year in ENGL 450 (Project Writing) at the University of Bahrain, combined with a reflective practitioner approach, the study identifies four recurring challenge categories: (1) topic over-scoping, (2) information literacy deficits, (3) unfocused or multiple research questions, and (4) confusion between research objectives and hypotheses. The findings reveal that students consistently propose studies that exceed the feasible scope of a one-semester undergraduate project, struggle to locate and integrate credible academic sources, formulate research questions that are either too broad or too numerous, and conflate the conceptually distinct functions of research objectives, questions, and hypotheses. These challenges are discussed in relation to existing literature on EFL academic writing, Gulf learner profiles, and undergraduate research supervision. The paper concludes with pedagogical recommendations, including the value of staged proposal submission, topic-scoping workshops, and explicit instruction in research question formulation. The study contributes to a growing body of literature on EFL research writing in the Gulf context.

| KEYWORDS

EFL academic writing, research proposal, undergraduate, Gulf context, capstone course, Bahrain

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1. Introduction

Academic research writing is widely recognised as a high-stakes literacy skill, one that signals a student's readiness for professional, postgraduate, and scholarly engagement. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in higher education, the challenge of producing academic writing is compounded by linguistic, cultural, and epistemological barriers that can impede the development of disciplinary literacy (Hyland, 2004; Leki & Carson, 1994). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the writing of research proposals, a genre that requires students not only to command academic language but to demonstrate a coherent understanding of research design, methodological choice, and scholarly positioning.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) context, universities have increasingly introduced capstone research courses as part of undergraduate degree programs in the humanities and social sciences, requiring final-year students to conceptualise, design, and execute original research projects. Despite this growing institutional emphasis, there remains a conspicuous gap in the literature specifically examining the proposal-writing challenges of Arab EFL undergraduates at this level. While studies have addressed EFL writing challenges broadly (Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Flowerdew, 1999), and others have examined thesis and dissertation writing at postgraduate level (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007), the undergraduate capstone proposal in a Gulf university context has received comparatively little focused attention. Research in Gulf EFL settings has tended to concentrate on skill development, assessment practices, and learner motivation (Al-Dawoody Abdulaal et al., 2024), leaving the specific genre challenges of undergraduate research proposal writing underexplored.

This paper addresses that gap through a qualitative document analysis of 30 undergraduate research proposals submitted in ENGL 450 (Project Writing), a capstone course offered by the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Bahrain. The study is grounded in a reflective practitioner framework (Schön, 1983), drawing on the course instructor's systematic observation of recurring patterns in student submissions over one semester. The aim is not to evaluate individual student performance but to identify and characterise the most common structural and conceptual challenges that emerge in the proposal-writing process, and to discuss their implications for pedagogy.

The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the most common challenges that EFL undergraduate students face when writing research proposals in a Gulf university capstone course? (2) How do these challenges manifest in students' initial proposal outlines? In addressing these questions, the paper contributes to the applied linguistics literature on EFL academic writing in the Gulf context and offers practical insights for instructors designing and supervising undergraduate research courses.

2. Literature Review

2.1 EFL Academic Writing Challenges

A substantial body of research has documented the difficulties that EFL writers encounter in academic contexts. Hyland (2004, 2007) argues that academic writing is fundamentally a disciplinary practice, shaped by genre conventions, discourse community expectations, and rhetorical norms that non-native speakers must acquire explicitly rather than incidentally. For Arab EFL learners in particular, the transition to English-medium academic writing involves navigating a complex interface between Arabic rhetorical conventions, including a preference for elaborative and cumulative argument structures, and the more linear, thesis-driven organisation expected in English academic prose (Leki & Carson, 1994; Yahia, 2011). These challenges are not merely linguistic but conceptual: students must internalise new epistemological orientations toward knowledge-making and academic argumentation.

Flowerdew (1999, 2000) has explored the particular difficulties faced by non-native-speaking academics in publishing research in English, noting that challenges related to research question formulation, source integration, and genre awareness are persistent and deep-rooted. While Flowerdew's focus is on experienced researchers, his observations are highly relevant to undergraduate students encountering academic research for the first time, as the foundational difficulties he identifies, namely the conceptual conflation of different research moves and the difficulty of situating one's work within existing literature, appear consistently across proficiency levels.

2.2 Undergraduate Research Proposal Writing

Research on the genre of the research proposal has been more limited than research on essay or thesis writing, but studies that do exist highlight consistent patterns of difficulty. Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) found that postgraduate EFL students struggle significantly with the literature review component of theses, particularly in their ability to synthesise sources critically rather than merely describe them. This finding is relevant to proposal writing, where a preliminary literature review is a key component. Similarly, Paltridge and Starfield (2007) note that thesis writers frequently experience difficulty in formulating clear, researchable questions, often conflating what they want to find out with statements of purpose, aims, or hypotheses. At the undergraduate level, Evans and Green (2007) found that students approaching research writing for the first time tend to underestimate the complexity of research design, proposing studies that are methodologically over-ambitious relative to their actual skills and available time. This tendency toward scope inflation, proposing large-scale, multi-method studies that cannot be completed within a single semester, is a recurring concern in undergraduate research supervision and represents a significant challenge in proposal evaluation.

More recently, Al-Zurfi and Al-Shammari (2026) conducted a mixed-methods study of Iraqi EFL undergraduates' barriers to graduation project writing, finding that deficiencies in academic writing skills and research methodology knowledge were primary obstacles, despite high student motivation and broadly positive perceptions of supervisory support. The present study builds on this finding by examining a related but distinct challenge: the specific genre of the research proposal, and the conceptual and methodological difficulties students encounter at the earliest stage of the research process, within a Bahraini rather than Iraqi institutional context.

2.3 Gulf and Arab EFL Learner Profiles

Research specific to Gulf and Arab university contexts has highlighted additional layers of challenge. Al-Khasawneh (2010) studied EFL academic writing among postgraduate Arab students and found persistent difficulties in argumentation, source attribution, and research question formulation, difficulties attributed in part to limited exposure to research methodology in earlier schooling. In Bahrain specifically, the linguistic profile of students in English Language and Literature programs typically involves Arabic as the first language, English as the primary medium of instruction, and varying degrees of prior exposure to academic writing depending on secondary school background.

Studies of assessment and learning in Gulf EFL contexts have demonstrated that psychological and pedagogical factors interact in complex ways to shape student performance. Al-Dawoodi Abdulaal et al. (2024), in a study of EFL learners at a Gulf university, found that the type of assessment employed significantly affects not only academic outcomes but also students' motivation,

language apprehension, and self-confidence, factors that are directly relevant to the willingness and ability to engage with challenging tasks such as research proposal writing. These findings underscore the importance of designing capstone course assessment procedures that are appropriately scaffolded and formatively oriented.

A particular challenge in the Gulf context is information literacy, defined as the ability to locate, evaluate, and integrate academic sources effectively. Badke (2010) argues that information literacy is one of the most undertaught competencies in higher education globally, and this gap is especially acute in contexts where library instruction is limited and students have relied primarily on internet searches rather than academic database navigation. The inability to distinguish between peer-reviewed journal articles and informal online sources has direct implications for the quality of literature reviews and the bibliographic grounding of research proposals.

2.4 Research Question Formulation

Creswell (2014) identifies research question formulation as one of the pivotal and frequently mismanaged steps in the research design process. A well-formed research question must be clear, focused, empirically addressable, and bounded in scope.

Undergraduate EFL students, particularly those with limited prior exposure to research methods, often produce questions that are too broad to be answerable, or that conflate multiple distinct inquiries within a single question. Booth et al. (2016) similarly note that students in early stages of research training tend to confuse topics with questions and questions with hypotheses, treating the three as interchangeable when they serve conceptually distinct functions.

The distinction between research objectives and hypotheses is particularly problematic for EFL students from Arabic educational backgrounds, where research methodology is not systematically taught at the secondary level. Hypotheses, which are predictive, falsifiable propositions typically used in quantitative research, are frequently confused with research aims, which are directional statements of what the researcher intends to investigate, or with research questions, which are interrogative formulations of the research focus. This conceptual confusion has practical consequences for research design coherence and is one of the most commonly reported challenges in undergraduate research supervision (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Context

This study is situated within ENGL 450 (Project Writing), a three-credit-hour capstone course offered in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Bahrain. The course is designed for graduating students who have completed a minimum of 110 credit hours and is classified at NQF Level 8, positioning it as a rigorous scholarly undertaking within the national qualifications framework. The course is coordinated and taught by the author of this paper. Approximately 30 students are registered across one section per semester, all of whom are native speakers of Arabic pursuing a BA in English Language and Literature. English is their primary medium of academic instruction, though it functions as a second or foreign language in their daily social lives.

The ENGL 450 course requires students to research a topic of their choice, approved by the instructor, and to produce a final project of not less than 5,000 words, including an abstract, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion, conclusion, and APA-formatted references. The process is structured around a two-stage proposal model: Stage 1 requires a 250–300 word proposal outline submitted in weeks three to four of the semester, while Stage 2 requires a 500–600 word expanded proposal in weeks five to six. The two-stage structure was designed to provide early formative feedback and to scaffold the proposal development process in line with best practices in undergraduate research supervision.

3.2 Data and Analytical Approach

The data for this study consist of 30 Stage 1 proposal outlines submitted during Semester 2 of the 2025–2026 academic year. All proposals have been anonymised and are treated as documents rather than as individual student assessments; no identifying information about individual students is reported. The proposals were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with the analytical framework derived from the Stage 1 marking rubric used in the course. These rubrics assess proposals across six criteria: clarity and specificity of topic and title, background and rationale, research objective or question, method overview, academic presentation, and APA referencing. Recurring patterns of difficulty across these criteria were identified inductively from the proposal texts and from the instructor's written feedback, producing four thematic challenge categories reported in the Findings section.

The study adopts a reflective practitioner framework (Schön, 1983), in which the instructor-researcher's systematic engagement with student work, including the provision of written feedback and the observation of recurring patterns across submissions, constitutes the primary mode of inquiry. This approach is well-established in practitioner research in applied linguistics and language education (Mann, 2016), and is particularly appropriate for studies of classroom practice grounded in institutional data. Ethical considerations are addressed through full anonymisation of student data, which forms part of regular course assessment documentation within the University of Bahrain's institutional framework.

4. Findings

Analysis of the 30 Stage 1 proposals identified four recurring categories of challenge. These are presented below with illustrative examples drawn from the proposals and from the instructor's written feedback. All examples are paraphrased to protect student anonymity.

4.1 Topic Over-Scoping

The most widespread challenge across the dataset was topic over-scoping: students consistently proposing research projects whose breadth, scale, or methodological complexity far exceeded what is feasible within a single undergraduate semester. This pattern was evident in approximately three-quarters of the proposals reviewed and manifested in several forms.

In one case, a student proposed a comparative study of how different literary genres, namely the novel, drama, and poetry, represent a particular theme, while simultaneously planning to survey 20–30 students about genre preferences and to conduct a close textual analysis of three canonical works. The proposal thus conflated two entirely separate studies (a reception study and a stylistic analysis) and embedded both within a framework too large to be completed in one semester. The instructor's feedback identified this as a fundamental design problem: the proposal was attempting to address two completely different research inquiries simultaneously, with no clear methodological framework for either.

Similarly, another student proposed a sociophonetic study comparing labiodentalization in Cockney English and Bahrani Arabic, requiring original audio data collection from 10–15 Bahrani Arabic speakers, retrieval and phonetic analysis of Cockney corpus recordings, phonetic transcription, and inter-rater reliability testing. This is the kind of project one would expect at Master's or doctoral level. The instructor's assessment noted that the proposal read like a postgraduate thesis rather than a one-semester undergraduate project, and that the submitted text exceeded the 250–300 word stage limit by more than three times.

Another proposal planned to collect a 100,000-word corpus from four AI tools and a 50,000-word student writing corpus, intending to compare lexical frequency patterns using concordance software. While the research angle was described as potentially original, the proposed corpus size was identified as massively disproportionate for an undergraduate project, where 1,000–5,000 words of analysed data is a more appropriate scale. One further proposal proposed to survey two distinct age cohorts (ages 13–25 and ages 35–65), administer original English proficiency tests, and compare motivation and learning outcomes across generations, a design appropriate for a large-scale funded study rather than a capstone undergraduate course. A consistent underlying cause of this pattern appears to be students' lack of familiarity with the scale and norms of undergraduate research. Many arrive at the capstone course with an impression of research shaped by large published studies or postgraduate work, with no clear model of what a feasible, contained, one-semester undergraduate project looks like. The result is proposals that are intellectually ambitious but practically undeliverable.

4.2 Information Literacy Deficits

The second major challenge category concerns information literacy: students' ability to locate, evaluate, and correctly cite credible academic sources. This challenge was visible across multiple dimensions in the proposals, including citation of non-academic online sources, provision of broken or inappropriate URLs in place of journal article references, and an overall thinness of bibliographic grounding.

Several proposals included references to sources that were not peer-reviewed academic publications. One student submitted a reference citing a poem's page on a general poetry website as a source in a literary analysis project, reflecting a failure to distinguish between a primary literary text and an academic secondary source. Another proposal cited a conference proceedings paper retrieved from a university repository as the sole theoretical foundation for a complex phonetics study. While conference papers can be valid academic sources in certain contexts, their citation as primary theoretical anchors in a proposal alongside general web links suggests a limited understanding of academic source hierarchies.

Reference formatting errors were also pervasive. Multiple proposals included URLs that led to database landing pages rather than to specific articles, or that cited researcher profile pages rather than original journal publications. This reflects not only APA formatting difficulties, which are expected at this stage, but more fundamentally a confusion about what constitutes a primary academic source. Students appear to search the open web rather than library databases and to retrieve whatever appears in the top results, regardless of its scholarly status.

The most revealing indicator of information literacy deficits, however, was the thinness of the literature review component across proposals. Stage 1 requires only two to three preliminary references, yet many students struggled to identify even this minimum number of relevant, peer-reviewed sources. This suggests that the challenge is not merely one of APA formatting but of fundamental source-finding skills: knowing how to access academic databases, use Boolean search operators, identify relevant journals, and evaluate source credibility. These are competencies that are rarely taught explicitly in undergraduate curricula and that represent a significant gap in students' research readiness.

4.3 Unfocused or Multiple Research Questions

The third challenge category concerns research question formulation. A clear, focused, and researchable question is the structural cornerstone of any research proposal, yet the majority of proposals in this dataset contained research questions that were either too broad to be answerable in a small-scale study, or that multiplied inquiries to the point of incoherence. Broad, unanswerable questions were common. One proposal asked what factors determine success in learning English in Bahrain, framed as a direct opposition between opportunity and learner motivation, and supplemented this with a second question about how to increase learners' motivation and ability to learn. The first question, while potentially interesting in a large-scale survey study, is far too broad for an undergraduate project and implicitly requires causal analysis across historical, demographic, and psychological variables. The second question is not a research question at all but a pedagogical intervention objective, something that would require an experimental design to address properly.

Multiple-question proposals were similarly problematic. One student listed three research questions and three objectives for a phonetics study, generating a research design so multidimensional that no single data collection instrument could adequately address all of them. The course guidelines explicitly state that Stage 1 proposals should contain two to three clear questions or aims, yet a significant number of proposals exceeded this, with some listing up to five separate questions without any apparent awareness that a more focused design would produce stronger results.

A further illustrative example involved a Quranic linguistics proposal in which one formulated question asked whether the language of the Holy Quran could simply be categorised as Modern Standard Arabic or was more complex, a theoretical debate that has occupied Arabic linguistics scholars for decades and cannot be resolved within a small undergraduate study. The second item was not a question at all but a topic statement about the role of interpreting word order and its effects on meaning. Both items reflect a failure to understand what a researchable question is, one that is specific, bounded, and addressable through a clearly defined data collection procedure.

4.4 Confusion Between Research Objectives, Questions, and Hypotheses

The fourth and conceptually most fundamental challenge category is the confusion between research objectives, research questions, and hypotheses. These three components of a research proposal serve distinct functions: objectives state the aims of the research in directional terms ("to examine," "to investigate," "to compare"); research questions formulate the same aims interrogatively; and hypotheses are predictive, testable propositions typically employed in quantitative or experimental research designs. Students in this dataset regularly conflated these three elements, using the terms interchangeably or producing statements that occupied an undefined space between them.

One proposal included a list of three items under the heading "Research Objectives or Questions" that mixed all three types: one was a directional aim, one was an interrogative question, and one was a predictive hypothesis. While this particular student demonstrated a relatively sophisticated awareness of the three types, the conflation of all three under a single heading suggests a lack of clarity about their distinct roles in a research design. This pattern, in which students know the vocabulary of research design without a firm grasp of its underlying logic, was characteristic of the dataset as a whole.

More commonly, students presented objectives framed as questions and vice versa, or included hypothesis-style predictions in their background sections without labelling them as such. Several proposals stated aims using interrogative syntax rather than directional phrasing, and others formulated what were clearly hypotheses as research questions, for instance, asking whether motivation or opportunity determines success in English learning, a predictive binary question that presupposes an answer rather than opening an inquiry.

This challenge is particularly acute for students whose prior academic experience has not included systematic research methods instruction. At the secondary level in Bahrain, as in many Gulf states, research methodology is not a formal component of the curriculum, meaning that students arrive at the capstone course encountering these distinctions for the first time. The result is a conceptual vocabulary that is simultaneously over-applied, the word "hypothesis" appears in many proposals, and under-understood, with its specific methodological meaning consistently misapplied.

5. Discussion

The four challenge categories identified in this study, topic over-scoping, information literacy deficits, unfocused research questions, and objectives/hypothesis confusion, represent a coherent and interrelated profile of research writing difficulties. Rather than isolated errors, they reflect a deeper structural gap between students' prior academic preparation and the epistemological demands of undergraduate research in an EFL university context.

The over-scoping pattern is consistent with the finding of Evans and Green (2007) that students approaching research for the first time tend to underestimate its complexity and propose studies modelled on large published work rather than on realistic undergraduate project norms. In the Gulf context, this tendency is likely amplified by the fact that ENGL 450 is often the first, and in some cases the only, research methods course that students encounter in their degree program. Without prior exposure to small-scale, contained research models, students default to the only models of research they know, published journal articles or textbook examples describing large-scale studies, and attempt to replicate them in scope.

The information literacy deficits echo the argument of Badke (2010) that this competency is systematically undertaught in higher education, and are further consistent with the findings of Al-Zurfi and Al-Shammari (2026) regarding Iraqi EFL

undergraduates' difficulties with academic writing skills and source-based argumentation. In the Bahrain context, students' default research behaviour appears to be web-based rather than database-based, reflecting limited familiarity with university library resources and peer-reviewed publication conventions. The consequences for proposal quality are direct: without access to relevant literature, students cannot situate their research within existing scholarship, identify genuine gaps, or ground their methodological choices in established practice.

The research question formulation challenges are consistent with observations by Creswell (2014) and Booth et al. (2016) that this step is one of the most cognitively demanding in the research process, requiring students to transform a topic of interest into a focused, bounded, empirically addressable inquiry. For EFL students whose academic training has emphasised comprehension and reproduction rather than critical inquiry, this transformation is particularly difficult. The tendency to produce multiple, sprawling questions may also reflect a misunderstanding of what constitutes research comprehensiveness: students appear to believe that more questions signal more rigour, when in fact focus and depth are more valued.

The objectives and hypothesis confusion reflects a broader conceptual gap in students' understanding of research design. The fact that students often use the vocabulary of research (hypothesis, objective, variable) without a clear understanding of its meaning suggests that surface familiarity with research terminology does not constitute methodological competence. This is compounded by the finding of Al-Dawoody Abdulaal et al. (2024) that assessment practices in Gulf EFL contexts significantly affect students' confidence and their willingness to engage with challenging academic tasks. Where students lack confidence in their research design knowledge, the tendency to adopt superficial research vocabulary without fully understanding it may function as a face-saving strategy rather than a genuine attempt at rigorous design. This has implications for how research methods content is taught within capstone courses and for whether a standalone prerequisite course in research methodology might better prepare students for ENGL 450.

Importantly, the two-stage proposal model appears to function as an effective early intervention mechanism. By requiring students to submit a first outline in weeks three and four and an expanded proposal in weeks five and six, the course creates two formal checkpoints at which instructor feedback can redirect proposals that are over-scoped, under-referenced, or conceptually confused before students have invested significant time in a flawed direction. The qualitative feedback provided at Stage 1, which in several cases involved not just critique but alternative topic suggestions and methodological reframings, proved essential in reorienting students toward feasible, well-designed projects.

6. Conclusion

This paper has identified and characterised four primary challenges in undergraduate EFL research proposal writing within a Gulf university capstone course: topic over-scoping, information literacy deficits, unfocused research questions, and confusion between research objectives and hypotheses. These challenges are not incidental errors but reflect systematic gaps in students' research preparation that have both linguistic and epistemological dimensions. The findings are grounded in the analysis of 30 actual student proposals submitted in ENGL 450 at the University of Bahrain, giving them an empirical specificity that complements existing literature on EFL academic writing in the Gulf context.

The paper offers three principal pedagogical recommendations. First, the staged proposal model, in which students submit an outline before an expanded proposal, should be retained and further developed as a structured scaffolding mechanism. The early identification of over-scoped or conceptually confused proposals through Stage 1 feedback is demonstrably valuable. Second, explicit information literacy instruction, ideally delivered in partnership with university librarians, should be integrated into the early weeks of ENGL 450, covering academic database navigation, source evaluation, and the distinction between peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed material. Third, dedicated instruction on the conceptual distinctions between research questions, objectives, and hypotheses, using discipline-specific examples drawn from the students' own areas of interest, should be incorporated as a formal component of the course content.

The study has several limitations. The analysis is based on proposals from a single course section at one institution in one semester, which limits the generalisability of the findings. The reflective practitioner approach, while well-suited to practitioner-based inquiry, also means that data interpretation is mediated by the instructor-researcher's own pedagogical perspective. Future research might expand this work through cross-institutional comparisons within the Gulf region, longitudinal tracking of students from proposal to final project, or quantitative analysis of larger proposal corpora to establish the relative frequency of each challenge category. Notwithstanding these limitations, the paper offers a grounded contribution to the understanding of EFL undergraduate research writing in the Gulf context and to the practical design of capstone research courses.

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