

The Research Problem

1- What is it?

According to Kumar (2005), a research problem is, broadly, a potential assumption to be investigated, a question to be answered or an assertion to be challenged. This makes what is termed a research problem construed as the general idea around which the whole research process revolves. As such, it cannot be denied that the step of formulating the research problem is of paramount importance in the course of carrying out a well thought research paper. The research problem acts as a significant determinant of all the successive steps including: the type of study design, the type of sampling strategy, the type of research instruments and the type of data analysis to be undertaken.

2- Sources of the Research problem:

As regards the issue of the sources from which a research problem stems, a variety of starting points are identified (Bryman, 2012).

1- *Personal or professional experience*: Everyday personal or professional experience may lead us to identify a problem for which we would like a solution. Alternatively, we may encounter a question or questions that we would like to try and answer.

2- *Theory*: Theories are ideas about how things relate to each other. Theories may be general, commonly held beliefs or more technical ideas (for example, that global warming is causing a change to the timing of the seasonal responses of the flowering cherry tree in the UK). There are many ways of expressing theories, some are very formal, others are informal.

3- *Literature and the media*: There are many sources of literature, such as books, journal articles, and newspapers. When searching and reading literature it is possible to encounter gaps in information and knowledge, and problems for which there is currently no solution. These may provide a good basis for research. We are also flooded with information presented by the media, such as television, which again might give rise to research ideas.

3- Criteria for Selecting the Research Problem

It is of essence for one to consider the fact that not every problem encountered is necessarily a researchable one. Instead, Kumar (2005) highlighted a list of considerations in selecting the research problems. Amongst the most prominent of these are the following.

- **Interest**: It goes without saying that interest should be one crucial element in every research endeavor. It is the quality which helps the researcher to maintain the motivation required to finish the research.

- **Level of Expertise:** It is imperative for any researcher to take into account whether his capacities, in terms of knowledge and skills, enable him to successfully conduct the purported study.
- **Relevance:** the research problem should be of relevance with regard to adding to the existing knowledge and bridging current gaps.
- **Availability of Data:** sources which are meant to be utilized in the process of research must be within the researcher' reach.
- **Ethical issues:** the problem under investigation should cause no harm to the population of the study, scholars cited in the research and to institutions involved in the study.

4- Steps of Formulating the Research Problems:

Under the authority of Kumar (2005), the process of the formulation of a certain research problem undergoes seven salient steps.

1- Identifying a Broad field of interest: the researcher determines which area of research is of much interest for him. For an EFL researcher, this area can be the psychology of the language learner, as a case in point.

2- Dissecting the Broad area into subareas: the broad field of interest is successively dissected into narrower areas. This serves limiting the scope of interest.

3- Selecting what is of most interest for the researcher: the most interesting sub area of the dissected broad field is selected.

4- Raising Research Questions: These questions are not specific. The researcher brainstorms any emergent questions linked to his subarea.

5- Formulating Objectives: The objectives which are meant to be achieved are highlighted in this step. (Some researchers prefer to start from the objectives to provide the research questions).

6- Assessing the Objectives: In this step, the feasibility of achieving the set objectives is critically evaluated.

7- Double Checking: The final step entails that the researcher reassures that the selected problem and objectives are interesting and feasible.

References

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*, 4th ed. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Kumar, R. (2011). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners*. Los Angeles:

SAGE