

Original Article

Non-Standard English and Register Variation in the Academic Writing of Students at a Philippine State University: A Qualitative Portfolio Case Study

Merlie M. Binay-an , Nathaniel A. Aliguyon , Denny B. Jamil 

Author Information:

Department of Arts and Languages, College of Arts and Sciences, Nueva Vizcaya State University, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines

Corresponding Author:

Nathaniel A. Aliguyon
naliguyon@nvsu.edu.ph

Article History:

Date received: June 11, 2026
Date revised: August 29, 2026
Date accepted: September 11, 2026

Recommended citation:

Binay-an, M., Aliguyon, N., & Jamil, D. (2026). Non-standard English and register variation in the academic writing of students at a Philippine state university: A qualitative portfolio case study. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 4(10), 239-249. <https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2026.357>

Abstract. This qualitative portfolio case study examined non-standard English (NSE) and register variation in the academic and professional writing of 150 engineering and human ecology students at a Philippine state university. It aimed to identify recurring NSE and register-related features, interpret them through sociolinguistic, interlanguage, and academic-literacy perspectives, and determine context-sensitive pedagogical responses. The researchers analyzed 662 usable outputs from five course-based writing activities and conducted five focus group discussions, using descriptive frequency counts and thematic analysis. Recurrence was defined as occurrence in at least 5% of analyzable outputs for an activity and in at least five unique writers. Findings revealed three major analytic groups: digital-register forms, grammatical and formulaic instability, and recognized spelling variation across English standards. Among counted features, 55 of 143 outputs used “with regards to,” while 23 of 130 used “If I am ... I will.” Digital forms were treated as illustrative rather than recurrent because form-level counts were unavailable. The study found that repeated forms did not automatically establish vernacular membership, digital causation, or first-language transfer. Results support contrastive register instruction, explicit form-meaning teaching, guided revision, and consistent application of recognized English conventions in multilingual academic writing, while avoiding simplistic deficit interpretations of students’ legitimate linguistic variation.

Keywords: *Academic literacy; Digital discourse; Non-standard English; Register awareness; Vernacular subculture.*

Academic writing in a multilingual university demands more than grammatical accuracy. Students must learn how genre, audience, disciplinary purpose, and institutional convention shape what counts as appropriate written English (Matsuda & Silva, 2010; Hyland, 2019). For purposes of this study, non-standard English refers to forms that depart from the Standard American English convention adopted in the technical writing and business communication courses under examination. The label is used analytically and does not mean that a student’s language is inherently defective. A departure may be dialect-related, contextually informal, developmentally unstable, or a legitimate form from another recognized English standard.

This distinction is necessary because the study of non-standard English (NSE) in academic writing sits between

sociolinguistic and applied-linguistic explanations. Sociolinguistic research explains how recurring forms may acquire social meaning through group affiliation and shared practices (Cheshire, 1982; Eckert, 2000). Research on students' writing, however, cautions against assuming that every departure from school conventions comes from dialect or vernacular culture. Some features are better explained by incomplete control of academic register, educational experience, or writing development (Snell & Andrews, 2017; Constantinou & Chambers, 2020; Snell & Cushing, 2022). Interlanguage and possible first-language influence add a cognitive-developmental explanation, but these cannot be assigned to a particular form without evidence from the learners' language backgrounds and the structure being examined (Selinker, 1972; Hashim et al., 2024).

Digital communication further complicates the issue. Messaging applications and social-media environments make abbreviations, symbolic substitutions, flexible capitalization, and compressed expressions familiar to students. Asafo-Adjei et al. (2023) reported a connection between social-media practices and writing performance in one Ghanaian ESL setting. Squires (2010), conversely, showed that 'internet language' is also an ideological register whose features are widely recognized even when their actual distribution is uneven. A written form resembling digital discourse therefore supports a contextual interpretation, but it does not by itself prove that digital communication caused the form.

Philippine research provides a closer empirical context. Tuquib and Bacus (2024) identified Netspeak features in student academic writing in Cebu, while Monderin and Go (2021) documented abbreviations and other Netspeak lexical patterns in Filipino social-media data. These studies establish the local availability of a recognizable digital register, but they do not show that a particular form in the present portfolios originated in digital interaction. Philippine academic-writing research also shows why variation, register, and developmental control should be kept analytically separate. Tocalo et al. (2022) documented changing informality in academic writing by Filipino ESL researchers, Arboleda (2022) examined recurring rhetorical and linguistic patterns in Filipino graduate research abstracts, and Hernandez (2024) identified a possible Philippine English subject-verb agreement innovation across disciplinary research articles. Recent local studies further show that academic writing can respond to explicit instructional and feedback conditions (Tan & Bensal, 2022; Gavina & Ibay-Pamo, 2024).

The present case is situated at a Philippine state university, where students enter English-medium writing courses from diverse multilingual and ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Engineering and human ecology are treated as two embedded disciplinary contexts because both require formal academic and professional communication, yet their course tasks emphasize different communicative purposes. In the courses examined, technical writing tasks foregrounded procedural and professional communication, while business communication tasks foregrounded organizational and applied professional communication. The study does not test or claim disciplinary differences between the programs. Existing studies have examined dialect, digital writing, first-language (L1) influence, and academic literacy, but their connections remain insufficiently explained in actual writing portfolios from these two Philippine university contexts. The study addresses this gap by identifying recurring candidate NSE and register-related features, determining which explanations the available evidence supports, and translating the resulting distinctions into context-sensitive instruction.

The study brings together Cheshire's (1982) account of vernacular subculture, Eckert's (2000) view of linguistic variation as social practice, Selinker's (1972) interlanguage construct, and academic-literacy or second-language-writing perspectives (Matsuda & Silva, 2010; Hyland, 2019). These theories are not presented as separate descriptions of the same problem. They operate at connected levels where social practice explains how forms become familiar and socially meaningful; interlanguage and academic literacy explain developing control of grammar, genre, audience, and register; and institutional or disciplinary expectations determine whether a form is appropriate for a particular academic or professional task.

Cheshire's (1982) concept of vernacular subculture is used as a sensitizing lens, not as a ready-made label for the participants. Cheshire's original work concerned a locally bounded adolescent speech community and linked vernacular forms with adherence to group norms. The students in the present study cannot be assumed to constitute an equivalent or homogeneous subculture. A form is therefore interpreted as socially patterned only when it meets the study's recurrence rule across writers and when the portfolio context or focus group discussion (FGD) accounts connect it with shared peer, classroom, institutional, or digital practice. Recurrence alone does not establish a vernacular norm.

Eckert's (2000) social-practice lens supplies the mechanism connecting everyday participation and written choices. It directs the analysis toward what students repeatedly do (message peers, participate in classroom routines, encounter institutional phrases, and write for course requirements) instead of treating age, program, or multilingual background as automatic causes. Interlanguage and academic literacy provide the developmental explanation. A mixed conditional, inconsistent capitalization, or unstable formulaic expression can reflect a learner's evolving linguistic system, incomplete control of the meaning required by the prompt, or partial acquisition of institutional writing conventions (Selinker, 1972; Hyland, 2019). L1 influence remains a legitimate possibility, but the present study did not conduct language-specific contrastive analysis. It therefore does not attribute any observed feature directly to the participants' first languages. This boundary integrates cognitive and social perspectives without allowing either explanation to absorb all of the evidence.

The conceptual model is explanatory because each layer performs a distinct analytic function. Corroborated shared practices may help explain the social availability or familiarity of a form. Interlanguage and academic-literacy development account for the writer's shifting control of form, meaning, genre, and register. Institutional and disciplinary expectations account for how the form is evaluated in a specific task. The interaction among these layers explains why the same written feature can be socially familiar, developmentally unstable, and contextually inappropriate at the same time.

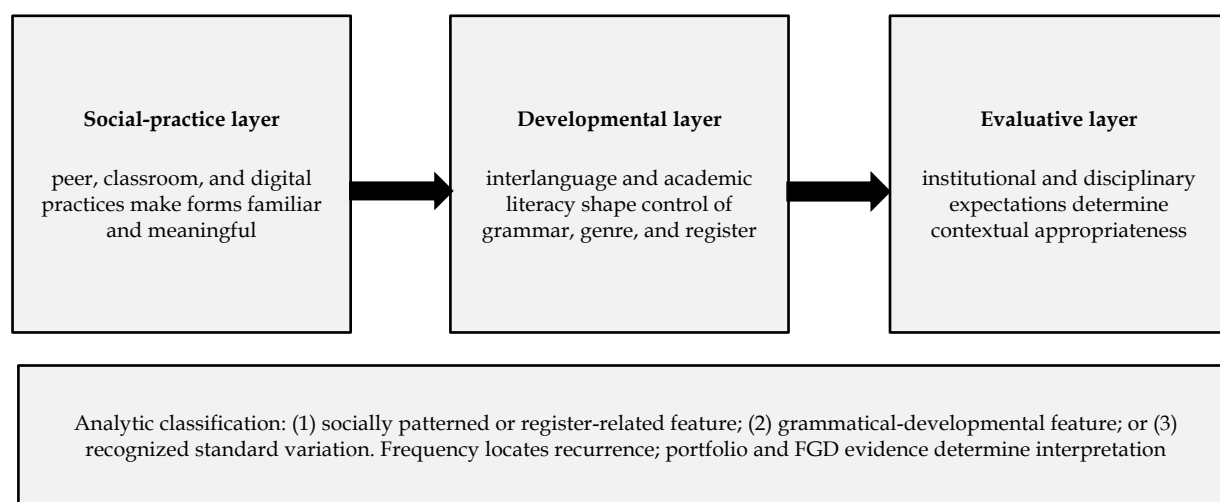


Figure 1. *Conceptual Model Guiding the Classification and Interpretation of Recurring Written Features*

The framework was applied through a sequence of decision rules. First, for article-level reporting, a form was treated as recurrent when it appeared in at least 5% of the analyzable outputs for the relevant activity and in at least five unique writers. This author-defined screening rule was used to remove one-off cases and to apply the same minimum rule across activities with different numbers of usable outputs. It is descriptive only and is not a population-prevalence standard. Forms for which the original coding archive did not retain form-level counts could still be discussed as examples of register use, but they were not labeled recurrent findings. Second, a social-practice interpretation was retained only when the distribution of the form and the available contextual evidence supported an association with peer, classroom, institutional, or digital practice. Third, a grammatical-developmental or interlanguage interpretation was used when the feature involved unstable tense, clause relations, capitalization, or form-meaning control and lacked evidence of a shared social norm. Fourth, a form recognized in another major English standard was classified as standard variation, not NSE.

Eckert's lens was therefore applied to the samples by examining the practice in which a form was normally functional, the formal task into which it moved, and the evidence supporting that movement. Cheshire's lens was applied only to patterned forms supported by shared-practice evidence. Interlanguage and academic literacy were applied to grammatical or register instability. Frequency counts served as locating devices for the counted features: they identified forms requiring closer interpretation but did not establish cause, prevalence in the wider student population, or differences between the two programs. Digital-register forms lacking retained form-level

counts were treated illustratively and were not used to make recurrence or shared-writer claims.

The same classification also guides pedagogy. A socially familiar but contextually misplaced form calls for contrastive register instruction. An unstable grammatical construction calls for explicit form-meaning teaching, practice, and guided revision. A recognized spelling variant calls for consistency with the governing style and should not be stigmatized as an error. In this manner, sociolinguistic interpretation leads directly to instructional decisions.

Guided by the synthesized framework and its operational rules, the study addressed the following research questions: What candidate non-standard English and register-related features recur in the academic and professional writing outputs of engineering and human ecology students? How are the documented features interpreted in relation to recognizable registers, developing interlanguage and academic literacy, and exposure to multiple English norms? What context-sensitive pedagogical responses follow from the sociolinguistic and developmental classification of these features?

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed an interpretivist qualitative case study with a descriptive orientation. The case was bounded by one state university, two writing courses, two intact classes, and the second semester of academic year 2024–2025. Engineering and human ecology served as embedded disciplinary contexts within the single case. A case study was appropriate because the inquiry sought a contextual explanation of recurring language features in naturally occurring course writing, not causal testing or statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The unit of analysis was the recurring written language feature as it appeared across consented portfolio outputs and was interpreted against the meaning of the task, the surrounding text, and relevant FGD accounts. The interpretivist stance recognizes that a form acquires analytic meaning in relation to the writer's developing repertoire and the institutional setting in which it is evaluated. Frequency counts were retained only as descriptive scaffolding; the principal analytic work concerned the form, function, recurrence, context, and defensible explanation of each feature.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants were 150 students: 80 engineering students enrolled in technical writing and 70 human ecology students enrolled in business communication during the second semester of academic year 2024–2025. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used (Patton, 2015). Inclusion required enrollment in the relevant course, completion of the writing activities included in the corpus, and voluntary consent to use the submitted outputs for research.

The two programs were treated as embedded disciplinary contexts, not as groups for comparative statistical analysis and not because they represent all university disciplines. Engineering students completed technical-writing tasks that emphasized procedural and professional communication, while human ecology students completed business-communication tasks with organizational and applied professional purposes. The distinction provides context for task interpretation only. No program-level difference is inferred from the frequency counts.

The use of intact classes introduced selection and context bias. The participants were not randomly selected and shared teachers, classroom routines, task prompts, and assessment expectations that could influence their writing. These conditions strengthen the contextual account of the bounded classroom case but restrict transferability beyond the two courses. The reported frequencies are therefore not estimates of population prevalence.

The portfolio corpus was defined by the boundaries of the case and was not based on a statistical sample-size formula. Five FGDs were used to add context to the portfolio findings. They were conducted to help the researchers understand students' writing and language experiences and were not used to claim statistical representation or formal saturation.

Data Sources and Research Instruments

The primary data source was the writing portfolio. The participant-level corpus comprised 150 consented student portfolio records containing course-based academic, technical, or business-writing activities completed during

normal instruction, including available drafts and final versions. For the five focal activities reported quantitatively, each student could contribute at most one analyzable output per activity. The analyzable denominators were 130 for Activity 1, 128 for Activity 2, 143 for Activity 3, 133 for Activity 4, and 128 for Activity 5, for a total of 662 task outputs across the five activities. Activity 1 involved a professional leadership scenario, Activity 2 a hypothetical response to an erroneous letter, Activity 3 professional or business expressions, and Activities 4 and 5 spelling variation in course-based writing. The total of 662 counts outputs, not unique students, because the same student could contribute one output to more than one activity.

The original data records showed how many student outputs were usable for each activity and how many times each language feature appeared. However, they did not contain a reliable total word count for the whole collection or an exact count of all draft and final files. Because these records were incomplete, the researchers did not estimate or recreate the missing numbers. Drafts were considered when available, but the frequency counts in the Results were based on the usable final output for each specific activity.

Course-based rubrics were used for instructional assessment, while the research analysis used a researcher-developed feature-classification guide derived from the conceptual framework. Standard American English served as the courses' reference convention for grammar, mechanics, and usage, and APA Style requirements were considered when a task required academic documentation. A form was not coded as erroneous merely because it differed from American spelling. Recognized British or international variants were recorded separately and examined as matters of style consistency.

A researcher-developed semi-structured FGD guide elicited students' experiences in academic writing, perceptions of standard and non-standard forms, peer and digital communication practices, and views on possible instructional responses. The FGDs did not serve as a test that mechanically confirmed the portfolio findings. They contextualized, qualified, or challenged the researchers' initial interpretations of the written features.

Data Gathering Procedure

After institutional approval, data were gathered during the approved period within the academic year 2024–2025. Students completed the writing activities as regular course requirements. Research participation concerned only the use of those outputs and participation in the FGDs. Students were informed that declining research participation would not affect their grades, standing, or relationship with the teacher-researchers.

Only outputs covered by consent were included in the corpus. Identifying information was removed before excerpts were used in analysis or reporting. The teacher-researchers compiled the eligible portfolios, identified candidate features, and conducted five FGDs with willing participants who had submitted complete portfolios. The discussions occurred toward the final stage so that the questions could respond to patterns already observed in the writing. The five FGDs were conducted on March 7, March 28, April 4, April 25, and May 17, 2025. Approximately 5 to 10 students joined each session, or about 25 to 50 participant attendances across the five discussions. Participants came from the engineering and human ecology classes included in the case. The exact number of unique FGD participants and the Engineering/Human Ecology breakdown for each session were not separately distinguished. Each discussion lasted about 15 to 20 minutes and was conducted in person in the classroom. Students could speak in Filipino, English, or a combination of both languages to express their experiences and ideas naturally. The teacher-researchers facilitated the discussions. The exchanges were recorded with the students' knowledge and permission and were replayed when necessary to check their responses. The researchers noted and coded relevant responses from the recordings together with the portfolio patterns. Relevant Filipino responses used in the analysis or reporting were translated into English. The available record does not show that complete verbatim transcripts were prepared for every session, so the study does not claim that they were.

The teacher-researcher role created a methodological and ethical challenge. The teacher-researchers conducted the discussions, so students could withhold language practices they considered informal or incorrect, or provide answers they believed their teachers preferred. During the FGDs, the researchers stated that the inquiry concerned how academic writing develops within the students' sociolinguistic context and was not intended to shame their language use. Students were reminded that research participation and their responses did not affect course grades. Voluntary inclusion, anonymization, and the separation of grading from research use reduced the pressure arising from the classroom relationship, although the teacher-student power asymmetry remained a limitation of the

case.

For descriptive counting, each identified feature was recorded once for every analyzable output in which it appeared, regardless of repeated occurrences within that output. Because the number of valid submissions differed by activity, the denominator reported for each pattern is the number of analyzable outputs for that task. Outputs were excluded from a task denominator when they were incomplete, unavailable in the retained portfolio record, or did not contain an analyzable response for that activity. Within a focal activity, each analyzable output belonged to one writer; consequently, the output count and unique-writer count are numerically identical for each feature row. Across activities, however, the same writer could contribute multiple outputs, so the 662 analyzed task outputs do not represent 662 unique students. The counts were not used for inferential comparison between programs.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The analysis proceeded in two connected stages. First, the researchers inventoried candidate NSE and register-related features in the portfolios and grouped them provisionally as digital-discourse or register markers, grammatical-developmental patterns, lexical or formulaic expressions, and orthographic or standard-variety differences. For the counted features, recurrence was operationalized as at least 5% of analyzable outputs for the relevant activity and at least five unique writers. For Activity 1, the three conditional rows were coded hierarchically and mutually exclusively: mixed were + will constructions were assigned first; remaining lowercase first-conditional constructions were assigned second; and remaining capitalized first-conditional constructions were assigned third. Lowercase *i* could still be noted as a secondary orthographic property, but the same Activity 1 output was not counted in more than one conditional row. Outside that conditional block, an output could contribute to more than one feature row when distinct features occurred because the rows represent features; they are not exclusive writer groups.

Second, the portfolio and FGD data were examined through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) recursive phases of familiarization, initial coding, category development, review, definition, and reporting. The conceptual model supplied guiding questions, not predetermined conclusions: Was the form recurrent under the reporting rule? Was it connected by the available evidence to a shared practice? Did it involve unstable grammatical meaning or register control? Was it accepted in another English standard? FGD codes were used to contextualize, qualify, or challenge portfolio interpretations; they were not used to infer a digital origin when participants had not linked a particular form to their own communicative practices. This sequence integrated the frequency counts into interpretation instead of treating the counts as findings in themselves.

Trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation between portfolios and FGD accounts, peer debriefing among the researchers, comparison of coded examples and category definitions, and review of discrepant cases. Interpretations were revised when the task context or a contrary example did not support the initial classification. The researchers' analytic discussions were used to interrogate assumptions and document reasons for retaining or changing a category; they were not treated as a mechanical intercoder-reliability test. These procedures are consistent with the transparency and trustworthiness principles discussed by Nowell et al. (2017).

Reflexivity was maintained throughout coding. The researchers recognized that their training in Standard American English and their roles as writing teachers could lead them to treat every departure as a deficiency. The analysis therefore separated contextual inappropriateness from linguistic illegitimacy, recorded recognized British forms as standard variation, examined the meaning required by the task before classifying conditional structures, and withheld claims of digital or L1 causation when the evidence did not support them.

Ethics Considerations

The researchers secured informed consent before including any student output or FGD contribution in the study. The writing activities remained part of normal course requirements, but permission to use those activities as research data was voluntary and separate from course evaluation. Refusal carried no academic penalty. Identifying information was removed from written outputs and FGD excerpts, and handwritten examples used as figures were visually anonymized. The study followed the institutional processes required for the proposal, approval, and conduct of internally initiated research. Recruitment and consent are not represented as independent of the teacher-researcher relationship; instead, research use of course materials was made voluntary

and separate from grading, refusal carried no academic penalty, and the power relationship was explicitly treated as a methodological limitation. Further, ethical considerations for this paper primarily included the institutional guidelines.

Results and Discussion

Digital-Register Forms: Illustrative Evidence and Interpretive Limits

Forms commonly associated with digitally mediated communication appeared in the portfolios as symbolic substitutions, abbreviations, shortened expressions, and inconsistent capitalization. The archived coding record did not retain form-by-form output-level and writer-level counts for @, ATM, OTW, HM, Y, idk, and FYI. These forms are therefore presented here as illustrative evidence of a recognizable digital register, not as recurrent corpus-level findings and not as evidence that the practice was shared across writers.

One salient example was the use of @ for the preposition at, as shown in Figure 2. The surrounding sentence was otherwise an extended response to a professional scenario. The symbol performed efficiently in messaging and online addresses, yet its placement in the course output did not fit the formal written register required by the task.

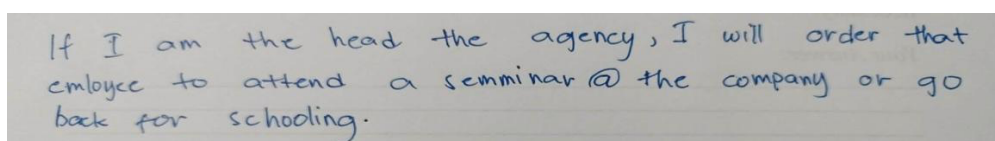


Figure 2. A Written Output Using "@" for "at"

The portfolios also contained ATM (at the moment), OTW (on the way), HM (how much), Y (why), idk (I do not know), and FYI (for your information), often without stable capitalization. Figure 3 illustrates the use of ATM at the opening of a formal response. These forms are conventional and intelligible in digital interaction, but the retained screenshots establish occurrence only. Because form-level counts were not preserved, the examples cannot support a claim that any one digital form was recurrent or shared across writers.

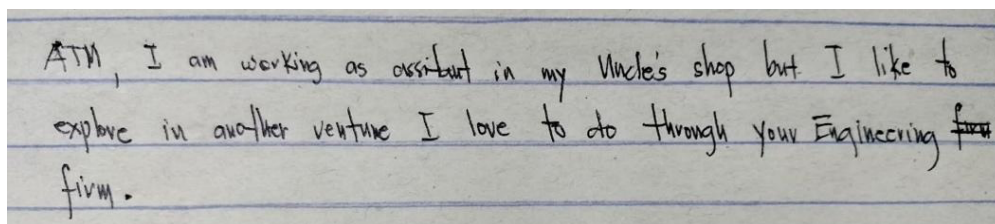


Figure 3. A Written Output Using "ATM" for "at the moment"

Eckert's (2000) social-practice lens offers a possible explanation for how such forms can become familiar through recurring communicative activities. The available FGD excerpts, however, do not connect these specific forms to participants' actual peer or digital practices. Cheshire's (1982) vernacular-subculture lens is therefore not used to establish a shared vernacular norm for these examples. The study did not observe the participants' online exchanges or trace each written form to a specific platform.

Asafo-Adjei et al. (2023) interpreted social-media participation as adversely affecting writing performance in their Ghanaian case. Squires (2010), in contrast, demonstrated that 'internet language' is socially enregistered: people recognize a cluster of features as digital even when actual users do not employ all of them uniformly. The present findings sit between these positions. Digital forms clearly entered some formal outputs, but the defensible explanation is register instability within a broader academic-literacy ecology, not a general claim that social media causes poor writing.

Grammatical and Formulaic Features

The second pattern involved conditional constructions, capitalization, and formulaic expressions. Table 1 presents the recurrence of these forms together with their analytic classification. The added classification is important because the same surface form can be acceptable under one meaning and unsuitable under another. Frequency

alone cannot settle that distinction.

Table 1. *Recurring Grammatical and Formulaic Features in Students' Written Activities*

Activity	Observed form	Outputs, <i>n/N</i>	Analytic classification	Unique writers, <i>n</i>
1	"If I am the head of the company, I will..." (capitalized first conditional)	23/130	Possible first-conditional framing. Its appropriateness depends on whether the prompt presents a real future possibility or an unreal hypothetical.	23
1	"If i am the head of the company..." (lowercase first conditional; excludes were + will)	10/130	Lowercase i is an orthographic departure. The conditional itself can be acceptable under a real-possibility reading.	10
1	"If i were the head of the company, i will..."	17/130	Mixed conditional (were + will) and lowercase i; inconsistent with the counterfactual relation expected in edited academic English.	17
2	"If i receive an erroneous letter, i will feel..."	11/128	First conditional plus lowercase i. Grammatically possible, but misaligned when the task explicitly requires an unreal hypothetical response.	11
3	"With regards to..."	55/143	A common formulaic variant; edited academic prose generally prefers with regard to or regarding.	55
3	"As per..."	8/143	A recognized but marked institutional expression; not NSE solely by form, although a simpler alternative can better suit the task.	8

Note. *N* is the number of valid, analyzable outputs for the specific task and varies because incomplete, unavailable, or non-analyzable task responses were excluded. A feature was counted once per output. Within a focal activity, one output came from one writer, so output *n* equals unique-writer *n* for each row. The three Activity 1 conditional rows are mutually exclusive under the coding hierarchy described in the Methodology. Distinct feature rows outside that block may overlap when the same output contains more than one feature. Counts are descriptive and do not represent inferential comparisons.

Activity 1 asked students to respond to a professional scenario beginning with the idea of being the head of a company or agency. Twenty-three of 130 analyzable outputs used 'If I am ... I will' with standard capitalization, ten used a first-conditional construction with lowercase *i*, and seventeen combined were with will and lowercase *i*. English conditionals express the writer's construal of possibility. 'If I am ... I will' is grammatical when the writer frames the situation as a possible future condition; 'If I were ... I would' is expected when the prompt requires an unreal or counterfactual stance. The mixed form 'If I were ... I will' remains structurally inconsistent because the two clauses encode different conditional relations.

The lowercase first-person pronoun occurred across the conditional examples and elsewhere in the portfolios, as shown in Figure 4. Unlike the choice between first and second conditional, lowercase *i* is not dependent on the imagined meaning of the prompt. It is an orthographic and editing departure from formal English convention. Its recurrence can reflect weak proofreading or incomplete automatization of written conventions. Because the available evidence does not link this feature directly to participants' digital practices, no digital-causation claim is assigned to it.

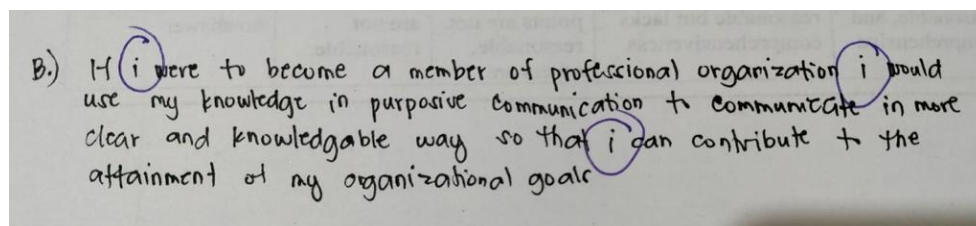


Figure 4. *A Written Output Using Lowercase "i" for the Pronoun "I"*

The conditional pattern is more defensibly explained through interlanguage and academic-literacy development than through vernacular subculture alone. Selinker's (1972) interlanguage construct recognizes that learner language is systematic but variable while form-meaning relations are still developing. Hyland (2019) likewise places grammar within genre, audience, and disciplinary purpose. In this case, students appeared to rely on familiar will constructions while negotiating the unreal or hypothetical meaning required by some prompts. The study does not attribute the pattern directly to L1 transfer because the participants' first languages were not

subjected to contrastive analysis. Hashim et al. (2024) establish L1 influence as a possible source of writing difficulty in their specific Pakistani university context, but that study does not supply evidence for the particular language backgrounds and conditional forms in this corpus.

Formulaic expressions required a different interpretation. Fifty-five of 143 outputs used with regards to and eight used as per. With regards to is widespread but edited academic prose ordinarily favors with regard to or regarding. As per is grammatically established in institutional and commercial writing, although it can sound bureaucratic or unnecessarily formal. The recurrence of these expressions therefore shows partial acquisition of institutional discourse, not a single category of grammatical deficiency. Students had encountered forms associated with formal communication but had not yet developed stable control over their grammatical shape, stylistic force, and suitability for a specific task.

This result qualifies the deficit interpretation of NSE. Constantinou and Chambers (2020) found that non-standard features in students' writing varied over time and by attainment, while Snell and Andrews (2017) concluded that evidence linking regional dialect directly to literacy development remains limited and uneven. Snell and Cushing (2022) further showed how teachers can over-attribute writing problems to the way students speak. The present corpus similarly contains features that look socially familiar, but grammatical development, task interpretation, editing practice, and institutional exposure often provide the stronger explanation.

Recognized Spelling Variation and Style Consistency

The third pattern involved spelling forms associated with different recognized English standards. These forms were retained in the analysis because they departed from the Standard American English convention used in the courses, but they were not classified as NSE. Table 2 records their frequency and status.

Table 2. *Variations in English Spelling in Students' Written Outputs*

Activity	Spelling form	Outputs, <i>n/N</i>	Status under the coding rule	Unique writers, <i>n</i>
2	<i>dialogue</i>	16/128	Standard spelling in major English varieties; dialog is also used, particularly in computing contexts.	16
4	<i>acknowledgement</i>	112/133	Recognized variant of acknowledgment; the latter is commonly preferred in American-edited prose.	112
4	<i>enrolment</i>	92/133	British spelling; American convention generally uses enrollment.	92
5	<i>labelling</i>	11/128	British spelling; American convention generally uses labeling.	11

Note. *N* is the number of valid, analyzable outputs for each task. Within a focal activity, one output came from one writer, so output *n* equals unique-writer *n* for each spelling row. The forms are recognized variants and were separated from NSE during coding.

The high recurrence of acknowledgement and enrolment is consistent with exposure to British or international conventions, but it does not establish the source of that exposure. Labelling likewise represents a recognized British spelling variant. Dialogue is standard in American English as well as other major English varieties, so it should not be treated simply as a departure from Standard American English. Peters (2004) documents variation across British, American, and international English, while Ortega (2019) cautions against monolingual and native-speaker assumptions in the study of multilingual development. In the present case, the issue is document-level consistency with an adopted style, not the legitimacy of the form itself.

This finding also prevents the theoretical framework from becoming a device for forcing every difference into vernacular subculture. The spelling variants were not interpreted as products of peer or digital practice because no such explanation was necessary. They were classified through the evaluative layer of the model: globally recognized resources entered a course environment governed by an American-English reference convention. Instruction should therefore explain the governing style and require consistency while recognizing the variants as legitimate English.

Integrated Interpretation and Pedagogical Response

Across the three groups of features, the analysis produced one central theme: students were developing the ability

to move among familiar language resources, grammatical meanings, and institutional expectations. The digital abbreviations and symbols illustrate resources recognizable from a digital register but could not be treated as recurrent corpus-level findings because form-level counts were not retained. Mixed conditionals and lowercase *i* reflected unstable form-meaning and editing control. British spelling variants were legitimate forms that required consistency and were not corrected as NSE. For the counted grammatical, formulaic, and spelling features, frequency and writer counts established recurrence under the reporting rule; the conceptual model then guided the interpretation of what that recurrence could and could not mean.

The first pedagogical response is contrastive register instruction. Teachers can present paired examples from anonymized student writing and ask what changes when a message, classroom response, technical report, or business letter addresses a different audience. Symbols and abbreviations should be discussed in terms of function and setting, not condemned as inherently poor language. This response follows directly from the social-practice layer of the framework.

The second response is explicit form-meaning teaching followed by guided revision. Conditional structures should be taught through the distinction among real possibility, hypothetical distance, and counterfactual meaning, not through the mechanical replacement of *will* with *would*. Formulaic expressions should be compared according to grammatical form, register, and concision. Students should then revise their own sentences and explain the meaning they intended. This response follows from the interlanguage and academic-literacy layer.

The third response is style-consistency instruction. Students should be shown that enrolment and enrollment are legitimate under different conventions, while a particular academic or professional document may require one form throughout. This response follows from the evaluative layer and avoids penalizing students for exposure to global Englishes.

The students' comments support this explicit approach. One participant stated, 'It would be better sana kung isasali ang topic na ito sa mga discussions para alam namin agad' [It would be better if this topic were included in the discussions so that we would know it immediately] (P3, FGD). Another asked teachers to provide 'the list and the proper words that we should use in our activities' (P6, FGD), while a third suggested that the content become 'part of our module' (P1, FGD). These requests support a practical sequence: classify the feature, explain its grammatical or register function, provide context-appropriate alternatives, and require revision in an authentic task. These excerpts support the need for explicit instruction; they do not establish that the digital-register forms originated in participants' peer or online communication.

Such instruction remains sociolinguistically informed because it recognizes variation and social meaning, but it also remains accountable to academic and professional requirements. Snell and Cushing (2022) caution against policing non-standard English through unexamined deficit assumptions. In this study, avoiding deficit does not mean suspending standards. It means identifying which standard applies, explaining why it applies, and distinguishing contextual inappropriateness from linguistic illegitimacy.

Conclusion

This study examined recurring candidate NSE and register-related features, together with illustrative digital-register forms, in the course writing of engineering and human ecology students at one Philippine state university. The portfolios contained conditional and capitalization patterns, formulaic institutional expressions, spelling differences, and examples of digital-register forms. These forms did not constitute one undifferentiated category of error.

The synthesized framework explained the differences among them. Shared peer, classroom, or digital practices may help explain the familiarity and social availability of a form when such a connection is corroborated; for the digital examples in this corpus, the available evidence supports a register association but not a claim of shared practice or causal origin. Interlanguage and academic-literacy development accounted for unstable control of grammar, task meaning, and register. Institutional and disciplinary expectations determined whether a feature was contextually unsuitable or simply a recognized standard variant. Recurrence located the counted patterns; contextual and corroborating evidence determined their interpretation.

The findings support an instructional response grounded in classification. Digital forms require contrastive register teaching. Conditional and formulaic patterns require explicit form-meaning instruction and guided revision. British or international spelling variants require consistency with the governing style, not correction as illegitimate English. This approach preserves academic and professional standards while respecting the multilingual resources students bring to writing.

The study remains bounded by two intact classes, two programs, one university, and course-based tasks. Shared teachers, prompts, and assessment routines shaped the corpus, and the study did not directly observe students' digital interaction or conduct language-specific contrastive analysis. The original coding archive also did not retain form-level counts for the digital-register examples, a reliable corpus-wide word count, or a separate exact draft-versus-final file tally. For the FGDs, the exact unique-participant total and the program breakdown for each session were not separately retained. These values were not recreated. Future research can compare additional disciplines and institutions, collect direct evidence of peer and digital practices, preserve a fully auditable corpus inventory, and examine particular first-language groups without presuming transfer in advance.

Contributions of Authors

The authors contributed to the study conception, project implementation, data gathering, data analysis, institutional submission, and preparation of the manuscript.

Funding

The study arose from an institutionally approved university research project with a recorded approved budget of PHP 2,700.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

The researchers thank the Nueva Vizcaya State University for the opportunity and institutional support to conduct the study.

References

- Arboleda, A.D.B. (2022). Move analysis of thesis and dissertation abstracts in one Philippine graduate institute. *Premise: Journal of English Education and Applied Linguistics*, 11(3), 576–594. <https://doi.org/10.24127/pj.v11i3.5437>
- Asafo-Adjei, R., Mensah, R.O., Klu, E.K., & Swanzy-Impraim, E. (2023). Social media and English language writing performances of a Ghanaian ESL class: The nexus. *Cogent Education*, 10(1), Article 2189388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2189388>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cheshire, J. (1982). Linguistic variation and social function. In S. Romaine (Ed.), *Sociolinguistic Variation in Speech Communities* (pp. 153–166). Edward Arnold.
- Constantinou, F., & Chambers, L. (2020). Non-standard English in UK students' writing over time. *Language and Education*, 34(1), 22–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2019.1702996>
- Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C.N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Eckert, P. (2000). *Linguistic variation as social practice: The linguistic construction of identity in Belten High*. Blackwell.
- Gavina, M.A.T., & Ibay-Pamo, L. (2024). Effect of automated writing evaluation in higher education academic writing performance. *EDULANGUE*, 6(2), 118–137. <https://doi.org/10.20414/edulangue.v6i2.8300>
- Hashim, S., Samad, A., & Alamgeer, H. (2024). Influence of L1 on the academic writing skills of undergraduate students of English: A case study of Thal University Bhakkar. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 15–25. [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024\(5-1\)02](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024(5-1)02)
- Hernandez, H.P. (2024). Does Philippine English subject-verb agreement exist in academic writing? The case of research articles across disciplines. *Asian Englishes*, 26(2), 337–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2023.2222347>
- Hyland, K. (2019). *Second language writing* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Matsuda, P.K., & Silva, T. (2010). Writing. In N. Schmitt (Ed.), *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics* (2nd ed., pp. 232–246). Hodder Education.
- Monderin, C.P., & Go, M. (2021). Emerging Netspeak word choices in social media on Filipino pop culture. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 4(6), 49–61. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2021.4.6.7>
- Nowell, L., Norris, J., White, D., & Moules, N. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Ortega, L. (2019). SLA and the study of equitable multilingualism. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(S1), 23–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12525>
- Patton, M.Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Peters, P. (2004). *The Cambridge guide to English usage*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511487040>
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 10(1–4), 209–232. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1972.10.1-4.209>
- Snell, J., & Andrews, R. (2017). To what extent does a regional dialect and accent impact on the development of reading and writing skills? *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 47(3), 297–313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2016.1159660>
- Snell, J., & Cushing, I. (2022). 'A lot of them write how they speak': Policy, pedagogy, and the policing of 'nonstandard' English. *Literacy*, 56(3), 199–211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12298>
- Squires, L. (2010). Enregistering internet language. *Language in Society*, 39(4), 457–492. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404510000412>
- Tan, L.N., & Bensal, E.R. (2022). Effects of diametric motivational approach on Filipino students' academic writing proficiency: A mediation analysis. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 19(3), 797–817. <https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2022.19.3.4.797>
- Tocalo, A.W., Racman, S., Guiamelon, K.N.A., & Mama, B. (2022). Is Filipino ESL academic writing becoming more informal? *PASAA*, 64, 99–125. <https://doi.org/10.58837/CHUIA.PASAA.64.1.5>
- Tuquib, J., & Bacus, R. (2024). Netspeak in students' academic writing: A case in the Philippines. *The New English Teacher*, 18(1), 1–14. <https://assumptionjournal.au.edu/index.php/newEnglishTeacher/article/view/7350>