# Understanding Formal and Informal English: A Literature Review

**Habib Anugerah Alkarim[1], Angela Surya Ginting[2], Dona Aisyah Sitorus[3], Naylatul Fadhilah Ginting[4], Munawarah br. Limbong[5], Deasy Yunita Siregar[6]**
Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia[1,2,3,4,5,6]

Author's Email:
habib0304242095@uinsu.ac.id, angela0304242051@uinsu.ac.id, dona0304242085@uinsu.ac.id, nayla0304242088@uinsu.ac.id, munawarahbrlimbong0304242053@uinsu.ac.id, deasyyunita@uinsu.ac.id

**ABSTRACT**
*This literature review examines the use and characteristics of formal and informal English in a range of contexts, including digital communication, classroom interaction, and academic writing. Based on five selected studies, the review analyzes differences between formal and informal registers in terms of vocabulary choice, sentence structure, and pragmatic functions.The first study explores language use in digital communication, emphasizing how context and social conventions influence register selection. The second and fourth studies investigate classroom settings, focusing on how students and lecturers employ both formal and informal expressions in English language learning. The third study offers a theoretical discussion of linguistic features that distinguish formal and informal registers, providing a foundation for understanding register variation. The fifth study examines the use of formal and informal language in academic writing, highlighting the difficulties learners face in applying appropriate registers. Overall, the review highlights the importance of understanding register differences for effective communication, language education, and teaching practices, and emphasizes the need for pedagogical approaches that promote register awareness in diverse learning contexts.*

***Keywords:*** *formal English, informal English, register, language learning, classroom interaction, academic writing*

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## INTRODUCTION

Language plays a crucial role in human communication, functioning not only as a means of conveying information but also as a way to express identity, social relationships, and cultural values. In English, language use varies according to context, audience, and communicative purpose, resulting in different registers that are commonly classified as formal and informal. Formal English is typically used in academic texts, professional communication, and official documents, where accuracy, clarity, and adherence to standard conventions are required. In contrast, informal English is commonly found in everyday conversations, social media, and digital messaging, where personal expression and social connection are emphasized. Understanding the distinction between these registers is essential for effective communication, particularly in language learning and teaching contexts.

Recent studies have increasingly focused on the use of formal and informal English in various settings. Research on digital communication shows that online interactions often require flexible language use, with speakers blending formal and informal features depending on their audience and intentions. In classroom environments, studies reveal that both lecturers and students move between formal and informal registers during presentations, discussions, and collaborative activities. These patterns provide insight into how learners develop awareness of register and apply it in real communicative situations. Furthermore, research on academic writing indicates that learners frequently struggle to maintain a formal register, often incorporating informal expressions or experiencing difficulty with complex grammatical and lexical structures.

Understanding register variation also has important pedagogical implications. Teachers need effective strategies to help learners recognize and use appropriate registers, while learners benefit from developing awareness of the social, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions of language. By examining both the linguistic features and functional roles of formal and informal English, educators can enhance learners' communicative competence and ability to use English appropriately across contexts.

This literature review synthesizes findings from five key studies related to digital communication, classroom interaction, and academic writing to provide a comprehensive overview of formal and informal English. It discusses linguistic characteristics, patterns of use, and pedagogical implications, emphasizing the importance of register awareness in English language education. By combining theoretical and empirical perspectives, this review aims to support more effective language learning and offer insights for educators, learners, and researchers interested in developing linguistic and pragmatic competence.

## METHOD

This study employs a literature review approach to examine how formal and informal English are conceptualized, applied, and analyzed in different communicative contexts. Five peer-reviewed journal articles were purposively selected based on their relevance to the topic, accessibility of full texts, and contribution to discussions of register and linguistic features. The selected studies represent a variety of contexts, including digital communication, classroom interaction, and academic writing, allowing for a broad examination of register use in both educational and everyday settings. Each article was carefully reviewed to identify key elements such as research aims, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and major findings related to language register.

The data from the selected studies were analyzed through thematic synthesis. Thisprocess involved identifying recurring ideas, comparing findings across studies, and organizing them into major themes,

including linguistic characteristics, contextual influences on register choice, and implications for language teaching and learning. This thematic analysis enabled the integration of theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, resulting in a coherent and critical overview of existing research. Through this method, the study highlights essential insights for educators and learners regarding the role of register awareness in effective English language use.

## RESULT

The analysis of the five studies presents a detailed understanding of how formal and informal English function across different communicative contexts. A key finding is the consistent distinction between the two registers at the linguistic level. Formal English is generally associated with complex sentence structures, precise vocabulary, and strict adherence to grammatical norms, whereas informal English is characterized by contractions, colloquial language, a personal tone, and simpler constructions.

In digital communication contexts, register choice is strongly influenced by interaction type, audience expectations, and communicative goals. Users frequently shift between formal and informal styles, creating hybrid forms that combine clarity with conversational flexibility. This suggests that digital spaces encourage adaptive language use rather than rigid separation of registers.

Classroom-based studies reveal that both teachers and students deliberately alternate between formal and informal English to achieve pedagogical and social objectives. Formal language is commonly used to explain concepts, present academic content, and maintain structure during lessons. Informal language, on the other hand, is often employed to build rapport, reduce anxiety, and promote student participation. Students similarly adjust their language use, favoring informal English during peer interactions and personal responses, while adopting more formal language in presentations and teacher-directed tasks. This register shifting reflects learners' developing understanding of contextual appropriateness and demonstrates that classrooms naturally accommodate both registers.

The study focusing on linguistic features reinforces these findings by identifying consistent patterns in vocabulary, syntax, tone, and communicative norms. Formal English tends to emphasize objectivity and explicit meaning, while informal English allows for implicit messages, emotional expression, and personal involvement. These patterns are further supported by findings from the academic writing study, which shows that many learners struggle to sustain a formal register in extended texts. Common issues include the use of conversational vocabulary, inconsistent tone, and difficulty constructing complex academic sentences. This indicates challenges in transferring register awareness from spoken interaction to written academic contexts.

Overall, the findings emphasize that understanding register variation is a crucial aspect of communicative competence. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that learners benefit from explicit instruction and practice in both formal and informal English. They also suggest that language teaching should include activities that raise awareness of register differences and guide learners in selecting appropriate language forms based on context. Mastery of both registers is therefore essential for effective communication in academic, professional, and digital environments.

## Discussion

The reviewed studies highlight the significant role of technology in supporting both formal and informal English learning. In formal learning contexts, digital tools such as learning management systems, writing support applications, and online instructional materials contribute to improved linguistic accuracy,

increased engagement, and more individualized learning experiences. These tools have become integral to teaching practices, offering grammar and vocabulary support, enhancing comprehension through multimedia content, and facilitating timely feedback. Technology also promotes learner autonomy by enabling flexible access to learning materials and encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning.

In informal learning contexts, technology plays an equally important role. Social media platforms, video-sharing websites, mobile applications, and online communication tools provide learners with exposure to authentic English use, particularly in listening and speaking. These informal environments allow learners to interact naturally, engage with global communities, and practice language skills in meaningful contexts. The reduced pressure of informal settings often increases learners' confidence and willingness to communicate, supporting more spontaneous and authentic language use.

Despite these advantages, several limitations are noted in the literature. Differences in access to technology and varying levels of digital literacy can affect learning outcomes. Many studies rely on self-reported data, which may limit objectivity. Additionally, while informal digital learning offers flexibility, it often lacks structured guidance, making consistent progress difficult to ensure. Most studies also focus on short-term outcomes, leaving the long-term effects of technology-assisted learning underexplored. These limitations indicate the need for more comprehensive research designs and greater consideration of contextual factors.

Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of integrating formal instruction with informal digital learning. Understanding the distinctions between formal and informal English, combined with effective use of technology, can enhance learners' communicative competence and pragmatic awareness. Educators are encouraged to design instructional approaches that address both registers and make strategic use of digital resources. Future research should explore ways to bridge formal classroom instruction and informal digital practices to optimize language learning outcomes and prepare learners for diverse communicative contexts.


## CONCLUSION

This literature review has explored the use of formal and informal English in digital communication, classroom interaction, and academic writing. The findings reveal clear differences in vocabulary, structure, and pragmatic use, while demonstrating that register choice is highly context-dependent. Digital environments allow for flexible blending of registers, classroom interactions involve purposeful register shifting, and academic writing presents challenges for learners in maintaining formality.

Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of integrating formal instruction with informal digital learning. Understanding the distinctions between formal and informal English, combined with effective use of technology, can enhance learners' communicative competence and pragmatic awareness. Educators are encouraged to design instructional approaches that address both registers and make strategic use of digital resources. Future research should explore ways to bridge formal classroom instruction and informal digital practices to optimize language learning outcomes and prepare learners for diverse communicative contexts.

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