



The Use of Formal and Informal English in Academic Listening Contexts: A Literature Review

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Abstract : Listening in an academic setting necessitates that learners grasp spoken material that may fluctuate between formal and informal styles. Numerous English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students find such variations challenging, particularly in genuine lectures and discussions, where the register is vital for understanding meaning, audience, and communicative intent. This research offers a systematic literature review of studies published from 2020 to 2025, focusing on the usage and conceptualization of formal and informal English in academic listening scenarios and their impact on comprehension. Sources were gathered from primary scholarly databases and thematically analyzed. The findings reveal that formal English is characterized by academic vocabulary and complex syntactic structures, which increase cognitive load but are critical for success in academia, whereas informal English boosts familiarity, motivation, and incidental vocabulary development. Strategies such as register awareness, explicit teaching, and exposure to mixed-register materials are emphasized as essential pedagogical approaches. The review provides practical implications for EFL educators and encourages further experimental research to investigate the long-term effects of register training.

Keywords: academic listening, formal language, informal language, register, receptive skills, listening strategies

A. Introduction

Academic listening is an important receptive skill for EFL students, particularly in tertiary education, where comprehension of lectures and academic discussions is critical to academic achievement. In addition to decoding spoken information, learners also need to understand the communication context, formality level, and intent of the speaker. These language differences can have an impact on meaning as well as listeners' ability to understand and remember what is being said.

Language commonly switches between formal and informal registers in authentic academic contexts, like lectures or presentations at universities. To interest students or make ideas clear, instructors may begin with organized academic discourse and then switch to a more conversational manner. Students may miss important facts or misunderstand communications if they are unaware of these registers properties.

According to recent research, many EFL students find it difficult to distinguish between the casual idioms frequently present in real multimedia sources and the formal language used in academic settings (Tsang, 2025). As students depend more on informal English input from sources like podcasts and social media, which might not match the linguistic requirements of lectures, this situation gets more complex.

With the rising focus on authentic listening resources in EFL teaching, there's a necessity for an updated review to consolidate current viewpoints. Thus, this literature review aims to explore how formal and informal English are defined within the realm of academic listening and outline their educational implications. The key research questions guiding this inquiry are:

- a) How are formal and informal language defined in academic listening research (2020–2025)?
- b) What effects do formal and informal input have on listening comprehension?
- c) What instructional methods effectively enhance students' awareness of register?

B. Theoretical Framework

According to register theory (Biber et al.), language changes according on communicative goal, audience, and circumstance. A formal register is associated with exact language, hedging statements, logical connectors, and intricate syntax in the context of academic listening. As demonstrated in lectures or presentations, it is usually premeditated and structurally comprehensive. Conversely, the informal spoken register, which is marked by contractions, fillers (such "uh," "you know"), and colloquial language, denotes spontaneous communication. In demanding academic settings, it can reduce clarity even though it might be simpler to comprehend.

Listening comprehension hinges on both bottom-up decoding abilities and top-down contextual interpretation. The metacognitive model proposed by Goh and Vandergrift highlights the importance of strategy monitoring, enabling learners to adjust their processing when encountering unfamiliar register cues.

The amalgamation of input type and cognitive strategy influences success in academic listening. Consequently, grasping register variation is crucial for learners to adapt to diverse spoken academic genres and achieve effective understanding.

C. Methodology of the Review

This research adopts a systematic literature review approach to ensure a credible and valid synthesis of existing findings. Sources were gathered from ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, MDPI, and Google Scholar. The keywords utilized included: “academic listening,” “formal English,” “informal English,” “register variation,” and “EFL listening strategies”. The inclusion criteria for chosen works were:

- a) Published between 2020 and 2025,
- b) Peer-reviewed journal articles or scholarly books,
- c) Written in English,
- d) Focused on listening comprehension and/or register within EFL contexts.

Studies that did not relate to listening or register analysis were excluded. The initial search yielded approximately 100 documents. Following a review of abstracts and full texts, 25 were deemed relevant. Ultimately, the 15 most recent and rigorous studies were selected for thematic analysis: 10 journal articles and 5 books. Data extraction involved coding thematic patterns related to register characteristics, comprehension outcomes, and instructional implications.

The synthesis method employed thematic categorization, comparing research outcomes and organizing them into four primary themes: register operationalization, cognitive processing effects, learner factors, and pedagogical strategies. This approach facilitates the drawing of conclusions that reflect various perspectives while emphasizing converging empirical evidence.

D. Finding Thematic Review

1. Operationalizing Register in Listening Research

Research differentiates between formal and informal English using markers such as lexical density, clause complexity, and subject-specific terminology. Interactional devices, simplified structures, and discourse markers characterize informal speech. Certain studies employ corpus tools to quantify register features present in lecture recordings.

2. Effects on Listening Comprehension

Research indicates that a formal register heightens cognitive load, especially for lower-proficiency learners. Abrupt shifts in register can interrupt comprehension since listeners may find it challenging to adjust their expectations. In contrast, informal input fosters comfort and fluency, but it does not inherently enhance comprehension of academic discourse unless accompanied by explicit instruction.

3. Learner Factors and Motivation

Exposure to informal digital content (such as YouTube, vlogs, and student-to-student discussions) is linked to increased listening confidence and incidental vocabulary acquisition. Nonetheless, learners with underdeveloped metacognitive

strategies remain at risk of misinterpreting complex academic talks despite frequent exposure.

4. Pedagogical Practices and Materials

Researchers advocate for educators to create listening tasks that incorporate both formal and informal input. Activities like register-spotting, guided note-taking, and vocabulary contextualization assist students in navigating various language forms. Authentic lecture videos are highly recommended for use in the classroom

E. Discussion

The thematic results highlight how crucial it is to balance formal and informal English when developing academic listening abilities. Informal input can improve sociolinguistic awareness, reduce anxiety, and increase student participation. However, an excessive dependence on informal content does not sufficiently prepare students for the intricacies of academic discourse, especially in higher education where lectures require sophisticated processing skills. One important mediating factor is registering awareness. Learners are better able to predict meanings and deduce the speaker's intentions when they understand how register functions and why speakers change the degree of formality depending on their audience and purpose. This emphasizes how important it is to combine direct instruction on register signal recognition with real-world listening practice.

Exposure, awareness-raising exercises, and scaffolded metacognitive practices are therefore essential components of classroom approaches. Students develop independence in academic listening by keeping a close eye on their comprehension and responding appropriately to changes in register. Together, the research examined demonstrates that teaching design rather than just the type of input is the main determinant of achievement.

F. Pedagogical Implications

The findings advocate for the development of a systematic framework for courses focused on Academic Oral Receptive Skills:

- a) Begin with casual listening materials before advancing to more formal academic presentations.
- b) Explicitly instruct on register markers such as hedges, discourse markers, and lexical bundles.
- c) Utilize pre-listening activities to clarify the audience and level of formality.
- d) Promote the use of reflective listening journals to monitor strategy implementation.

Table 1 Sample 12-Week Learning Roadmap

Week	Input Focus	Strategy Focus
1–3	Conversational informal videos	Identifying context & speaker roles
4–7	Semi-formal interviews & academic podcasts	Detecting register shifts
8–12	University lectures & TED Talks	Academic note-taking & inference

Evaluation criteria for listening and register awareness (score range 0–4):

- a) Precision in recognizing register
- b) Quality of understanding
- c) Application of strategies
- d) Use of vocabulary from the input

These insights can be readily implemented in Mam Deasy’s classroom environment.

G. Conclusion

Successful academic listening demands that learners manage the intricate differences between formal and informal registers. The literature examined supports the idea that various registers contribute to distinct comprehension aspects: formal English promotes academic literacy, while informal English boosts engagement and confidence. Thus, an instructional method that balances explicit register training is essential. Future studies should assess the long-term effects of instruction focused on registers and investigate technology-driven learning solutions that offer scalable exposure to mixed registers for EFL learners across various environments.

This review is restricted to sources published in English between 2020 and 2025, which may overlook earlier foundational studies. Furthermore, the limited number of controlled intervention studies hampers broader conclusions regarding the effectiveness of register training. Subsequent reviews should include a wider range of language contexts and experimental studies with quantifiable learning outcomes

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