The Research Proposal (中間発表)

It is important to approach your graduation thesis in a systematic way. No builder would start construction on a new house or building without first coming up with a set of blueprints that show the architecture (the structure) of the finished building. In the same way, you must do the same thing as the first step in your thesis or dissertation. At the mid-year colloquium (中間発表) you are expected to present a detailed outline of your project to the other students and the teachers of the department. This is known as the 'Research Proposal.' Having a proper plan helps ensure that you have thought about all the parts of the project before you begin, so that serious problems that waste time and cause a lot of frustration can be avoided.

The form of the 'Research Proposal' is similar (but not entirely the same) to the structure of your final document - the thesis that you will submit.

Structure of the research proposal

TITLE

A: Introduction
   1. Context - description of topic or problem
   2. A brief review of the current literature
   3. Research Question OR Research Hypotheses, or both

B: Research Methodology
   1. Subjects
   2. Design
   3. Data collection procedures

C: Analysis
   1. Data Organization
   2. Statistical analysis procedures

D: Significance of the research project
   1. Anticipated uses of the outcomes or results
   2. Relevance to education

TITLE: The first thing is to decide on a working title for your research. In fact, this title may change slightly when it comes to submit your final thesis. Have a title that gives the Reader a clear idea of the topic but which is also brief. One way to do this is to use a short statement followed by a colon. After the colon can be a longer description of the topic. E.g.

1. Teachers' Questions: A study of the form and function of two teacher's questions.
2. EFL conversation: An investigation into the discourse structure of Japanese university students' EFL classroom conversation.

INTRODUCTION
The introduction has three parts. The first part (1. Context) - gives the reader an idea of the focus of the research. In this section, you 'position' your research project in the existing or current cultural, educational, and linguistic contexts. You state the cultural conditions you are concerned with (second or foreign language speakers, Japanese native speakers, etc.) the educational context (e.g., primary, junior high school, or university education), and the research area (e.g., vocabulary acquisition, discourse structure, pronunciation, etc.).

The second part (2. Brief review of the literature) does several things: (1) it gives the background to your proposed research, (2) it shows that you are competent in that it shows you understand what is currently known, and (3) it provides a reason for your research. To do numbers (1) & (2) you have to link your research project with existing or current information that is already known in the general area of your topic. This is where you tell the reader about the work and findings of the most important people in your field of interest - the people that most articles refer to or are have their works listed in the reference sections of the articles. In number (3), you establish why your research is important and timely. You do this in either one of two ways. The first way is to show that there is a lack of information relating to your topic in the above contexts and/or a lack of evidence of this information being used in a practical application (such as classroom teaching). The second way is to say that your project will add significant (important) and/or different information to the existing knowledge.

The third part (3. Research question or research hypothesis or hypotheses), states clearly and exactly what you are going to research. This is one of the most important parts of the whole project, and it is also the most difficult part of the whole process. In this section you tell the reader the question or problem you are going to research. Your supervisor cannot decide this - your supervisor can only advise you once you have selected your questions/s or problem/s. How do you get to this stage?

a) Find a topic or area that interests you. This can come from your own experiences as a language learner or a teacher. This can also come from the reading materials your teachers have given you over the years, or from articles in academic journals. An especially good place to look for a possible topic is the conclusions of articles in these academic journals and the conclusion chapters of the theses of past students. This is because these often mention questions that their study did not cover and offer recommendations for future research. Read and take notes of the important conclusions of earlier writers.

b) Having found an area that interests you, the next step is to form a research question or research hypothesis. Good research hypotheses meet two criteria: (1) the hypothesis is investigating an answer to, and (2) a yes or no answer can, in fact, be found.

Good research questions meet two criteria: (1) The question needs asking and is worth finding an answer to, and (2) the question can, in fact, be answered.

What is the difference between a research question and a research hypothesis? If your purpose is to acquire (get) information, then the research area you will tackle is put as a research question. For example, consider these three questions, all related to the topic of "Teachers' Questions: A study of the form and function of two teacher's questions."
1. What type of questions do junior high school teachers ask in English class?
2. Which types of questions result in the longest student responses?
3. Will there be any difference in the type of questions and responses according to the proficiency level of the class?

If your purpose is to test a theory, then you state the object of your research as a hypothesis. The answer to a hypothesis is a simple yes or no. The theory was either proved or it was not. For example, consider these three hypotheses all related to the topic "Teachers' Questions: A study of the form and function of two teacher's questions."

1. Teachers will ask more display questions than referential questions.
2. Learner responses to referential questions will be longer than the response to display questions.
3. A greater number of referential questions will be accompanied by a greater number of confirmation checks and clarification requests by the teacher.

B: Research methodology.
In this section of the proposal you include a description of how the research will be carried out and the method you will adopt to answer your research questions or hypotheses. You include who the subjects will be, the kind of research it is, and how you will collect the data. One test of a good methodology section is if after reading it someone else could go ahead and carry out the research based solely on the information you have given.

Subjects: Describe briefly the people you will use as subjects, the number of subjects needed, how the subjects are to be recruited, any known information in their background that might possibly impact upon the research.

Design: This section is the place to describe the type of research you are going to carry out. For example, "This project design is an original design and has been constructed for the sole purpose of the data collection. E.g., classes at junior high schools will be observed on three occasions; subjects will be asked to fill-out questionnaires; take part in three paired-conversations; speak into a tape recorder; particular written material will be analysed, etc."

Data collection: In this section you include a detailed and accurate account of how you will go about collecting the data. You should mention what equipment will be used, what surveys or questionnaires you will use etc. The information in this section should be so clear that the reader can not only visualize the process of how you are going to do the research but also have enough knowledge to be able to replicate your research. In other words, imagine that you are sick, and the reader is going to take your place when you collect the data.

C: Analysis:
This part of the proposal typically (though not always) has two parts. This section focuses on the question of what you are going to do with all the data when you have collected it.

1. If you have a lot of data, how are you going to isolate the information you need from all that data. Are you looking for frequency of occurrence of the data, total numbers of the occurrence of a particular item? Are you going to use a chart, a taxonomy or table of some description? Is this table your own construction or is it from the work of earlier
researchers? Are you going to use a transcription system (if spoken data)? 2. Are you going to use a computer-based program of statistical analysis, other statistical analyses techniques such as Chi-square tests, ANOVA tests, Pearson Correlation, means, standard deviations etc.

D: Significance of the research project:
This section is the place for you to state the importance of your research study. In it, you explain that should your research be successful and/or your questions answered or your hypotheses proven, what contribution will this make to education or linguistics, or whatever field you have chosen. This is where you state the possible uses of the results of your study.