

Informality features in Thai EFL academic writing: Corpus evidence and instructor perceptions

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a slight increase in the use of informal elements has been observed in academic writing, indicating a shift toward a more interactive connection between authors and readers in scholarly communication. Although more flexibility is found in academic texts, EFL students' ability to develop academic writing styles has not been fully explored in the Thai context. This research investigated the distribution of 10 informal features established by Hyland and Jiang (2017) in Thai EFL students' academic essays and examined EFL writing instructors' perceptions of such features. The data were collected from a corpus of 147 academic essays (63,029 words) written by Thai undergraduate English majors. The survey responses were obtained from 31 EFL writing instructors regarding their perceptions of informal features collected through online questionnaire responses. The results revealed that the most frequently occurring informal features were second-person pronouns, first-person pronouns, and sentence-initial conjunctions, respectively. While the writing instructors perceived split infinitives, unattended anaphoric pronouns, and sentence-final prepositions as highly acceptable informal features, they were unlikely to approve of contractions, sentence-initial conjunctions, and exclamations in students' academic assignments. The study combines corpus-based evidence with instructor perspectives to reveal a mismatch between students' linguistic practices and academic writing expectations in the Thai context. It further suggests that explicit instruction in academic writing conventions should be more fully integrated into the writing curriculum to strengthen EFL students' understanding and development of academic discourse proficiency.



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1. Introduction

1.1. Academic writing challenges for EFL students

For university students, academic writing is a fundamental skill, as it is central to coursework, assessments, and examinations. This form of writing emphasizes logically structured arguments, an objective stance, and the use of discipline-specific vocabulary. Effective academic writing involves integrating evidence from reliable sources, following established citation conventions, and developing a coherent thesis to support claims (Ferris, 2016; Hyland, 2015). Biber et al. (2002) also noted that formal academic writing requires writers to avoid colloquial expressions and contractions, instead prioritizing clarity, precision, and formality. Proficiency in these conventions enables students to

communicate their ideas effectively within the academic community and to meet the expectations of scholarly discourse.

Nevertheless, the expectation for non-native English speaking students to adopt a formal, academic writing style can pose challenges, as it differs significantly from the more casual register of conversational English. Moreover, these students often find academic writing particularly complex and challenging because it requires not only the use of research evidence but also the formal expression of claims and opinions (Sulaiman, 2022). Research studies have identified stylistic issues in non-native students' academic papers, such as the underuse of coherence and cohesion devices, lexical choices, and limited rhetorical strategies in crafting their writing to the conventions of the target academic culture (Hinkel, 2003; Leedham, 2015). The challenge for EFL/ESL students lies in articulating their viewpoints using appropriate academic vocabulary and conventional rhetorical styles.

Previous research indicates that novice academic writers frequently struggle to meet established academic conventions and may unintentionally use informal or non-academic expressions as they develop their academic discourse competence (Larsson & Kaatari, 2019; Walsh, 2011). EFL writers often rely on linguistic features associated with speech rather than academic prose, reflecting limited awareness of register distinctions (Bosuwon, 2014; Gilquin & Paquot, 2008). For non-native English writers, such informality may result from linguistic constraints, including limited exposure to formal academic language and insufficient control of appropriate stylistic resources, despite clear communicative intentions (Strauss, 2012; Yang & Pan, 2023). These challenges highlight the need for contextualized research into EFL student writing features and instructional expectations in order to establish pedagogical support that facilitates learners' transition from non-academic styles to scholarly writing discourse.

1.2. Nature of Informality in Academic Writing

According to Biber (2006), academic writing has traditionally focused on precision, objectivity, and formality, which are often expressed through features such as passive constructions, nominalization, and limited use of personal language. Writers are generally encouraged to limit informal elements such as contractions, sentence-initial conjunctions, and first- and second-person pronouns to maintain credibility and scholarly tone (Swales & Feak, 2012; Hyland, 2001). However, recent studies suggest that academic writing is becoming more conversational, with an increase in informal features over time. Hyland and Jiang (2017) documented a gradual rise in the use of first-person pronouns, sentence-initial conjunctions, and unattended anaphoric references, especially in disciplines like the social sciences. Despite the focus on published research articles rather than student essays, their findings remain relevant for understanding linguistic choices in students' academic writing development. Nevertheless, the use of informal features, such as contractions, personal pronouns, abbreviations, unattended anaphoric pronouns, and colloquial expressions, continues to be questioned in academic writing (Huang et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2021; Kyei et al., 2025). Praminatih et al. (2018) examined informal features in EFL students' academic writing and identified eight commonly occurring types: first-person pronouns, second-person pronouns, sentence-initial conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs, sentence-final prepositions, run-on expressions, sentence fragments, contractions, and direct questions. Over time, the use of four of these features, including first-person pronouns, sentence-initial conjunctions, run-on expressions, and sentence fragments, showed a decline, possibly suggesting a growing tendency among EFL learners to adopt more conservative, formal writing styles in academic contexts. Recent studies indicate that informal features in academic writing play a complex rhetorical role, particularly for EFL writers navigating between prescriptive norms and communicative effectiveness (Briones et al., 2024; Constantinou et al., 2020). Comparative studies (Alipour & Nooreddinmoosa, 2018; Xia, 2020) show that native writers frequently employ informal elements more liberally, whereas non-native writers tend to avoid them. This avoidance is likely attributable to more conservative writing norms or limited exposure to flexible discourse practices.

1.3. Linguistic Issues in EFL Students' Academic Writing

Previous studies have indicated that EFL students face challenges in academic writing due to their lack of understanding of the lexicogrammatical differences between written and spoken English (Angelica et al., 2025; Mizusawa, 2020), suggesting the need for targeted instruction in this area. Not only is the development of formal writing ability a gradual and uneven process, but students' writing

performance is also shaped by several variables, including prior learning experience, L1 writing conventions, exposure to academic texts, and awareness of disciplinary expectations (Bosuwon, 2014; Hinkel, 2002; Manchón & Larios, 2007). Tocalo et al. (2022) observed a rise in non-academic features among ESL writers, which they attributed to increased digital engagement and evolving communication norms. Additionally, informal elements may arise not from carelessness but from students' attempts to make meaning, clarify ideas, or express stance. On the other hand, L2 learners may avoid self-mention or direct address due to uncertainty about their appropriateness, even when these features could enhance cohesion or persuasion (Lee et al., 2019). Recent student-focused research further highlights this tension between academic norms and actual writing practices. Parveen and Hafeez (2024) report that student academic writing frequently contains informal features, particularly conjunctive adverbs and sentence-initial conjunctions. When these features are used as surface-level cohesion devices without sufficient control of their logical and grammatical functions, they may weaken textual coherence and reveal a gap between prescribed academic conventions and students' developing academic writing competence.

1.4. Instructor Perceptions of Linguistic Issues in EFL Academic Writing

A growing body of literature now views strategic informality not as a flaw, but as a rhetorical tool to be used judiciously for reader engagement and stance expression. In fact, informal elements, often viewed as problematic, can enhance clarity and strengthen the writer-reader connection and facilitate second language writing development (Hyland, 2023; Yu, 2025). Features such as self-mention, direct address, or rhetorical questions can highlight the writer's voice and promote engagement (Basturkmen, 2010; Sansom, 2018). Although informal features are increasingly present in academic texts, research studies have found a mismatch between prescriptive norms and actual practices (Liardét et al., 2019; Thayer et al., 2010). Teachers typically uphold the view that academic writing should be impersonal, objective, and free of conversational tone. Despite growing research support for strategic informality, many EFL instructors in the Thai educational context continue to practice traditional grammar-based models (Saengboon et al., 2022; Chang & Wei, 2022). Informal features, especially contractions, sentence-initial conjunctions, and exclamations, are often seen as markers of inexperience or carelessness and are therefore strictly regulated in classroom feedback (Hyland & Anan, 2006). However, perceptions of non-academic features in student writing vary across cultural and institutional contexts (Matsuda & Nouri, 2020; Dixon, 2022). For example, Hyland and Anan (2006) found that Japanese teachers were more critical of deviations from formality than native English-speaking instructors, who were more open to rhetorical variation. Some teachers recognize that features such as first-person pronouns or sentence-initial conjunctions can enhance cohesion or engagement, especially in early drafts or reflective genres. Overall, these perspectives reveal a continuing gap between research-informed views of informality and prevailing instructional practices in EFL academic writing.

Research has also suggested that an overly prescriptive pedagogical approach, which focuses solely on identifying and eliminating informalities, can be counterproductive (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2024; Liardét et al., 2019). Rather than treating informalities as errors to be removed, it is crucial to examine what students are actively developing in their academic writing and how these emerging practices align with instructors' expectations. Kongcharoen et al. (2025) found that Thai EFL students' formality scores remained relatively low, indicating limited development of academic style and highlighting the need for further research into their writing features to inform more targeted pedagogical support. Accordingly, the present study investigates EFL writing instructors' perceptions of informalities in student writing in order to identify the gap between students' developing academic discourse and teachers' expectations. Although informality in academic writing has been widely discussed, few studies have examined this phenomenon in Thai EFL contexts using corpus-driven methods, and teachers' perceptions of informality in Thailand remain under-researched. By recognizing the potential pedagogical value of informal features, the study seeks to inform instructional practices that foster deeper awareness of academic discourse and more meaningful engagement with academic writing development.

2. Research Questions

- 1. What informal features are present in the academic essays of Thai EFL students?
- 2. What are EFL writing instructors’ perceptions of informal features found in Thai EFL students’ academic essays?

3. Method

3.1. Framework of Analysis

The informal features in undergraduate students' argumentative essays were classified using ten elements proposed by Hyland and Jiang (2017). These elements are adaptations of the informal categories originally identified by Chang and Swales (1999), as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of Informality Features (adapted from Hyland and Jiang, 2017)

Informal Features	Example Sentences
1. First-person pronouns to refer to the author(s)	"Based on recent evidence, I argue that young people need to be educated about sustainable practices."
2. Unattended anaphoric pronouns (this, these, that, those, it)	"That was the conclusion we reached."
3. Split infinitives - an infinitive that has an adverb between to and the verb stem	"The figure was added to clearly demonstrate the findings." "The administrators expect the team to fully support the new policy."
4. Sentence-initial conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs	"And the team decided to attempt the experiment once more." "But many experts agree on the importance of renewable energy." "However, the results were inconclusive." "So, the experiment's success led the team to pursue further research."
5. Sentence-final preposition	"This is the model we are working with." "The theory was not something the committee was convinced by."
6. Listing expressions ('and so on', 'etc.', 'and so forth' used when ending a list)	"Various factors, such as temperature, pressure, etc., were considered." "The software offers features like data encryption, user authentication, network security, and so on."
7. Second-person pronouns/determiners to refer to the reader (you and your)	"Imagine you are analyzing complex data sets." "Your feedback is crucial to the success of this project."
8. Contractions	"It's essential to verify all inputs before proceeding." "They'll need to revise the document before they've finalized it."
9. Direct questions	"How can we improve the accuracy of this algorithm?" "Which policies have been most successful in reducing urban pollution?"
10. Exclamations	"That's absolutely incorrect!" "There is no chance to have incredible results from such a simple experiment!"

3.2. Settings and Participants

The study was conducted at Naresuan University in Thailand, focusing on undergraduate students enrolled in the Persuasive and Argumentative Writing course during the 2022–2023 academic year. The course required students to write multiple drafts of argumentative essays on various topics such as “Living in a Dormitory vs Living at Home,” “Online vs Onsite Learning,” “Gasoline vs Electric

Cars,” and “Can AI Replace Human Teachers?”. There were two groups of participants including 147 undergraduate students and 31 EFL writing lecturers responded to an online questionnaire. The undergraduate English majors submitted second drafts of their argumentative essays, totalling 63,029 words (approximately 428 words per essay). The EFL instructor participant were those who voluntarily participated in an online survey via email and an open invitation posted to a Facebook group for university writing lecturers in Thailand.

3.3. Data collection

Students were required to produce three drafts per essay topic. The first draft focused on basic organization, the second on elaboration and coherence, and the third served as the final, graded submission. The second drafts were selected for analysis because they demonstrated a more fully developed essay organization, including the key components expected in academic writing, whereas the first drafts often lacked sufficient development of ideas and content organization. At the same time, the second draft had not yet been revised in response to teacher or peer feedback and therefore had not undergone stylistic, lexical, or structural adjustments.

The perception questionnaire was distributed online to assess instructors’ acceptance of ten informal language features. A total of 31 instructors voluntarily responded to the survey. Consent was indicated by respondents’ decision to proceed with the survey after reading the consent statement, which acknowledged that their responses would be used for research purposes. The questionnaire did not collect any personal or identifying information, and all responses were recorded anonymously to ensure participant confidentiality. The survey consisted of ten items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with each item accompanied by open-ended comment space, allowing participants to elaborate on their responses.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of informal features in student academic writing draws on a collection of argumentative essays composed by undergraduate English majors. The essays were converted into plain text or .txt files for creating the database in the AntConc program (Anthony, 2014). The name of the author, personal identification, footnote, and referencing data were removed before being added into the AntConc software. The analysis of informal features in students’ essays followed the typology established by Hyland and Jiang (2017) in Table 1. There are ten categories of informality features in academic writing: first-person pronouns, unattended anaphoric pronouns, split infinitives, sentence-initial conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs, sentence-final prepositions, listing expressions, second-person pronouns, contractions, direct questions, and exclamations. To detect informal elements in students’ essays, a combination of the AntConc software analysis and manual review was employed. For instance, first-person pronouns, e.g. I, me, my, we, us, ours, were identified using the concordance tool, which retrieved sentences or lines containing these words from the corpora. To ensure coding accuracy and reliability, all automatically retrieved instances were manually examined by the researcher. Each occurrence was manually examined within its immediate concordance line and the full essay context to confirm its syntactic and functional role and to exclude false positives. Any discrepancies between the AntConc output and the researcher’s classification were reexamined to ensure the reliability of the coding process.

For the survey analysis, EFL writing instructors’ perceptions on the use of informal features were based on responses collected from a questionnaire. The survey instrument included ten items, each corresponding to the 10 informal features in Table 1. Respondents were asked to rate their acceptance of these features appearing in academic writing on a four-point scale. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to identify trends in EFL writing instructors’ acceptance of each informal feature.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Informal Features in Student Academic Writing

According to Table 2, there were 790 instances of informal features in students’ academic writing, accounting for 1.25% of the total 63,029 words. This means that, on average, there were approximately 125 instances of informal elements per 10,000 words.

Table 2. Occurrence of Informal Features in Student Academic Writing

Total words	Frequency of Informal Features	Percentage
63,029	790	1.25

This occurrence aligns with findings from previous research studies (Alipour & Nooreddinmoosa, 2018; Hyland & Jiang, 2017; Lee et al., 2019). Despite the increasing presence of informal features in various types of academic texts, the overall percentage of students' academic writing remains relatively low. The infrequent use of non-academic features in academic text can be explained by the conformity of academic styles among non-native and less experienced writers (Hyland & Jiang, 2017). Even though the percentage of informality was low in students' drafts, some interesting occurrences of informality were observed in Table 3, as follows.

Table 3. Frequency of Informality Features Found in Student Academic Writing

Types of Informality	Frequency	Percentage	Rank	Level
1. First-person pronouns	203	26.09	2	High
2. Unattended anaphoric pronouns (this, these, those)	52	6.68	6	Medium
3. Split infinitives	8	1.03	8	Low
4. Sentence-initial conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs	121	15.55	3	High
5. Sentence-final preposition	8	1.03	8	Low
6. Listing expressions ('and so on', 'etc', 'and so forth')	12	1.54	7	Low
7. Second-person pronouns	241	30.98	1	High
8. Contractions	56	7.20	5	Medium
9. Direct questions	87	11.18	4	High
10. Exclamations	2	0.26	9	Low
Total	790	100		

Out of a total of 790 occurrences of informal features found in students' texts, second-person pronouns (e.g., you, your) appeared the most frequently, comprising 30.98% of the instances and ranked first overall. Following closely are first-person pronouns (e.g., I, we), accounting for 26.09% of occurrences and ranked second. Sentence-initial conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs rank third, with a frequency of 15.55%, illustrating a tendency among students to begin sentences in a more casual, conversational style. Direct questions, appearing 87 times (11.18%) and ranked fourth, also highlight an informal engagement with the reader that may appear to deviate from the expected analytical approach in academic writing.

Ranking fifth, contractions (e.g., can't, doesn't) occur with a frequency of 7.20%, showing students' inclination towards brevity, often at the cost of formality. Unattended anaphoric pronouns (e.g., this, these) appear in 6.68% of cases, ranking sixth, which can make academic arguments less clear due to ambiguous references. Listing expressions like "and so on" and "etc." (1.54%) are relatively infrequent but indicate an informal summarizing style that ranks seventh. The remaining categories, sentence-final prepositions and split infinitives, each account for 1.03% and are ranked eighth, while exclamations (e.g., !) are the least frequent with only 0.26% of occurrences, ranking ninth. This low frequency aligns with established academic writing conventions and style guidelines, which discourage the use of exclamation marks because they convey strong emotion or emphasis that may undermine objectivity, formality, and an impersonal scholarly tone (e.g., Hyland, 2001; Swales & Feak, 2012).

Generally, the data suggests that informal language in students' academic writing is largely driven by first- and second-person pronoun use and choices of lexical and textual structures that manifest conversational styles. This finding corroborates Yang and Pan's (2023) remark that, in academic texts,

although the use of informal features is generally discouraged, writers often incorporate some elements like first-person pronouns and sentence-initial conjunctions, while avoiding other informal features to preserve a formal tone. To present a deeper understanding of students' inclination to non-formal styles in academic writing, the following examples of the most frequent informal elements (ranked 1-4) are provided.

a) First- and second-person pronouns

As presented in Table 3, the high prevalence of personal pronouns suggests that students often adopt a conversational tone in composing their drafts. The use of both first- and second-person pronouns was often discouraged in conventional academic writing as it may detract from the objective tone typically expected in formal academic contexts. Nevertheless, in previous studies, the use of personal pronouns in academic writing has gained more acceptance in recent decades (Hyland & Jiang, 2017; Tocalo et al., 2022). Some examples of students' uses of first- and second-person pronouns are presented below.

"I cannot even imagine if there were only AI teachers."

"In my opinion, it is impossible that AI teachers will replace human teachers completely."

"We live in a technologically advanced world that makes our lives easier."

"When you decide to live alone, your expenses become a burden."

"Online classrooms allow you to communicate and connect with your classmates via video conference."

From the above examples, the use of "I, we, my, our" and "you, yours" represents informality by asserting the author's personal viewpoint and involving the readers, which appears less common in formal academic writing. However, using first- and second-person pronouns in academic writing is becoming more acceptable as it can be applied to enhance the writers' argument (Chuang & Yan, 2022; Pramatinth et al., 2018). This writer-reader direct communication has been recognized as an inclusive strategy in L2 written discourses (Abegglen et al., 2022; Basturkmen, 2010). In fact, first-person pronouns are used for giving personal evidence or persuasive purposes to seek alliance from the readers to agree with the key argument presented. In contrast, the use of the second-person pronoun "you" in student writing does not typically function to directly address the audience. Rather, it is frequently used to generalize situations, offer advice, clarify explanations, or guide readers through hypothetical or instructional examples. According to Crespo (2024), the use of second-person pronouns in academic and scientific writing can actively engage readers in the process of knowledge construction to highlight the collaborative nature of meaning-making in academic discourse. In this way, "you" serves to connect readers to the content of the essay and make abstract ideas more accessible, rather than to engage in direct interpersonal address. As noted by Basturkmen (2010), the strategic use of personal pronouns can enhance reader engagement and strengthen the perceived connection between writer and reader. Through such usage, writers may adopt a more conversational tone that supports clarity and persuasiveness while still advancing academic arguments.

b) Sentence-initial conjunctions

It was found that "however", "so", and "but" were used as sentence-initial conjunctions in students' texts. Some examples are presented below.

"However, we have online learning in this situation, and we pay almost the same [tuition fee]."

"So, the online class has benefits such as understanding the subject better and finishing assignments faster."

"But, we should study in a traditional class for our benefit."

In this case, it is not uncommon that "however" was used by students in the assignment since the purpose was to present the writers' argument on the debatable topics. These essay topics require

students to express their opinions and logical reasons to support their stances; therefore, the use of contrastive or concessive conjunctures including “however” and “but” is indispensable to state their justification according to the argumentative discourse (Hinkel, 2003). In a similar manner, the use of “so” at the beginning of the sentence may appear conversational; however, it indicates the author’s attempt to justify their reasoning or conclusion, drawing a logical connection between ideas and reinforcing the coherence of their argument. This finding is consistent with Parveen and Hafeez (2024), who demonstrate that students often rely on sentence-initial conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs to organize arguments and guide readers, reflecting developing academic writing competence that may not yet fully align with conventional academic norms. Although the appearance of sentence-initial conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs is considered informal in academic styles, these particles facilitate textual coherence and comprehension and are being used widely in several academic disciplines (Alipour & Nooreddinmoosa, 2018).

c) Direct questions

“Do you use technology to keep in touch with your family these days?”

“Have you ever wanted to get a part-time job?”

“When was the last time you studied in class?”

Although direct questions are generally discouraged in academic writing because authors are expected to provide complete information, they can function as effective rhetorical tools to capture readers’ attention. When used in essay introductions, direct questions can serve as a ‘hook’ by engaging readers, encouraging reflection, and stimulating critical thinking, rather than prompting them to supply an actual answer.

4.2. EFL Instructors’ Perceptions of Informality in Students’ Academic Writing

According to Figure 1, EFL instructors’ perceptions of informality features in academic writing were categorized into three ranges from low ($\bar{x} = 1.00\text{--}2.33$), neutral ($\bar{x} = 2.34\text{--}3.00$), and high ($\bar{x} = 3.01\text{--}4.00$) acceptance. This indicates that while some informality features might appear tolerated among participants, some traditional expectations of formality still hold significant influence in academic writing instruction. Accordingly, this paper discusses only the high and low acceptance of informal features concerning the respondents’ comments.

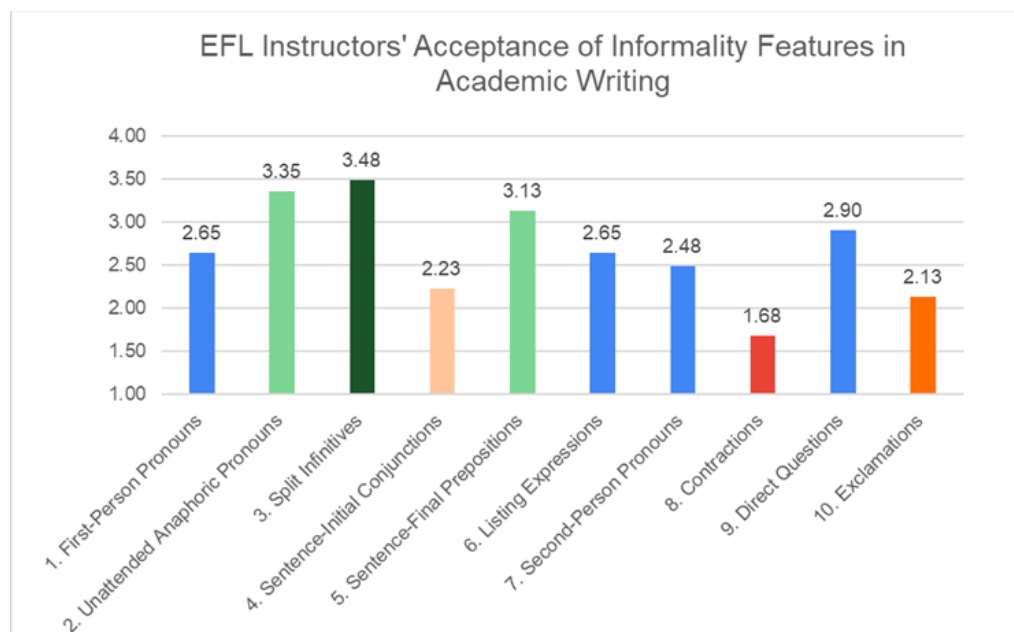


Fig. 1. EFL Instructors’ perceptions of students’ informal features in writing

a) *Teachers' low acceptance of contractions, exclamations, and sentence-initial conjunctions*

Among the three low acceptance features, the least acceptable stance was using contractions ($\bar{x}=1.68$). Participants commented that using contractions, which is usually associated with casual or conversational language, contrasts with the formal tone expected in academic writing. Below are examples of their reflections:

"Using the full form is customary in academic writing."

"Contractions are highly informal and to be avoided in an academic piece of writing."

"The use of contractions is acceptable in fiction and less-formal forms of writing; however, they should be avoided in academic writing..."

The data suggests that instructors prioritize maintaining a formal and objective tone in academic writing, aligning with traditional conventions. Research indicates that contractions create a conversational tone that reduces the perceived distance between the author and the reader (Biber et al., 1999; Chan & Meng, 2023). In contrast, the use of full forms helps writers avoid potential ambiguities and signals a shift from casual interaction to scholarly discourse. Consequently, instruction often emphasizes limiting contractions in order to help students adapt to formal writing standards and ensure that their work meets academic expectations and professional norms.

For the second least accepted feature, participants remarked that the use of exclamation marks ($\bar{x}=2.13$) in academic essays was overly emotive and inconsistent with the objective tone of scholarly writing. They made the following comments:

"Exclamations express an emotional tone, which is not appropriate for academic writing."

"Exclamations convey a sense of judgement and one of the features of academic writing is its objective style. Students would be required to revise to keep an even tone."

Participants emphasized that exclamations may conflict with the clarity and neutrality expected in scholarly work. As such, instructors discourage their use, encouraging students to maintain a professional tone in their academic essays.

Another low-accepted feature was using sentence-initial conjunctions ($\bar{x} = 2.23$). This feature was perceived as generally inappropriate in academic writing, as it has historically been perceived as informal or stylistically improper in academic contexts.

"Weaker students would use 'and' and 'so', especially if they're under time pressure. I'd ask them to pick a more formal word from the given list of transition words."

"I personally do not like the idea of putting 'but', 'or', 'and', 'so' in front of the sentence. These words are supposed to be used between clauses as co-ordinating conjunctions."

Using coordinating conjunctions at the sentence-initial position was often discouraged due to traditional grammar rules. Nevertheless, a few participants remarked that using 'however' at the beginning of sentences was somewhat acceptable.

"Using 'however' is acceptable, but don't use FANBOYS correlative conjunctions as transitions."

"Using conjunctions to start a sentence is not the biggest issue for my students since it doesn't affect comprehensibility. I feel the second example 'however' (and similar adverbs) are fine."

In summary, contractions, exclamations, and sentence-initial conjunctions received strong resistance or minimal acceptance from EFL writing instructors, as these features are closely associated with conversational styles of language rather than formal academic discourse (Chan & Meng, 2023; Mizusawa, 2020). Consequently, writing instructors are likely to recommend revising these features in order to help students develop greater control over academic discourse conventions and strengthen their overall academic writing competence.

b) Teachers' high acceptance of split infinitives, unattended anaphoric pronouns, and sentence-final prepositions

According to Figure 1, EFL instructors demonstrate high acceptance for certain features traditionally considered informal, such as split infinitives ($\bar{x} = 3.48$), unattended anaphoric pronouns ($\bar{x} = 3.35$), and sentence-final prepositions ($\bar{x} = 3.13$). This trend highlights a shift in attitudes toward prioritizing clarity and natural language flow over rigid adherence to prescriptive grammar rules in academic writing. As the highest-rated feature, using split infinitives is widely accepted among these instructors. For example, constructions like "to clearly demonstrate" allow writers to place emphasis on the nature of the verb, as some participants remarked:

"If it sounds natural then it is OK."

"While Prescriptive Grammar avoids splitting infinitives, modern usage accepts them if they do not disturb the clarity of the content."

"For the drafting stage, split infinitives are OK. However, I'm going to ask my students to consider rewriting if it can convey better meaning."

The use of split infinitives is considered a minor deviation from the formal structure which hardly affects the overall meaning but can play a role in enhancing clarity. During the drafting stage, writing instructors are likely to accept this feature and may advise their students to restructure the sentence or consider alternative phrasing. Tolerance toward split infinitives has also been observed by Yang and Pan (2023). They suggest that although such features, including personal pronouns and sentence-initial conjunctions, are often discouraged in style manuals, certain informal elements are nevertheless widely accepted in recently published materials.

Also receiving high acceptance, unattended anaphoric pronouns ($\bar{x} = 3.35$) may have previously been discouraged due to its potential ambiguity. While some instructors consider this feature acceptable when the context is clear and does not affect comprehension, some comments suggest using relative clauses to reduce the unclear noun reference.

"It can be used as long as it does not break grammar rules or hinder the meaning of the sentences."

"If students try to use 'this', they should make sure that this demonstrative pronoun refer to exactly the word or clause they intend to refer it to such as this case or these participants."

As presented, the use of unattended anaphoric pronouns such as "this, these, and those" can be tolerated if their noun references are clear, prioritizing clarity over rigid grammatical rules. Students are also encouraged to use relative clauses to enhance conciseness and achieve a more academic tone in their writing.

Sentence-final prepositions, often criticized in traditional grammar, are also highly accepted ($\bar{x} = 3.13$). Although most instructors are aware of the informal register of ending a sentence with a preposition, they seem to acknowledge the utility in maintaining sentence fluidity, as they commented:

"While Prescriptive Grammar avoids positioning prepositions at the end of a sentence, modern usage accepts them if they do not disturb the clarity of the content."

"I see this as a bad habit from spoken language, not a serious grammatical error. I'd encourage stronger students to modify the sentence to make the language more formal."

Using informal elements in writing has been perceived as an opportunity to accommodate novice writers' rhetorical functions (Abegglen et al., 2022; Basturkmen, 2010; Larsson et al., 2022). Since the students were in the drafting process, they may write in a conversational tone to convey their ideas as much as possible. However, the instructors are likely to suggest revision afterward to reduce informal styles in academic writing assignments.

As previously discussed, writing instructors tend to accept certain informal features, including split infinitives, unattended anaphoric pronouns, and sentence-final prepositions, as these features

generally have minimal impact on textual flow and overall comprehension. Nevertheless, students are encouraged to make careful linguistic choices and further develop their textual strategies and lexical knowledge. In academic assignments, they should be explicitly informed of the need to maintain an appropriate level of formality. Features such as contractions, sentence-initial conjunctions, and exclamations continue to be strictly regulated by instructors, reflecting a traditional grammar-oriented view that associates these forms with conversational styles and considers them less acceptable in academic contexts. Consequently, instruction often focuses on guiding students toward established norms to maintain academic credibility. The low frequency of contractions and exclamations in the student corpus suggests that students may be aware of the strongly conversational nature of these features and therefore attempt to avoid them. Such awareness is a key component of developing academic discourse competence, which requires sensitivity to readers' expectations and disciplinary norms (Gilquin & Paquot, 2008; Yang & Pan, 2023).

The findings reveal a contrast between students' writing practices and teachers' expectations regarding informal features, particularly first- and second-person pronouns and direct questions. While students may use these features to clarify ideas and engage readers, instructors tend to tolerate personal pronouns but place greater restrictions on features that strongly signal conversational discourse, such as exclamations, contractions, and sentence-initial conjunctions. This selective tolerance suggests increasing recognition of the rhetorical value of certain informal features in specific contexts, reflecting the social and pragmatic dimensions of academic writing among EFL practitioners (Fairclough, 2001; Hyland, 2023). Informal features may therefore be acceptable when they enhance clarity or engagement, especially in early drafts or reflective tasks, provided they are used strategically in line with disciplinary conventions and audience expectations.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the use of informal features in Thai EFL students' academic essays and explored EFL writing instructors' perceptions of these features. By combining corpus-based analysis with instructor perspectives, the study contributes to current discussions on informality in academic writing, particularly in EFL contexts. The findings extend Hyland and Jiang's (2017) framework to student writing and show that informal features in novice academic texts function not only as deviations from formal norms but also as resources that students use to express stance, organize ideas, and engage readers. The contrast between students' actual writing practices and instructors' expectations highlights the socially situated and negotiable nature of academic discourse.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results also suggest that informality should not be treated solely as error in academic writing instruction. Instead, greater emphasis should be placed on raising students' awareness of informal features and their rhetorical functions. Writing instruction should explicitly address when informality may support communication, such as using first-person pronouns to clarify author stance or sentence-initial connectors to improve textual flow, and when such features may reduce perceived academic formality. This approach can help students develop more informed and purposeful language choices rather than relying on rigid rules or avoidance strategies.

Therefore, the need for curriculum development that integrates form and meaning in EFL academic writing courses is required. Rather than focusing primarily on eliminating informal language, students should be encouraged to evaluate stylistic choices in relation to genre, audience, and disciplinary expectations. Corpus-based examples, guided revision activities, and explicit discussion of academic conventions may help students better understand how formal and informal features operate in authentic academic texts. Such instructional practices can reduce the gap between student writing practices and instructor expectations identified in this study.

5. Limitations and Recommendations

The generalizability of the findings is restricted by the limited sample size of student essays gathered for this investigation. The elements of informal language found in this particular dataset might not be representative of the wider linguistic practices of undergraduate students in the Thai EFL environment. It is also impossible to generalize the acceptability of these informal aspects to all EFL teachers since the perceptions of EFL writing instructors in this study were based on their unique professional practices and experiences.

Further studies could examine informal features in student writing across different academic disciplines to explore variation in stylistic norms. Longitudinal research could also investigate how students' use and control of informal features develop over time as they gain academic writing experience. In addition, future research may focus on how teacher feedback influences students' revision of informal features and their developing awareness of academic discourse. These research directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of informality as part of EFL students' academic writing development.

Finally, EFL academic writing instruction should evolve to recognize informality in student writing as a developmental feature rather than a deficiency. Students' use of informal elements can reflect emerging authorial voice, attempts to engage readers, and efforts to organize meaning, particularly at early stages of academic writing development. Rather than rigidly enforcing formal and distant styles, educators and researchers are encouraged to adopt a balanced pedagogical approach that acknowledges the constructive role of informality while guiding students toward greater awareness of academic conventions and audience expectations. At the same time, students should be supported in recognizing the gap between their current writing practices and disciplinary academic norms. Such an approach can promote clearer communication, deeper engagement with content, and stronger scholarly connections, making academic writing more accessible, meaningful, and effective.

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|------------------------|---|--|
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