



THE USE OF INFORMAL LANGUAGE IN THESIS PROPOSAL: AN ANALYSIS OF EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' WRITINGS

Yumnanita Putri D.¹, Hilda Izzati Madjid, M.A²

¹ ²

UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya

¹ ²

yumnaaputrii@gmail.com; hildaizzati@uinsby.ac.id

Abstract: Informal languages are often used in ordinary and casual communication in both written and spoken forms, but it is inappropriate if individuals use informal language in academic writing. In some cases, students still use informal expressions in academic writing such as thesis proposals. This study identified the use of informal languages in students' thesis proposals. Specifically, the study examined the elements of informality and types of informal languages that students frequently use when writing a thesis proposal. By using a qualitative method, this study analyzed 15 students' thesis proposals. The findings found that there are seven elements of informality covering pronouns, conjunction, listing expressions, contraction, adverbs, segment fragment, and direct questions. The types of informal language that students frequently use are pronouns, conjunctions, and listing expressions. The findings further indicate that the use of informal language is not only at a morphological but also syntactic level.

Keywords: *Writing, Informal Words, Thesis Proposal, University Students*

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is linked to students' language learning and other instructional processes; it is supposed to address an intellectual community in which students actively participate in their learning. Some rules must be established, which are formal and impersonal. The writing must be concise, clear, and professional. Using knowledge to gain new insights and perspectives is an important aspect of learning. One of the elements that characterize academic writing is the formality of the language. As written in the writing handout from the University of Leeds that it is expected to use formal language in academic writing.

Students' capability to obtain, examine, and integrate the viewpoints and ideas of others to build the input of their academics is critical for the success in postgraduate study. When students present the knowledge that they have acquired, they must be able to distinguish between what they have acquired from others and acquired on their own (Bristol Business School, 2006, cited in Fadda, 2012). In addition, the students must also consider some aspects regarding audience, purpose, strategy, organization, and style. David (in Khadijah, 2020) explains that some of the obstacles students have when writing an academic paper or proposal are grammatical errors, plagiarism, lexical difficulties, and insufficient planning. Thesis proposal, as one of academic writing products, best reflects the students' use of language. In fact, most students have shared common concerns and difficulties when completing their thesis proposals, either in the content or in the language construction.

A learner should consider numerous aspects when creating a thesis proposal. One of the factors to consider is the language used. When creating a thesis proposal, students must follow the criteria of a good thesis proposal. Using formal language is one of the qualities. The purpose of engaging in formal language is to help others be aware and abstain misunderstandings. According to Heylighen and Dewaele (1999), formality is the avoidance of ambiguity and impersonality. Formality helps the opinion stated to be objective, explicit, and less twisted (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999, pp. 2-9 cited in Riaz & Akhtar, 2019). Furthermore, Hyland and Jiang (2017) define formality as an essential characteristic in thesis proposals in order to protect written content from ambiguity, personal opinion, and misinterpretation that conceivably cause the less objectiveness of the written content (Alipour & Nooreddinmoosa, 2018). As a result, the lack of formality in thesis proposals can be destructive to both the author and the topic of the writing.

Several studies have found a trend of informality in scientific English in thesis proposals. According to Hundt and Mair informality has affected thesis proposals, whereas Hyland and Jiang report a small enlargement of informality features in academic work, such as pronouns, conjunctions, listing expressions, contractions, adverbs, segment fragments, and direct questions. These studies indicated formality of thesis proposals has decreased or is rarely used because nowadays students tend to use many informal words for academic writing. By the different words, academic writing particularly in the middle of English native speakers has continuously become less formal (Praminatih et al., 2018).

Reflecting on the previous study discussed earlier, it is shown that students now tend to use informal languages in their thesis proposals. Previous research by Hundt and Mair or Hyland and Jiang focused exclusively on the decrease of formality in thesis proposals. On that matter, this study is focused on the elements of informality and common informal words that are frequently used in students' thesis proposals.

2. METHOD

This study discusses the students' informal language as reflected in their proposals. Furthermore, a descriptive qualitative design is employed to explore further the types of informal language as well as its frequent occurrence in their writing. Trochim (2002) views that descriptive qualitative is generally used to express what exists or what is happening and it is to explore the thesis proposals by the students.

2.1 Subjects

This study reviewed 15 thesis proposals to identify the informal language. The thesis proposals were selected from three classes (A, B, C) of the academic writing course and 5 thesis proposals were selected in each class based on the teacher's recommendation and students' permission. This study involved the thesis proposal in the academic year of 2015-2016. The documents were then classified by the researcher based on the classes chosen as the sample.

2.2 Data Collection Procedure

The study used content analysis to explore the element of informal language used in the students' thesis proposals. The informality elements analyzed in students' academic writing are only restricted to the elements of informality by Christine B Feak and John M Swales. Through observing proposals, the use of informal language in the thesis proposals of the students in this study is analyzed. There are 7 elements of informality that are examined in this study including pronoun, conjunction, listing expression, contraction, adverb, segment fragment, and direct question. Through the elements, this study also examined the example of informal words in the thesis proposals. The thesis proposals chosen are in the academic year of 2015-2016 with several topics made by students. The documents were categorized based on the classes chosen as a sample which are three classes (A, B, and C). The data is assessed after categorizing the document.

2.3 Data Analysis Technique

The data is obtained by evaluating the students' thesis proposals. After gathering the students' thesis proposals, the process of analyzing the thesis begins. The steps for conducting the analysis are as follows:

1. Categorizing The Data
Examining and classifying the data depending on the assigned class.
2. Reading The Content
All through the document analysis, read the students' thesis proposals in order to identify the informal words they use.
3. Coding The Elements
Prior to assessing the data, the code of the elements is chosen by using colors to make it uncomplicated to categorize the informality elements. The colors are divided below:
 - a. Pronouns are marked in yellow.
 - b. Conjunction is marked in red.
 - c. Listing expressions are marked in green.
 - d. Sentence fragments are marked in blue.
 - e. Construction is marked in orange.
 - i. Direct question is marked in purple.
 - j. Adverbs are marked in gray.
4. Analyzing Each Element of Informality
Each element of informality is investigated in each student's thesis proposal after categorizing and coding the data.
5. Summarizing The Coding

After analyzing each element in the thesis proposals, the elements discovered are displayed in the form of a table.

6. Drawing The Conclusion

After the sample has been analyzed, the conclusion is drawn and given in the form of a table.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate the result analysis on the informality elements used in the thesis proposals of students, the elements of informality that are frequently used by students in academic writing, and examples of informal words and sentences.

3.1 Finding

The result of the review of 15 thesis proposals indicated that students use 7 elements of informality in their writing. They are pronoun, conjunction, listing expression, contraction, adverb, sentence fragment, and direct question. Table 1.1 highlights the elements of informality that are found in the students' thesis proposals. Table 1.1

The Informality Elements in Students' Thesis Proposal

Informality Elements	Data
Pronoun (<i>"I", "we", "our", "it", "this"</i>)	<p>"In this paper, I argue that small incentives can lead to a greater participation in the survey".</p> <p>"You carry a more encompassing meaning than rhetorically focusing on an individual reader, seeking instead to engage...".</p> <p>"Writing is as a tool to express our unspoken ideas that need to be completed".</p>
Conjunction (<i>"but", "and", "so", "because" and "then"</i>)	<p>"And the students will get the result"</p> <p>"But, the difficulties to develop a paragraph or essay are still found in undergraduate students..".</p>
Listing Expression (<i>"etc", "many more", and "and others"</i>)	<p>"The second is unwritten material, such as video, picture, and others".</p> <p>"These semiconductors can be used in robots, CD players, etc."</p>
Contraction (<i>"it's", don't", "can't", and "couldn't"</i>)	<p>"Mobile became the most important thing when the lecturer can't attend..."</p>

Adverb (<i>“actually”, “usually” and “unfortunately”</i>)	<i>“Actually it contains questions that are given to students to get the students’ answer”.</i>
Sentence Fragment	<i>“A sequence instruction to do something”.</i>
Direct Question	<i>“Why does the teacher need to use it in teaching activities?”</i>

Table 1.1 presents the elements of informality and provides the data to support it. The majority of students used pronouns, conjunction, and listing expressions in their thesis proposals.

The pronoun used refers to the author, the readers, personal experience, or unfinished story from the previous sentence or paragraph. The examples of pronouns that students used are *“I”, “you”, “we”, “our”, and “this”*. This element can be shown from the following data:

1. *“In this paper, I argue that small incentives can lead to a greater participation in the survey”*
2. *“**You** carries a more encompassing meaning than rhetorically focusing on an individual reader, seeking instead to engage...”*,
3. *“Writing is as a tool to express **our** unspoken ideas that need to be completed”*. It can be highlighted from the data that the students tend to use personal pronouns that indicate personal experiences. In fact, personal experience which leads to the possibility of personal judgment needs to be avoided in academic writing. Therefore, omitting pronouns is able to establish an impersonal position. This is also done to avoid personal experience, independent argument, and the creation of a sense of closeness in academic writing. Moreover, it is able to make the information easier to understand for the reader and to show the professionalism and authoritativeness of the writer.

Another informal language found in the students’ thesis proposals is conjunction. The conjunction is used to connect the words, phrases, or clauses. The data showed that the majority of the conjunction is used at the beginning of the sentence functioning as the transition between one idea to another. The examples of conjunctions that students used are *“but”, “and”, “so”, “because”, and “then”*. These conjunctions can be shown in the following data:

1. *“**And** the students will get the result”*
2. *“**But**, the difficulties to develop a paragraph or essay are still found in undergraduate students..”*.

As can be observed from the data, the conjunctions are not appropriately used. The coordinating conjunctions should connect similar parts of sentences within the sentence (Dalrymple, 2001). However, the data has shown the opposite practice. The inappropriateness of the conjunction could possibly indicate the informality. Although the readers are still able to manage the meaning without encountering significant difficulties, the inappropriateness of the use of conjunctions is not common and considered informal.

Other elements of informality found are listing expressions, contractions, and adverbs in initial and final positions. For listing expressions, students use “*etc*”, “*many more*”, and “*and others*”. It can be found in the following data:

1. “*The second is unwritten material, such as video, picture, **and others***”
2. “*These semiconductors can be used in robots, CD players, **etc.***”.

The sentences containing listing expressions require the reader to deduce the rest of the information individually. It signifies that the sentence is ambiguous. Listing expression is unspecific and forces readers to discover the details. According to that matter, the use of listing expressions leads to multiple interpretations.

Contraction is also found in the students’ thesis proposals. Contraction is defined as the process of integrating two words to construct it briefly. Moreover, it is a strategy to make the written paper appear more conversational and to make the reader feel as though they are a part of the writing. Contraction is often used in everyday discourse, using contractions in academic writing makes the text more informal. The students use contractions such as “*don’t*”, “*couldn’t*”, “*can’t*” and “*it’s*”. This practice can be looked at from the data “*Mobile became the most important thing when the lecturer **can’t** attend...*”.

Another informality element found in the students’ thesis proposals is the adverb. The adverb is considered informal if an adverb is found in the beginning of the sentence or at the end of the sentence, because the formal use of the adverb is in the middle of the sentence. The examples of adverbs used by students are “*usually*”, “*actually*” and “*unfortunately*”, found in the data “***Actually** it contains questions that are given to students to get the students’ answer*”.

Furthermore, there are other informality practices found in the students’ thesis proposal, that is sentence fragments and direct questions. The sentence fragment is a bit of information that has the same structure as a sentence but lacks some of the features of a proper sentence. A sentence fragment is defined as missing one element of the sentence, which can be the subject, predicate, or object. Meanwhile, academic writing should provide comprehensive data. The example found in the writing is “*A sequence instruction to do **something***”.

The last informal language feature found in the students’ thesis proposal is direct question. A direct question could be a constructive way to bring attention of the reader to a point, but it is valuable when outlining research questions or an argument to be answered. However, it is infrequent in the middle of a paragraph to have a direct question. An example of direct questions used by students is “***Why** does the teacher need to use it in teaching activities?*”. To put direct questions in the middle of a paragraph, the construction should be transformed into indirect ones.

3.2 Discussion

The result of the study showed that students utilized seven elements of informal language in their thesis proposals. They are pronouns (*I, we, it, this, and those*), conjunction (*but, and, so, because, and then*), listing expressions (*etc, many more, and and others*) , contraction (*can’t, couldn’t, don’t, doesn’t, didn’t, haven’t, i’ll, it’s, that’s, won’t, and we’re*) , adverbs in initial or final position (*basically, critically, crucially, importantly, remarkably, significantly*), segment fragment (“*A sequence instruction to do something*”), and direct questions (*What can be done for?*).

Following the data, it can be concluded the informality elements have been used frequently in the thesis proposals of the students. As stated by Ken Hyland and Fang (Kevin) Jiang (2017), the informality that has infiltrated a wide scale of previously formalized spoken and written realms (business association, journalism, organizational papers, etc.) has now expanded to academic work. There are several things academic writers might pay attention to while the process of writing. As expressed by Swales and Feak (2012), the communications are written in the proper style and academic writers must make certain of that. The style of a specific work has to be coherence and appropriate in the information delivered and the audience aimed. Even if the ideas or data are difficult, the conversational English used in academic writing that is written informally might be regarded as extremely simple.

The data also indicates that the elements of informality are found both in morphological and syntactic aspects. The morphological form of the use of personal pronouns, listing expressions, and contractions implies the subjective position which in turn leads to the personal judgment. In addition, the inappropriate use of adverbs in terms of its position in the sentence also proves the informal tone of the students' thesis proposal. The informal use of language is also found in the syntactic level. Omitting one of the sentence elements may be acceptable in oral communication, specifically in an informal conversation. However, in academic writing, this practice is considered inappropriate and informal. Another informal language use in the syntactic level is also found by the direct questions used. To put the direct questions as a part of a sentence, it must be transformed first into indirect ones.

Among ESL and EFL students' academic writings, several studies on informality have also been conducted to discover the elements of informality that students used frequently. McCrostie (2008) conducted a study of Japanese students in English major. According to the findings of the study, freshman students utilized unessential oral variation, singular and plural first-person pronouns, and uncertain vocabulary in their works. Nevertheless, the study found that second year students decreased repetition in employing oral variation, incomprehensible words, and first person pronouns. This minimization was influenced by the writing experience of the students and the writing curriculum of the university. Leedham and Fernandez-Parra (2017) conducted a study of undergraduate and graduate engineering students (Chinese, Greek, and British) at five different universities in the UK, employing data from the BAWE corpus. According to the study, the use of the first-person pronoun *we* in their writings was preferred by Chinese and Greek students, but the use of the first-person pronoun *I* was preferred by the English students. The study also discovered the use of the first-person pronouns *we* and *I* in academic paper was influenced by student's social and cultural backgrounds. These previous studies across different languages support the recent research finding that highlights a similar issue regarding the use of personal pronouns in the students' thesis proposal, which in turn leads to informality. Moreover, personal pronouns are the most frequently found in the students' thesis proposal.

4. CONCLUSION

By observing the students' thesis proposal, seven elements of informality are found. They are pronouns, conjunction, listing expressions, contraction, adverbs, segment fragments, and direct questions. The informal language in the students' thesis proposal is found both at the morphological and syntactic level. The informality has been structured into

the elements of informality by John M Swales and Christine B Feak (2012). It is previously applied in structured written and spoken realms (journalism, business correspondence, administrative papers, and so on) and has now been used widely in academic writing.

The findings implied that the students' language awareness and sensitivity should also be emphasized during the teaching and learning process. To write academically does not only put words into a well-grammatical sentence but also an appropriate tone and style of the language use. In relation to the pedagogical context, teachers could consider it in their teaching.

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