

Informality in Academic Writing: An Analysis of ESL Undergraduate Written Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Business correspondence is a foundational genre for ESL undergraduates, especially those preparing for professional roles that demand formal written communication. Despite its importance, research consistently points to a tendency toward informality in student writing, shaped by factors such as first language influence, instructional practices, and the growing role of digital communication. This study examines this issue within the Malaysian higher education context, drawing on 50 business emails produced by undergraduates at a public university. Guided by the informality framework proposed by Chang and Swales (1999) and operationalised by Hyland and Jiang (2017), the analysis focuses on nine informal features, including unattended anaphoric pronouns, second-person pronouns, contractions, sentence-initial conjunctions, direct questions, listing expressions, exclamations, sentence-final prepositions, and split infinitives. The findings indicate that although students possess a basic awareness of formal conventions, informal features persist due to L1 interference, limited exposure to authentic business discourse, and pedagogical priorities that emphasise grammatical precision over register-appropriateness. By shedding light on these patterns, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in ESL writing research and offers practical pedagogical strategies for developing students' professional writing competence.

Keywords: business correspondence, ESL undergraduates, informality, Malaysian tertiary education, written discourse

INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive job market, the ability to produce clear, professional business correspondence is a skill that sets graduates apart. For ESL undergraduates in Malaysia, this skill is increasingly expected by employers; however, it remains a persistent challenge for many. Unlike casual email exchanges or social media interactions, business correspondence carries specific expectations of formality, clarity, and professionalism. For Malaysian undergraduates, many of whom are second language speakers of English, mastering this genre is not merely an academic requirement but a practical necessity for employability and workplace success (Mat & Hashim, 2025).

In the Malaysian tertiary context, English academic and professional writing holds an integral position within the curriculum. Business correspondence courses are commonly offered in Malaysian universities, aiming to equip students with the skills necessary for effective workplace communication. Such courses emphasise the production of professional business documents that build good work relationships, focusing on appropriate language, format, and conventions. Despite years of English instruction, many students continue to produce business writing that carries informal features (Lee et al., 2019; Praminatih et al., 2018). This persistent gap between classroom learning and professional expectations warrants closer examination.

The presence of informality in business correspondence is particularly concerning given the genre's conventional expectation of formality, clarity, and professionalism. Business correspondence serves not only as a medium for information exchange but also as a reflection of organisational identity and professional

competence (Tocalo et al., 2022). As Hyland (1998) demonstrated in his analysis of CEO's letters, business discourse relies heavily on metadiscoursal resources to build credibility and establish relationships with readers. When students employ informal language features, they risk undermining the professional tone expected in workplace communication, which can have real consequences for their credibility and career prospects.

Several factors have been identified as contributing to informality in ESL student writing. These include first language interference (Mehat & Ismail, 2021), instructional practices that prioritise grammatical accuracy over register-appropriateness (Razali & Azmar, 2024), and the growing influence of digital communication on students' writing habits (Baron, 2015). While these factors have been examined in the context of academic essays and theses (Lee et al., 2019; Praminatih et al., 2018), business correspondence as a distinct genre has received considerably less attention. Puvenesvary (2003), in a comparative study of evaluation criteria employed by academic and workplace professionals in Malaysia, noted that limited research investigates the criteria of good writing as viewed by workplace professionals and ESL teachers. This gap is significant, as the stylistic demands of business correspondence differ from those of academic writing in important ways.

This study addresses this gap by examining informality in business correspondence written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. Based on 50 business emails composed by students at one Malaysian public university, this exploratory study offers a grounded perspective on the informal features that surface in their business writing. Specifically, this study aims to achieve two objectives. The first objective is to identify the types and frequency of informal features employed by Malaysian ESL undergraduates in their business correspondence. The second objective is to examine the factors contributing to the use of informal features in student business correspondence and propose pedagogical implications. By shedding light on these patterns, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in ESL writing research and offers practical pedagogical strategies for developing students' professional writing competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Business Correspondence as a Genre

Professional communication has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, shaped not only by technological advances but also by the very real pressures facing today's workforce: the demand for speed, the rise of global teams, and the constant negotiation of professional identity across cultures. At the heart of this field lies business correspondence, a genre encompassing everything from formal proposals to routine emails, which serves as a primary vehicle for building trust, resolving conflict, and advancing organisational goals (Bhatia, 2004; Hyland, 2018). Traditionally, this genre has been defined by formal registers, concise language, and strict adherence to established formats, all of which are championed in style guides for their role in safeguarding professionalism and ensuring clarity (Guffey & Loewy, 2021). However, for many working professionals and students alike, the line between appropriate formality and acceptable informality has become increasingly difficult to draw. The everyday realities of digital communication, where instant messages and hurried emails often favour brevity over convention, have blurred these boundaries, introducing new norms that can leave second language (L2) writers feeling uncertain about how to project competence without appearing stiff or out of touch (Baron, 2015).

This tension is particularly palpable in educational settings, where policies such as the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2016 explicitly call for graduates to develop entrepreneurial traits, including polished professional communication skills (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2016). For Malaysian students, for whom English serves as a second language, mastering this balance is not merely an academic exercise; it is a deeply personal endeavour tied to future employability and professional credibility. Research on Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) suggests that Malaysian ESL users naturally adopt more standard English in formal settings, while informal contexts see the emergence of more hybrid, lingua franca forms (Sadjirin et al., 2018). This context-driven adaptability, however, is a skill that many learners have not fully internalised. Without explicit guidance, they may fall back on informal patterns that feel more accessible, inadvertently undermining the register expectations of formal business writing.

Much of what we know about informality in L2 writing has emerged from studies of academic genres, essays, theses, and abstracts, rather than from the professional correspondence that students will eventually produce in their careers. The foundational taxonomy proposed by Chang and Swales (1999), which identified features such as first-person pronouns, unattended anaphoric references, sentence-initial conjunctions, and contractions, has provided a useful lens for examining student texts. Subsequent research has painted a more nuanced picture. Praminatih, Kwary, and Ardaniah (2018), for instance, traced Indonesian EFL thesis abstracts over two decades and observed a gradual decline in informal features, a trend they interpreted as either a sign of improved pedagogical attention or a growing conservatism among learners. In a comparative study of L1-English and ESL undergraduate essays, Lee, Bychkovska, and Maxwell (2019) found that while ESL students used informal features less frequently overall, they relied more heavily on specific elements like second-person pronouns and unattended "it." These patterns suggest that ESL writers often operate under a heightened awareness of prescriptive rules, while their L1 counterparts enjoy a more relaxed, intuitive relationship with register norms (Lee et al., 2019).

In the Southeast Asian context, Tocalo et al. (2022) extended this inquiry to Filipino ESL researchers, revealing that informality features do not evolve uniformly over time. While some features, such as unattended anaphoric pronouns and sentence-initial conjunctions, increased in frequency, others, including first-person pronouns and listing expressions, declined. Such divergent trajectories underscore a crucial point: informality is not a monolithic construct, and its manifestation in L2 writing is shaped by a complex interplay of instructional emphasis, learner experience, and evolving disciplinary conventions. Despite these insights, research specifically targeting informality in L2 *business* correspondence remains conspicuously sparse, leaving a gap in our understanding of how students navigate this professionally critical genre.

Turning to the Malaysian higher education landscape, the challenges are both pedagogical and deeply human. Both lecturers and students describe English academic and professional writing as a formidable undertaking, one that demands not only linguistic accuracy but also cognitive effort, strategic organisation, and cultural awareness (Razali & Azmar, 2024; Mat & Hashim, 2025). Error analyses have identified persistent difficulties with subject-verb agreement and verb tense, challenges often traced to structural differences between English and Malay (Mehat & Ismail, 2021). More fundamentally, classroom observations reveal that writing instruction frequently centres on grammatical drills and examination preparation, with less attention given to the stylistic nuances and register sensitivity that define effective business communication (Razali & Azmar, 2024). This examination-oriented focus, while understandable given systemic pressures, may inadvertently condition students to view writing as a set of discrete rules to be memorised rather than as a dynamic, context-responsive act of professional engagement.

Efforts to address these challenges have been bolstered by local corpus initiatives, such as the Corpus of Entrepreneurship Emails (COREnE), which compiles authentic student writing to inform more contextually relevant curricula (Sadjirin et al., 2018). However, the specific ways in which Malaysian ESL students deploy, or struggle with, informal features in business correspondence have received little empirical attention. Given the high stakes of professional communication for graduate employability, and the unique sociolinguistic environment of multilingual Malaysia, this gap warrants urgent exploration. The present study seeks to address this need by systematically examining the informal features present in business correspondence produced by Malaysian ESL students, with the aim of offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for educators and curriculum developers working at the intersection of language, culture, and professional readiness.

METHODOLOGY

This study analysed 50 business email samples written by undergraduate students at a Malaysian public university. The participants were selected as they represented students enrolled in a business email writing course. All students had completed relevant writing courses and their English proficiency levels, based on university placement tests and course prerequisites, ranged from B1 to B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The sample included students from three disciplines: Applied Sciences (n=20), Built Environment (n=18), and Social Sciences and Humanities (n=12). The data consisted of email writing tasks that included inquiries and information exchange. Each email followed a standard format and

required a minimum of 200 words. The specific writing prompt required students to compose a formal inquiry email to a supplier, a task designed to reflect authentic workplace communication scenarios. The main research instrument was the students' email compositions, which were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

The analytical framework for examining informality features was based on the taxonomy developed by Chang and Swales (1999) and subsequently refined by Hyland and Jiang (2017) and others (Lee et al., 2019; Pramatinah et al., 2018). This framework identifies nine informality features commonly proscribed in formal writing contexts, with first-person pronouns excluded as they are not inherently informal (Hyland, 2002; Ho, 2018).

Table 1: Taxonomy of Informality Features

No.	Feature	Description	Example
1	Unattended anaphoric pronouns	Ambiguous use of demonstrative pronouns	"This is not acceptable"
2	Second-person pronouns	Direct address to the reader	"you", "your"
3	Contractions	Shortened forms of words	"don't", "can't", "won't", "it's"
4	Sentence-initial conjunctions	Conjunctions placed at sentence beginning	"But", "And", "So", "Because"
5	Direct questions	Questions addressed directly to reader	"Are you sending the payment?"
6	Listing expressions	Informal enumeration markers	"etc.", "and so on"
7	Exclamations	Exclamatory statements	"We need this urgently!"
8	Sentence-final prepositions	Prepositions placed at sentence end	"...the person I spoke to"
9	Split infinitives	Adverb placed between 'to' and verb	"to quickly finish the report"

Table 1 presents the nine informality features examined in this study. The taxonomy is adapted from Chang and Swales (1999) and has been widely used in subsequent studies of informality in student writing (Hyland & Jiang, 2017; Lee et al., 2019). First-person pronouns are excluded as they are no longer considered inherently informal in professional and academic discourse (Hyland, 2002; Ho, 2018). Each of the 50 samples was analysed for the presence and frequency of these nine informal features. Data analysis followed a systematic procedure: (1) each text was read in full to identify instances of informal features; (2) identified features were coded according to the taxonomy; (3) frequency counts were calculated for each feature across the samples; and (4) the coded data were compiled for descriptive statistical analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of 50 business email samples revealed a range of informal features, though their frequency and distribution varied considerably across the corpus. As shown in Table 1, certain features appeared far more prominently than others, suggesting that students are not uniformly informal but rather exhibit specific areas of difficulty.

Table 2: Frequency of Informal Features in Business Email Samples (N=50)

No.	Feature	Frequency (out of 50)	Percentage (%)
1	Unattended anaphoric pronouns	31	62.0

2	Second-person pronouns	29	58.0
3	Contractions	24	48.0
4	Sentence-initial conjunctions	18	36.0
5	Direct questions	14	28.0
6	Listing expressions	9	18.0
7	Exclamations	5	10.0
8	Sentence-final prepositions	3	6.0
9	Split infinitives	2	4.0

Unattended anaphoric pronouns emerged as the most frequent informal feature, appearing in nearly two-thirds of the samples (62%). Second-person pronouns and contractions followed closely, at 58% and 48% respectively. At the other end of the spectrum, features such as sentence-final prepositions and split infinitives were relatively rare, occurring in only 6% and 4% of emails. This disparity is worth noting: it may reflect differing levels of student awareness, or it may simply be that certain features are more naturally triggered by the communicative demands of business correspondence.

Unattended Anaphoric Pronouns

Among the informal features identified, unattended anaphoric pronouns were particularly prevalent, appearing in 31 of the 50 emails. These occurred when demonstrative pronouns, primarily "this," "that," "these," and "those," were used without a clear referent. Table 3 offers a closer look at the distribution.

Table 3: Types of Unattended Anaphoric Pronouns Identified

Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Example
"This"	14	45.2	"This is not acceptable"
"That"	9	29.0	"That has caused problems"
"These"	5	16.1	"These need to be addressed"
"Those"	3	9.7	"Those are the issues"
Total	31	100.0	

"This" was the most frequently used unattended anaphoric pronoun, accounting for 14 instances (45.2%), followed by "that" with 9 instances (29.0%). The predominance of singular demonstrative pronouns over plural forms may reflect students' tendency to refer to a single unspecified concept or issue in their writing. In all cases, the referent was unclear, requiring the reader to infer meaning from context. Consider the following examples from student writing:

"This is not acceptable" — unclear: what is not acceptable?

"That has caused many problems" — unclear: what has caused problems?

"These are the issues we face" — unclear: which issues?

This pattern reflects the cognitive demands of formal writing, as students struggle to maintain clear referential relationships in complex texts. The high frequency suggests that many students are not sufficiently explicit in their writing, which is a significant issue in business correspondence where clarity is paramount. Formal alternatives would require students to specify the referent, such as revising *"This is not acceptable"* to *"This delay is not acceptable."*

Second-Person Pronouns (58%)

Second-person pronouns appeared in 29 of the 50 samples, with students frequently using "you" and "your" to address recipients directly. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the types identified.

Table 4: Types of Second-Person Pronouns Identified

Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Example
"You"	17	58.6	"If you need more information..."
"Your"	12	41.4	"We hope your company will..."
Total	29	100.0	

"You" was the most frequently used, appearing in 17 samples (58.6%), while "your" followed with 12 instances (41.4%). The predominance of "you" suggests that students are attempting to adopt a reader-oriented approach in their writing, which is a positive strategy in business correspondence. However, the high frequency and sometimes inappropriate usage indicate that students may not fully understand the professional conventions governing the use of second-person pronouns. Examples such as *"You should send the payment by Friday"* are particularly problematic as they can be perceived as demanding or presumptuous. While second-person pronouns can make writing more reader-oriented and engaging, overuse can create an overly familiar tone that undermines the professional distance expected in formal business correspondence.

Contractions (48%)

Contractions appeared in 24 of the 50 samples (48%), including "don't," "can't," "won't," and "it's." Table 5 provides a breakdown of the types of contractions identified.

Table 5: Types of Contractions Identified

Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Example
"don't"	8	33.3	"Don't hesitate to contact us"
"can't"	5	20.8	"We can't deliver on time"
"won't"	4	16.7	"We won't be able to..."
"it's"	4	16.7	"It's our pleasure..."
"didn't"	2	8.3	"We didn't receive..."
"haven't"	1	4.2	"We haven't heard back..."
Total	24	100.0	

"Don't" was the most frequently used contraction, accounting for 8 instances (33.3%), followed by "can't" with 5 instances (20.8%). The variety of contractions used suggests that students apply contractions across multiple

linguistic contexts rather than consistently using a single contracted form. This pattern indicates that contraction usage is widespread and may reflect students' everyday language habits. Contractions are widely considered inappropriate in formal business writing, yet students frequently employed them, potentially reflecting the influence of informal language in their daily communication. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that digital communication practices may be contributing to informality in student writing (Baron, 2015).

Sentence-Initial Conjunctions (36%)

Sentence-initial conjunctions appeared in 18 of the 50 samples (36%), with "But" and "And" being the most common. Table 6 provides a breakdown of the types of sentence-initial conjunctions identified.

Table 6: Types of Sentence-Initial Conjunctions Identified

Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Example
"But"	8	44.4	"But we hope you can reconsider"
"And"	6	33.3	"And we will send the goods next week"
"So"	3	16.7	"So please let us know your decision"
"Because"	1	5.6	"Because we need it urgently..."
Total	18	100.0	

Table 6 shows that "But" appeared in 8 samples (44.4%), while "And" followed with 6 instances (33.3%). The predominance of "But" and "And" suggests that students are using these conjunctions as simple connectors, potentially unaware of the more formal alternatives available to them. For example, *"But we hope you can reconsider"* would be more formally rendered as *"However, we hope you can reconsider."* While sentence-initial conjunctions are increasingly accepted in professional writing, their frequent use in student business correspondence suggests limited awareness of more formal alternatives. The use of sentence-initial conjunctions in formal writing is debated, with some style guides now accepting them in certain contexts (Hyland & Jiang, 2017). However, in the context of ESL student writing, the preference for formal alternatives may help students develop a more consistently professional register.

Direct Questions (28%)

Direct questions appeared in 14 of the 50 samples. While questions are sometimes appropriate in business correspondence (particularly in inquiry letters), students frequently used questions that were overly direct or informal. Examples include *"Are you going to send the payment?"* (overly direct; preferable: *"We would appreciate confirmation of payment"*) and *"Can you reply by tomorrow?"* (informal; preferable: *"We would be grateful for a response by tomorrow"*). The frequency of direct questions suggests that students may not fully appreciate the importance of politeness and indirectness in professional communication.

Listing Expressions (18%)

Listing expressions such as "etc." and "and so on" appeared in 9 of the 50 samples (18%). Table 7 provides a breakdown of the types of listing expressions identified.

Table 7: Types of Listing Expressions Identified

Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Example
"etc."	6	66.7	"We sell pens, pencils, etc."
"and so on"	2	22.2	"We offer many products, and so on"

"..."	1	11.1	"We have various items..."
Total	9	100.0	

Table 7 shows that "etc." was the most frequently used listing expression, appearing in 6 samples (66.7% of all listing expressions). "And so on" followed with 2 instances, while ellipsis appeared only once. These expressions are generally discouraged in formal writing, where specificity and completeness are valued. Their presence in student writing suggests limited awareness of the expectation for explicit and detailed enumeration in business correspondence. The reliance on "etc." in particular may indicate that students either lack the vocabulary to provide complete lists or believe that the use of listing expressions is acceptable in business writing.

Exclamations (10%), Sentence-Final Prepositions (6%), and Split Infinitives (4%)

These features appeared rarely in the corpus. Exclamations appeared in only 5 samples (10%), likely reflecting student awareness that exclamations are inappropriate in formal business writing. However, their occasional presence, such as "We need this urgently!", indicates that some students continue to struggle with maintaining a professional register, particularly when expressing urgency or strong emotion. Sentence-final prepositions (6%) and split infinitives (4%) appeared least frequently, which may indicate either greater student awareness of these rules or their lower salience in the type of language students produce. It is worth noting that both features are increasingly accepted in modern English usage, and many style guides no longer proscribe them as vigorously as in the past (Hyland & Jiang, 2017).

Factors Contributing to Informality

Beyond identifying patterns of informality, the analysis also revealed several factors that may contribute to the presence of these features in student business correspondence. These factors, summarised in Table 8, emerged from contextual information and patterns observed across the corpus.

Table 8: Factors Contributing to Informality in Student Business Correspondence

No.	Factor	Description
	Limited exposure to authentic business correspondence	Students had few opportunities to read or produce authentic business texts prior to university
	First language interference	Transfer of discourse patterns from Malay to English, particularly direct forms of address
	Pedagogical approaches prioritising grammatical accuracy	Writing instruction emphasised grammar over register-appropriateness
	Influence of digital communication	Transfer of informal email, text message, and social media patterns to business writing
	Assessment practices	Assessment focused on content and grammar rather than register-appropriateness

Limited exposure to authentic business correspondence emerged as a significant factor. Many students reported having limited opportunities to read or produce authentic business correspondence prior to their university studies. As a result, they lacked a clear understanding of the stylistic conventions and register expectations of the genre. This finding is consistent with research on the lack of genre-specific learner corpora in Malaysia, which has limited ESP practitioners' ability to develop locally-based curricula and teaching materials (Sadjirin et al., 2018).

First language interference played a notable role in shaping student writing. Several informal features reflected the transfer of discourse patterns from Malay to English. For example, the Malay language often employs more direct forms of address and persuasion, which may be considered too direct or informal in English business correspondence (Mehat & Ismail, 2021). Similarly, research on cross-border collaboration found that mother tongue surfaced in informal situations among Malaysian ESL users, suggesting that L1 interference is particularly evident when students are not under explicit pressure to maintain formal registers (Sadjirin et al., 2018).

Pedagogical approaches that prioritise grammatical accuracy over register-appropriateness were identified as another contributing factor. Analysis of the teaching contexts revealed that writing instruction often emphasised grammatical correctness and content delivery, with less attention to stylistic and register conventions (Razali & Azmar, 2024). Students reported that they received detailed feedback on grammar errors but limited guidance on the stylistic features of formal business correspondence. This finding aligns with the observation that teacher-centred approaches with heavy reliance on textbooks and drills remain common in Malaysian academic writing instruction.

The influence of digital communication was evident in student writing. Many students were accustomed to composing informal emails, text messages, and social media posts in English, and they appeared to transfer these communication patterns to business correspondence. The growing use of electronic mail and digital platforms in professional contexts has introduced new conventions that often favour brevity and immediacy (Baron, 2015), which may further encourage informality in student writing.

Finally, pedagogical and assessment practices were identified as contributing to informality. Students reported that assessment in business communication courses often emphasised content and grammatical accuracy, with register-appropriateness receiving less explicit attention. As noted by Puvanesvary (2003), there is a potential gap between the criteria applied by workplace professionals and academics in the evaluation of business correspondence, with academics often focusing on different aspects than employers. This disconnect may lead students to prioritise aspects of writing that are rewarded in assessment but may not align with workplace expectations.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for the teaching and learning of business correspondence in ESL contexts. Table 9 provides a summary of the pedagogical implications.

Table 9: Pedagogical Implications for Teaching Business Correspondence

No.	Implication	Description
	Explicit instruction on register conventions	Teach formal alternatives and explain professional expectations
	Authentic materials and real-world tasks	Use genuine business texts from real companies
	Process-based approaches	Complement product-focused approaches with drafting and revision
	Technology-enhanced resources	Utilise web-based modules and corpus-based tools
	Peer review and collaborative learning	Develop awareness through collaborative practice
	Assessment practices	Design rubrics that explicitly evaluate register-appropriateness
	Attention to BELF and intercultural communication	Address register variations in Malaysian context

The findings of this study carry several implications for the teaching of business correspondence to ESL undergraduates. First, there is a clear need for explicit instruction on register awareness. Students would benefit from systematic exposure to the stylistic features of formal business correspondence, including direct comparison between informal and formal versions of the same texts. Activities such as register transformation exercises, in which students rewrite informal emails in a formal register, could help develop this awareness.

Second, the development of genre-specific corpora and teaching materials grounded in authentic business communication would provide students with models of appropriate language use. The findings support the call for locally-developed learner corpora that can inform ESP curriculum design (Sadjirin et al., 2018). Access to authentic business correspondence samples would allow students to internalise the stylistic conventions of the genre through exposure and analysis.

Third, pedagogical approaches should address the influence of first language transfer. Contrastive analysis activities that highlight differences between Malay and English discourse patterns could help students recognise and avoid inappropriate transfer. This is particularly important for features such as direct address and persuasion, where cross-linguistic differences are most pronounced.

Fourth, assessment practices should be realigned to reward register-appropriateness alongside grammatical accuracy. Rubrics that explicitly evaluate stylistic features would signal to students that formal register is a valued component of business writing. Additionally, incorporating workplace perspectives into assessment criteria could help bridge the gap between academic and professional expectations (Puvanesvary, 2003).

Finally, the influence of digital communication habits on student writing suggests that educators should explicitly address the distinction between informal digital communication and formal business correspondence. Students may benefit from discussions about context-appropriate language use and the importance of adapting their writing style to different audiences and purposes.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined informality in business correspondence written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates, focusing on the types and frequency of informal features and the factors contributing to their use. The findings reveal that informal features are prevalent in student business emails, with unattended anaphoric pronouns (62%), second-person pronouns (58%), and contractions (48%) appearing most frequently. While students demonstrate basic awareness of formal conventions, they struggle to apply them consistently.

The persistence of informality stems from multiple interconnected factors: limited exposure to authentic business correspondence, first language interference from Malay, pedagogical approaches that prioritise grammatical accuracy over register-appropriateness, and the growing influence of digital communication on students' writing habits. These factors collectively create a gap between what students know and what they produce. For educators, the implications are clear. Teaching business correspondence requires explicit instruction on register conventions, exposure to authentic materials, process-based writing approaches, and assessment practices that evaluate register-appropriateness alongside grammatical accuracy. Curriculum developers should consider leveraging locally-relevant resources such as the Corpus of Entrepreneurship Emails (COREnE) to provide students with authentic models of professional communication.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on ESL professional writing by addressing a genre that has received limited empirical attention. The findings highlight the need for more intentional pedagogical attention to register and style, preparing Malaysian ESL undergraduates not only to write correctly, but to write professionally.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations of this study that needs to be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted of only 50 business emails from a single public university, which limits the extent to which the findings can be applied to the wider Malaysian higher education context. While the study included students from three disciplines

which are Applied Sciences, Built Environment, and Social Sciences and Humanities, with their proficiency levels ranging from B1 to B2, the sample remains relatively small and may not capture the full range of writing practices across Malaysian universities.

Additionally, the study did not employ a pre- and post-test design, nor did it include a comparative analysis against a corpus of real-world business correspondence. As a result, the study cannot determine whether the level of informality observed is a stable trait of student writing or a byproduct of the writing prompt and classroom conditions.

These limitations, however, point toward several promising directions for future research. Expanding the sample to include participants from multiple universities and a broader range of academic disciplines would make the findings more applicable to the wider Malaysian higher education context. Comparative studies between business and non-business students could reveal whether register awareness varies by field of study. Methodologically, a pre- and post-test design could track changes in students' register awareness following targeted instruction on formal writing conventions.

Additionally, future studies could map student-produced emails directly against a corpus of real-world business correspondence written by industry professionals, providing a benchmark for evaluating the gap between classroom writing and workplace expectations. Finally, incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews with students and instructors could offer richer insights into the factors that shape informality, complementing the textual analysis with voices from the classroom.

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