

From Confusion to Clarity: My Journey to Identifying Research Gaps in The Master's Thesis

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Abstract:

This article reflects on my journey as a novice researcher in identifying research gaps for my Master's thesis. Through reviewing literature, I uncovered both knowledge and methodology gaps, particularly within the Vietnamese context. By aligning my process with Farooq's (2017) framework, I gained clarity and confidence. In short, this article shares insights to guide early-career researchers through the complex, yet rewarding, process of gap identification..

Facing the Challenge: The Search for Research Gaps

In the vast ocean of academic literature, identifying research gaps can be daunting—especially for early-career researchers like myself. At the start of my Master's thesis, I struggled to pinpoint exactly where my research could contribute meaningfully. My study focused on morphosyntactic errors of verbs in English essays written by non-English majors (Tran, 2023), and I knew I wanted to investigate these errors both systematically and critically.

To navigate this, I immersed myself in a comprehensive literature review. At first, everything seemed already explored, but gradually, I began noticing subtle yet significant spaces where further research was needed. These spaces were what I later

understood as knowledge gaps and methodology gaps—two of the most common types in academic research (Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2014).

Discovering the Gaps: Knowledge and Methodology

The knowledge gap became clearer when I realized that although many studies had addressed morphosyntactic errors, few had narrowed their focus to narrative writing, or had intensively examined the use of verbs—a core component of syntax. More surprisingly, research in the Vietnamese context was almost nonexistent, making my local focus not only relevant but necessary. I also discovered inconsistencies in how prior researchers identified causative factors. Some listed intralingual causes in detail; others glossed over them. None,

however, investigated the influence of Vietnamese linguistic structures on these errors—a gap I was eager to address



Gaining Clarity: A Structured Approach to Research Gaps

After completing my thesis, I reflected on my process and found it closely aligned with Farooq's (2017) four-step model for identifying research gaps: conducting a literature review, analyzing existing studies for contradictions or missing elements, focusing on underexplored areas, and defining the gap clearly to justify the research contribution. This framework gave structure to what initially felt like an overwhelming task. This journey taught me that identifying research gaps is not about waiting for an obvious hole to appear—it is about reading critically, asking the right questions, and daring to go where others have not. In that process, I found not only the gap—but also my voice as a researcher.

The methodology gap revealed itself after a careful review of how previous studies had been conducted. Many relied on a small number of student samples and used qualitative methods without clearly interpreting grammatical features or linking

error types to specific causes. Quantitative aspects, like normalized frequency counts, were often overlooked, making comparisons difficult. I also noted that interrater reliability—an essential component for ensuring consistent error analysis—was often missing entirely. These observations led me to design a more rigorous methodology, combining both qualitative and quantitative elements to strengthen the validity of my findings.



References

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Tran Thanh Tan holds a Master's degree in TESOL and currently serves as a lecturer at HCMC Open University, Vietnam, and as a TESOL trainer. He has been demonstrating a strong commitment to research, with a particular focus on areas such as applied linguistics and CALL. He has also made contributions as a speaker in various conferences.