

FIRST LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: FACTORS AFFECTING THE USE OF LANGUAGE REGISTERS IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING CONTEXT

Alexander S. Ibni

Zamboanga Peninsula Polytechnic State University

R.T. Lim Boulevard, Baliwasan, Zamboanga City Philippines

Contact number: +639651074152 email: xanlee080@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: *It is evident that language register analysis gives important bases that may help understand the linguistic features of any register that are generally determined by such factors as social occasion, context, purpose, and audience. However, there were few studies conducted to determine the factors of language registers used in English as a second language learning context. For this reason, the main objective of the current investigation was to determine the factors affecting the use of language registers in writing among ESL learners and describe which among these factors are the most significant that may contribute to the development of students' writing competence. To determine these factors, a descriptive qualitative research design was utilized by which the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with seven ESL college students. Thus, Based on Biber's Framework of Situational Analysis of Language Register, the results of this study revealed that there were 7 factors elicited from the respondents during the discussion. These are the following: 1) participants' social characteristics; 2) communicative purpose, and expression of stance; 3) topic-specific topic; 4) relations among participants; relative status or power; 5) the setting in which the communication takes place; 6) vocabulary and grammar and; 7) participant's culture and first language. Most importantly, in addition to Biber's Framework of Situational Analysis of language registers, this study highlights a great contribution to the field of applied linguistics as it concedes that in the context of English as a second language teaching and learning, the participants' culture and first language are regarded as among significant factors affecting the use of language registers that should be taken into account in order to improve the ESL students' writing competence.*

Key words: language registers, English as a Second Language, writing competence, first language and culture

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Language register analysis gives important bases that may help understand the linguistic features of any register by looking into the lexical items and grammatical structures use in both spoken and written texts. Students are expected to communicate and produce English texts with appropriate use of vocabulary and grammar. Thus, the learners of English as a second language need to be competent in one of the essential language skills which is a productive skill in writing where they actually have to produce language themselves according to their writing competence with clear understanding of the lexical and grammatical structures in a context.

For this reason, the researcher was interested to determine the writing competence and provide a clear description of the language registers among ESL learners through the analysis of the factors influencing the use of language registers in their writing. This study was conducted in order to ultimately help students develop the writing competence required in academic situations and for the teachers to provide basis for instruction that addresses the linguistic demands of academic writing.

Additionally, there were few studies conducted to determine the factors affecting the use of language registers in English as a second language context. With this, the study aimed to investigate existing factors that may influence the use of language registers in writing among ESL learners using Biber's General Framework of Situational Analysis of Language Register that could contribute to the development of ESL theories and practices.

Statements of the Problem

The research aimed to assess the writing competence and language registers in essays among ESL College Students. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors affecting the use of language registers in English as a second language among ESL College students?

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Related Literature

According to Halliday in Davise [1], language register points out certain lexical and grammatical items which are chosen by speakers in accordance to the context and situation, the language participants and the purpose or use of language in discourse.

In addition, Biber [2] explain that the language register refers to the use of language in various situations. He also believes that language register is an important part of situational context which considers the communication purpose, the mode of communication either written or spoken, the generation of events, and different backgrounds and characteristics of the participants. Biber firmly concentrates on the characteristics of grammar in different types of text. He focuses on the register from the text end as a set of written form that shows the occurrence of certain grammatical features as relatively high or low frequencies. It can be inferred that language register comprises of many linguistic features including nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjective and other parts of speech – and these are categorized according to the relative use of the linguistic features.

Additionally, Chris Jay [3] claimed that a number of socio-cultural difficulties can increase because many students have limited exposures to the target language in the classroom

environment during the production and analysis of text. In addition to this, it often limited to a small coverage of experiences to students who have gained more encounters to English outside of the four corners of the classroom.

Moreover, Agha and Frog [4] mention that many linguists explain the development of language register analysis according to their own specializations and utilize analytic procedures invented from different disciplinary practices. They concentrate on the organization of registers according to the range of semiotic tools as whether prosody or grammatical units, melodic contours or lexical items, kinesics behaviors, or verbal signs, spoken as utterances and etc. The linguists also explain the frameworks of communicative acts through various social practices and historical settings and the number of events they consider is extremely broader than those early models to language registers.

Related Studies

Pescuma, *et al.* [5] evaluated the degree to which register phenomena are prevalent in various modalities, languages, cultures, and time period. In order to better identify registers in spoken and textual corpora, they suggested modifying well-established analytical techniques. They contend that examining the prevalence of register phenomena and gaining a thorough understanding of the cross-methodological resilience of register-related linguistic variability are supported by the deliberate application of several complementing techniques and metrics. These thorough understandings in turn offer a strong basis for related cognitive modeling.

Further, Ogemdi, *et al.* [6] identified the many registers employed in scientific writing and advertisements while closely examining the variations in diction, sentence structure, clarity, and conciseness. The civil service register's writing style is limited to the officialdom since it is thought to be unique to the officials. As a linguistic style, poetic techniques were widely recognized as an advertising language register. Improved appropriation of register in many study domains will result from a solid grasp of Standard English. Among other things, the researcher suggests that officials, scientists, and writers of advertisements undergo appropriate training and retraining on the conventional usage of the English language.

Furthermore, Haristiani [7] determine how Japanese high school students used registers in their language based on three factors. Specifically: field, tenor, and mode. Daily conversations from high school were employed in this descriptive qualitative study. Students' responses to the first ten episodes of Haikyuu season 1 of the anime and manga were used as research data and analyzed using the framework of Halliday's [8] register theory. The findings revealed that 35 pieces of data indicated registers. Using registers that were impacted by the field factor revealed the speaker's emotions and the wherein the interlocutors were subjected to registers in tenor, such as when expressing regret, expressing gratitude or calling the other person.

Additionally, Fang, *et al.* [9] investigated the register choices made by teenage students in factual writing, a crucial academic genre that is also highly regarded in society and the profession. Their work was coded for content quality and the

presence of certain academic and everyday register elements. The results of statistical and qualitative studies showed that (a) the students contrasted aspects of academic and ordinary registers in ways that hindered their ability to deliver information accurately, densely, authoritatively, and logically; (b) socioeconomic class had a substantial impact on the usage of academic registers and the quality of the content, but not grade level or gender; and (c) there was a positive correlation between the two, with academic register being linked to more scientific material.

In the same light, Mercado *et al.* [10] investigate the ways the language register impact the writing skills development among students in university level. The results show that there is a relationship between the writing skills development and language registers by means of sufficient knowledge and ability to distinguish the social situations which enabled language learners to accomplish a well-written text with the use of formal and informal language registers which at the same time facilitates the appropriate usage of written language. In addition, the results also suggest that even though students often times use informal form of language registers, there is still the need to write according to diverse social situations which requires either formal or informal language or eventually both forms and to recognize the social background of the participants in order to determine the level of formality use in communication.

Theoretical Framework

Biber and Conrad's Framework of Situational Analysis of Language Registers [11].

To facilitate the text analysis, Biber and Conrad provide a general framework to be applied in the study which is known as Framework for situational analysis. This framework is made up of factors which can be considered as affecting variables of the language registers in a particular social situation which include; participants, settings, relations among participants, communicative purpose, topic, and channel.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A descriptive qualitative research designs was utilized in this study. Thus, there were seven participants included in the focus group discussion. Specifically, it aimed to investigate and analyze the factors affecting the use language register in the context of English as a second language using Biber's Framework of Situational Analysis of Language Registers.

Research Locale

This study was conducted at one of the state universities in Zamboanga City. Recently, there were a total of 16 accredited programs offered in the university. Six programs are level III accredited; five programs level II accredited; four programs level I accredited, and one program for preliminary accreditation status. Apart from accreditation, the university was also able to have all of its programs conferred with Certificate of Program Compliance (COPC). This university is located at the R.T. Lim Boulevard, Baliwasan, Zamboanga City. In relation to this study, it justifies that among all programs of the university, the BS in Development Communication students under the college of Arts,

Humanities and Social Sciences were selected as respondents because this is the only program in its university that aims to produce Development Communication graduates with high interpersonal skills specifically in writing since they develop and produce multimedia materials and writing composition for development.

Population and Sampling Procedure

They were seven participants included in this study who were taking up Bachelor of Science in Development Communication (BS in DevCom) students. Further, this study utilized a convenient sampling technique because the focus group discussion was conducted through the exclusion of respondents according to their convenient time.

Research Instruments

This study utilized Guided Questions for Focus Group Discussion that contained questions related to the factors affecting the use of language register in writing. Hence, there were three (3) open-ended questions included in the discussion which were validated by the experts in language teaching. Since the guided questions are qualitative in nature, they do not yield any statistical reliability index.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher explained and clarified to the respondents that the data will be kept confidential for their protection and safety. Thus, the Informed Consent Forms were given to them. Moreover, focus group discussion was conducted to gather the qualitative data of the study. This method applied in this study so that the respondents can share their opinions and exchange ideas about factors affecting the use of

language registers in English as a second language learning context. Moreover, this activity was documented using video recording during the entire session.

Data Analysis Procedure

For the analysis of Focus Group Discussion results, the data gathered from the discussion were highlighted, coded and classified according to themes. Finally, data analysis on the factors affecting the use of language registers among ESL college students was validated by one of the linguistic experts and inter raters who graduated with the degree in Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Linguistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Problem 1: What are the factors affecting the use of language registers in *English as a second language among ESL College students*?

Table 4.1 presents the factors affecting the use of language registers in English as second language learning context among ESL college students. Based on findings of the qualitative analysis, there are 7 factors elicited from the respondents during the interview. These findings were thematically coded which finally yielded the following factors: 1) participants' social characteristics; 2) communicative purpose, and expression of stance; 3) topic-specific topic; 4) relations among participants; relative status or power; 5) the setting in which the communication takes place; 6) vocabulary and grammar and; 7) participant's culture and first language.

Table 1: Factors Affecting the Use of Language Registers in ESL learning Context

Categories/Themes	Factors
Identifying the readers according to their social background	1. Participants' Social Characteristics
Empathizing with readers and expressing emotions	2. Communicative Purpose and Expression of Stance
Creating a topic that is appropriate and acceptable based on readers' level of comprehension	3. Topic Specific and social status
Highlighting the writer's and readers' social relationship	4. Relations among Participants; Relative Status or Power
Understanding the context of situation	5. The setting in which the Communication Takes Place
Using correct word use and Grammar Structure	6. Vocabulary and Grammar
Taking into account the readers' cultural backgrounds and native language – implication the framework is good only for L2 speaker	7. Participant's Culture and First Language

Participants' social characteristics

As shown in the sample transcript below, Respondent 2, 3 and 6 state that....

Sample Transcript:

"knowing their age of whom I am going to ahm.. address my..my ..my writing. Lets say for example if my..my audience is ahm..like age ahm..same with me teens and youth ah.. they belong to the.. group of youth..people so I must..I must write a letter that..that will ahm..feel easily understood by them" (R2, F1)

"Before I am going to write an essay or letter, it..it makes me think that the first audience or..(yeah) audience is not just by ..by the age, but also educational attainment" (R3, F1))

"When I am writing I always consider the..the age, educational attainment and of course the background of their languages" (R6, F1)

The ESL college students do believe that it is important for the writer to consider the target audience by identifying the readers according to their social background. Based on findings, the respondents speculated that one single most important factor in writing is knowing the audience in terms of their social characteristics —their general age, gender, education level, and group membership. This implies that they need to analyze their audience in order to discover information that can be used to build a strong connection with the readers thus enables them to use an appropriate language

register that matches the communication situations according to participants' social characteristics. This finding is supported by Mercado *et. al.* [10] who investigates how language registers influence the development of writing skills. The findings revealed that there is a bond between language registers and the development of writing skills, this is due to the fact that adequate knowledge and distinction of social contexts permitted to students accomplished the creation of well-written texts demonstrating a thoughtful use of the formal and informal registers and facilitating the usage of appropriate written language.

Communicative purpose, and expression of stance

As shown in the sample transcript below, Respondent 1, 5 and 6 state that....

Sample Transcript:

"Well, for me, when you are writing a letter, you must be sensitive and at..with respect because ahm.. respect is very important for them to appreciate" (R1, F2)

"I will always think that I should always relate myself to them whenever I write so, so that we can as they read my essay as they read ahm..they can relate and they can understand that my experience could be their experience as well" (R5, F3)

"I always consider ahm..the..my readers and ahm.. I will always think that I should always relate myself to them whenever I write" (R5, F2)

"you cannot write how you want to but always consider your readers and audiences" (R6, F2)

The findings show that the ESL college students consider being able to express ideas, thoughts and emotions clearly with empathy to the target audience is one of the essential factors of language registers in their writing. They asserted that empathizing with readers and expressing emotions are keys in adjusting to the use of their registers in the form of narration, story-telling, persuasions and even entertainment with utmost sincerity and authenticity. This implies that showing empathy and engagement with the readers would help successfully achieve the communicative purpose in writing. In this way, it allows the respondents to confidently express their stance and intentions by which their language registers are affected by their mood, feelings, emotions and the communicative situations. Furthermore, this factor describes the concept of "take the role of the other" or "put themselves in the other's place as the heart of their language processing. This finding is supported by Biber and Finegan in Myers [12] that stance refers to lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feeling, judgments, or commitment concerning the proportional content of the message.

Topic-Specific Topic: Adjusting the topic to sit to the levels of readers' comprehension

As shown in the sample transcript below, Respondent 1, 3 and 7 state that...

Sample Transcript:

"you must consider that the words you must put is that easy for them to understand because they have different understanding compared to older or eldest" (R1, F3)

"I must prefer to..to.. use some vernacular words for them in order for them to understand what I am writing about" (R3, F3)

"In terms of writing the essay or the paper, we need to think the reader first if she or he understands easily... so ..you ..so you write common..you use common, common words" (R7, F3)

The results of this study show that the respondents take into account the level of understanding of the target audience by means of creating a topic that is appropriate and acceptable based on readers' level of comprehension which affect the use of their language register. In support to this finding, this factor is clearly indicated in the Biber's framework of language register analysis by which adjusting the topic to sit to the levels of readers' comprehension falls under the Specific topic and Social status of person being referred to explains that the written register, according to Biber [13], a writer has as much time as needed to plan exactly what he wants to write, and if he writes something unintended, he can revise, edit, delete and add language until he ends up with language that conveys exactly the intended meaning according the topic being covered and the comprehension level of the readers.

Relations among Participants; Relative Status or Power

As shown in the sample transcript below, Respondent 2, 4 and 5 state that....

Sample Transcript:

"I can notice or I can be aware and when I am going to write the..how formal or in..ah.. how formal or norma..I mean.. Informal way I should write the words ahmm..depending on the person I am going to ahm..appoint my writing" (R2, F4)

"Their..ehm..social status..ahm.. how to first, may be I will think of their social status not in the way of thinking that they are poor, they are in middle class but considering that fact well..ahm lead me to ahm.. lead me to understand, understand let them understand my writing" (R4, F4)

"So, for me ahm..the most important that I should consider is that status of the..my reader like for example, as well everytime I..I write a letter to send for someone so I should write it formally like I will send the letter to a Barangay Chairman, I will..I will ahm..writean..a letter formally and ahm.. if I would send a letter to ah.. to just a friend so I just have..I will just write it in a simple way" (R5, F4)

The finding reveals that the ESL college students consider the relationship between the writer and the readers as one of the significant factors that affect the use of their language registers. The respondents believe that background status plays important role in written communication as it also covers the social roles such as relative status or power. Thus, this determines the level of formality of the communication context. This speculation has been supported by Biber [13] in his framework that once a writer has identified the participants, the next step is to describe how they relate to one another. This implies that in many cases, participants can be socially equal, as in the case of two classmates having conversation. However, there can be important social differences among participants. For example, power differences influence language choices; for instance, if one is talking to his teacher or boss, he probably produces different language than when he talks to his friends.

The setting in which the Communication Takes Place

As shown in the sample transcript below, Respondent 1, 3 and 4 state that...

Sample Transcript:

"Here in the Philippines, the Filipino are sensitive and it compared to like the other country they are more on used now for the like words we are not using here in the Philippines" (R1, F5)

"I consider also the language background of the audiences because when we say for example the community, there, there are more like ahm.. Muslim, and Christians" (R3, F5)

"think first who or what is your audience, what is your audience before you will write a writing as well ahm.. maybe I will ahm..first communicate, communicate to them and talk to them in a way where they will feel comfortable" (R4, F5)

This study yielded the finding that understanding the context of situation or setting gives a great influence on the choice of language registers among ESL college students in their writing. They stated that considering the communicative context such as place and time helps them adjusting the language use by which, they believe that different contexts and settings require different language use in order to fit in the social context of communication. For instance, the participants coming from certain places have their own language orientation and norms which may be different from the viewpoints of the writers. Thus, considering the place or physical location where communication takes place may help avoid inappropriate use of language. This result is strongly backup in Biber [13] that the setting refers to the physical context of communication – the time and place.

Vocabulary and Grammar

As shown in the sample transcript below, Respondent 1, 2 and 5 state that...

Sample Transcript:

"I am going to refer to viewer, it's also important to address that if your reader is a young, you must also consider that ahm..your grammar and vocabulary" (R1, F6)

"Vocabulary and grammar is important. lets say when we write..ah..when we are writing, ahm.. ahm.. using vocabulary, some vocabulary words can catch someone's attention" (R2, F6).

"some readers are ahm..they don't have the..ahm..much idea about grammar, about vocabularies" (R5, F6)

The results of the study show that vocabulary and grammar are among the most crucial factors to consider by the ESL College students in choosing their language registers in writing. According to the respondents, apart from being socially aware of the context of situations and setting, the main source to generate their language use are the grammar and vocabulary. If one has lack of knowledge in both grammar and vocabulary, it is difficult for him to convey the information to the readers. So much more that Filipino students are mostly concerned with their English language proficiency and become more conscious whether they would write grammatically incorrect or insufficient of the lexical items. The concept of this finding is supported by Villanueva and Liali (2016) [14] that although we in the Philippines recognize the need to establish the national language, Filipino, English has remained an absolutely popular language in our country. It is an idea that may lead other

educators like to say that learning to speak and write in English in this age of globalization is necessary especially if we would want to compete in the knowledge-based world [15].

Participant's Culture and First Language

As shown in the sample transcript below, Respondent 3, 4 and 5 state that...

Sample Transcript:

"I prefer to choose the language background or the cultural background. First thing, the first thing I will do is to do some research or to do some search about..about their cultural background" (R3, F7)

"The factors that I consider first before I am going write..in writing first like what you said that it is ahm..really we think to do the first thing to do when we write a writing first we must consider their background language" (R4, F3)

"I agree with that we should consider ahm..the language background of our readers" (R5, F7)

Lastly, this study reveals that the ESL College students affirm that taking into account the cultural backgrounds and native language which are highlighted as factors affecting the use of language registers in their writing given that they live in a diverse cultural environment where English is spoken as a second language. It implies that readers who are not really exposed to the second language environment and who are deeply immersed in their first language and culture could hardly cope with the L2 communicative situations in both spoken and written texts. This study is supported by Oster [16] that understanding culture puts the writer in touch with the development and etymologies of the language, such that a culture-free language learning process would never enable the user to fully understand the language, no matter how well they might learn to parrot it.

In summary, this qualitative data provides reasons as to what really affects the students' usage of language registers such as culture and first language which are fundamental aspects in the context of English as a second language. This study highlights a great contribution to the field of applied linguistics as it concedes that in the context of English as a second language teaching and learning, the participants' culture and first language are regarded as among significant factors affecting the use of language registers that should be taken into account in order to improve the ESL students' writing competence and communication skills which was absent in the Framework of Situational Analysis of Language Register.

CONCLUSION

The findings strongly suggest that in the context of English as a second language learning, participants' culture plays a significant role that may influence the use of language registers among ESL students. Moreover, the participants' first language may really influence the use of their L2 by which the cultural aspects and first language give impact to their register in second language performance which includes aspects such as grammar, choice of words as well as tone in writing. It is also evident that readers who are not really exposed to the second language environment and who are deeply immersed in their first language and culture could

hardly cope with the L2 communicative situations in both spoken and written texts.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, the school administrators are recommended to use these findings as a baseline for curriculum development particularly on English language courses by including factors such as language and culture to resonate the intercultural communication in English language learning among ESL students which are regarded as among significant factors affecting the use of language registers that should be taken into account especially to improve the ESL students' writing competence and communication skills.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Davidse, K. (2018). Functions of Language. Vol. 25, Issue 2. John and Benjamin e-Platform. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/fo1.00008.dav>
- [2] Biber (1995)Biber, D. (1995). Longman grammar of spoken and written English. Harlow: Longman. Children Writing: A Reader (pp. 21-29). Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- [3] Chris, J. (2018). It's in the text: Using the Field-Tenor-Mode matrix to support EAL writing and textual analysis. International Teacher Magazine. Retrieved from:<https://rb.gy/ntbfks>
- [4] Agha, S. and Frog, E. (2015). Registers of communication. Finish Literature Society Publication. Finland.
- [5] Pescuma, V., et al. (2023). Situating language register across the ages, languages, modalities, and cultural aspects: Evidence from complementary methods. Front Psychol. 2023 Jan 4;13:964658. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.964658. Retrieved from: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9846624/>
- [6] Ogemdi, E., et al. (2021). Register as a language variation: A linguistics study of advertising, scientific and official writing. Sumerianz Journal of Education, linguistics and Literature, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 84-9, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47752/sjell.43.84.91>. Retrieved from: <https://www.sumerianz.com>
- [7] Haristiani, N. (2021). Register analysis on high school students' language in Japanese manga and anime. Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research. Vol. 595. Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia.
- [8] Halliday, M.A.K.(1994). Language as social semiotic. In J. Maybin (Ed.) Language and literacy in social practice: a reader (pp.23-43). Clevedon, UK:
- [9] Fang, et al. (2020) Multilingual Matters.Register choices in seventh and ninth-grade students' factual writing. Linguistics and Education, Volume 56, April 2020, 100798, ISSN 0898-5898, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2020.100798>. Retrieved from: <http://surl.li/qeexp>
- [10] Mercado, N. et al. (2019) Language register and the writing skills in English as a foreign language context. Universidad Técnica de Ambato. Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y de la Educación. Carrera de Idiomas. Retrieved from <https://repositorio.uta.edu.ec/handle/123456789/29956>
- [11] Biber, D. Conrad, S. (2009) Register, genre and style: Framework of Situational Analysis of Language Registers. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814358>
- [12] Biber, D. and Finegan E. (2013). Sociolinguistic perspectives on register. New York: Oxford University Press. USA.
- [13] Biber, D. (2013) Lexical Frames in Academic Pros and Conversation. International Journal of Corpus Linguistics 18.109–135. New York: Oxford University Press. USA.
- [14] Villanueva, S. & Liali, C. (2016). Register analysis as a tool for translation quality assessment. Translation Journal vol. 7. National University of Singapore. Retrieved from: <https://translationjournal.net/journal/25register.htm>
- [15] Martin, M. (2012). Language and situation: Register. Retrieved from: <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-langage-et-societe-2008-2-page-89?lang=fr>
- [16] Oster, K. (2017) Lexico-grammatical analysis of native and non-native abstracts based on Halliday's model. Research Gate Journal Publication. Retrieved From: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336966123_Lexico-grammatical_Analysis_of_Native_and_Non-native_Abstracts_Based_on_Halliday's_SFL_Model