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How Social Background Shapes Language Register: The Moderating Role of Cultural Awareness in Indonesian EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

Language register variation in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is often influenced by social, psychological, and cultural factors that shape how learners understand and adapt language to communication contexts. In Indonesia, differences in social backgrounds, such as family education level, environmental literacy, and access to learning resources, contribute to variations in students' ability to use formal, informal, and academic registers. Meanwhile, cultural awareness is increasingly recognized as important because it helps learners interpret communication norms across situations. However, its moderating role in the relationship between social background and register use has not been widely studied. This study used a narrative review of literature published between 2020 and 2025 to examine the relationship between these three variables. The selection process involved reviewing the relevance of titles, abstracts, and full text, followed by thematic analysis. The synthesis of results indicates that social background influences language exposure and register preference, while psychological factors and cultural identity enhance communication flexibility. Cultural awareness has been shown to support register shifting and can strengthen or neutralize the influence of social background on register use accuracy. Empirical evidence regarding this moderation is still limited, requiring further research. This study emphasizes the need for integration of cultural education and pragmatic training in EFL learning to improve register sensitivity and the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords : language register, social background, cultural awareness, Indonesian EFL, narrative review

INTRODUCTION

Language register variation in EFL learners is influenced by various social factors that shape their pragmatic competence. Aspects such as the level of formality, lexical choice, and discourse structure appropriate to the social context depend not only on linguistic ability alone but also on the social background that shapes the learner's language experience. Factors such as social class, parental education, and communication environment significantly contribute to an individual's register repertoire through the diverse language experiences and exposure they acquire throughout their linguistic development (Tao & Yu, 2024) . Psychological factors such as foreign language anxiety, self-confidence, and emotional intelligence also influence the ability to choose the right register. Classroom climate and teamwork play important mediators in reducing this anxiety and increasing student engagement in context-appropriate language use (Jouan & Hallot, 2022) .

In the Indonesian context, the influence of social factors on register competence appears increasingly complex. Research shows that socioeconomic background, supportive learning environments, and the availability of learning resources contribute significantly to successful English learning and students' ability to adapt language to diverse communication situations (Azzahra & Purnawan, 2025) . Furthermore, cultural

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identity and personality characteristics influence communication readiness and courage, which are closely related to the ability to choose the right register (Amalia et al., 2024; Burhanuddin et al., 2025) . EFL teachers in Indonesia also emphasize that pragmatic socialization, including understanding social norms and politeness, is a crucial part of developing students' pragmatic competence, which is closely related to register mastery (Ariani et al., 2021) . The experience of online learning during the pandemic also had a demotivating impact, affecting language performance and students' accuracy in adapting register to the context (Iftanti et al., 2023) .

The influence of social background on variations in register use is increasingly apparent through differences in language exposure and communication environments. Students from families with strong English literacy are generally more accustomed to using formal registers, while those who interact more in digital spaces tend to use informal or colloquial registers (Azzahra & Purnawan, 2025) . This linguistic experience continues to develop through social interactions, academic learning, and broader cultural exposure (Ariani et al., 2021) . An individual's cultural identity and personality also shape communication readiness, thus influencing register selection according to the social context encountered (Burhanuddin et al., 2025) . This suggests that developing pragmatic competence and an understanding of social norms in English learning is essential to helping learners adapt registers appropriately in various communication situations (Ariani et al., 2021) .

In the relationship between social background and register competence, *cultural awareness* plays a crucial role as a facilitating factor in understanding the cultural and social context of communication. Cultural awareness helps learners understand prevailing norms, values, and communication practices, enabling them to adapt registers more appropriately, for example, shifting from an informal digital register to an academic register with greater pragmatic sensitivity (Atmojo & Putra, 2022) . Without adequate *cultural awareness* , learners are prone to register selection errors, such as bringing an informal style of language into academic situations, which can result in less effective communication (Maulana, 2020) . However, research that comprehensively combines social background, register competence, and *cultural awareness* in a single integrated study is still limited, particularly in the Indonesian context (Munandar & Newton, 2021) . With Indonesia's highly diverse social background and the development of the digital ecosystem, the challenges of developing register competence are becoming increasingly complex and require more intensive integration of cultural aspects into the EFL curriculum (Hapsari et al., 2025) . Therefore, developing pedagogy that is responsive to cultural diversity and increasing *cultural awareness* is very important to support the ability to adjust registers in various communication situations (Asrifan & Dewi, 2024) .

Based on this description, this article aims to illustrate how social background influences the use of *language registers* in EFL learners in Indonesia and examine the role of *cultural awareness* as a factor that can modify this relationship. This focus was chosen because most previous research only describes register variations without systematically linking them to learners' social characteristics. Meanwhile, studies on *cultural awareness* often focus on pragmatic aspects or intercultural competence without considering them as variables that can moderate the relationship between social background and register use. Furthermore, research that integrates these three variables within an analytical framework specifically developed for the Indonesian EFL context is still very limited. This article seeks to fill this gap by providing a more comprehensive understanding as a basis for developing English language pedagogy that is more sensitive to learners' social and cultural contexts.

METHOD

This study uses a *narrative review approach* to examine published research from 2020–2025 relevant to the influence of social background on *language register variation* and the role of *cultural awareness* in the context of EFL learning in Indonesia. The search process was conducted using keywords related to *language register* , social background, psychological and cultural factors, and *cultural awareness* . Initial selection was carried out by reading titles and abstracts, followed by a full review of articles that met thematic relevance. This approach was chosen because it allows for cross-disciplinary conceptual integration necessary for a comprehensive understanding of register use phenomena.

The literature analysis was conducted using a thematic strategy by identifying patterns, trends, and relationships between concepts emerging from various studies. Similar findings were grouped into main themes reflecting the influence of social background, the role of psychological factors and cultural identity, and the contribution of *cultural awareness* in determining the appropriateness of register use. The results of the analysis were then compiled into a synthetic narrative that illustrates the complex relationships between variables and under-explored research gaps, particularly regarding the moderating function of *cultural awareness* in the Indonesian EFL context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Influence of Social Background on Language Register Variation

Social background is the primary foundation influencing variations in language register use by EFL learners in Indonesia. Factors such as parental education, family literacy level, socioeconomic conditions, and the quality of the communication environment significantly contribute to learners' daily language exposure, thus shaping their tendencies to choose particular registers. Learners from families or schools with a strong literacy culture find it easier to master formal and academic registers, while those from social environments with limited language exposure tend to rely on informal and colloquial registers, which are familiar in everyday interactions and digital spaces (Muslimin & Suhartoyo, 2023) . This variation not only reflects differences in individual linguistic abilities but also illustrates how social context and language experience shape learners' linguistic preferences (Emilia & Hamied, 2022) .

A conducive learning environment and appropriate teaching strategies can expand learners' abilities to manage multiple language registers, enabling them to adapt to diverse communication demands (Muslimin & Suhartoyo, 2023; Rianto, 2020) . In the Indonesian educational context, translanguaging practices that combine Indonesian and English often emerge as cognitive and social mechanisms that help learners navigate register shifts in academic and social contexts (Emilia & Hamied, 2022) . Strengthening cultural awareness through culture-based teaching has also been shown to be effective in improving speaking skills while reducing communication anxiety, ultimately improving learners' ability to adjust registers according to the situation (Munandar & Newton, 2021) .

Nevertheless, the complexity of Indonesia's social and cultural diversity and the limited use of English in everyday life remain challenges that affect the intensity of learners' language exposure (Rianto, 2020) . This situation emphasizes the need to develop a curriculum that is responsive to variations in social and cultural backgrounds, so that teaching strategies can more comprehensively accommodate

learners' needs and support the improvement of register competence in the Indonesian EFL context (Fathiyah et al., 2020) .

2. **The Role of Psychological Factors and Cultural Identity in Register Use**

The use of language registers is not only shaped by social conditions but also influenced by the learner's psychological dynamics and cultural identity. Speaking anxiety and self-confidence play a significant role in a learner's readiness to use both formal and informal registers. Learners with high levels of anxiety often avoid formal registers because they feel less able to meet the demands of language accuracy, while those with stronger self-confidence tend to be more flexible in switching between registers according to the communication context (Shaikh et al., 2025) . This reinforces the understanding that language proficiency is not only related to linguistic skills, but also the affective state experienced by learners during the learning process.

Cultural identity provides additional contributions because understanding politeness norms, social hierarchies, and local values also determine how learners interpret communication expectations in both academic and interpersonal situations (Aminah et al., 2025a) . In bilingual and heritage speakers, the relationship between cultural identity and language use has been shown to impact psychological well-being and social adaptability, which ultimately influences register choice (Lam & Catto, 2023; Park, 2024) . The process of acculturation and cultural immersion then strengthens language learning motivation and forms a dynamic bilingual identity, thereby increasing the flexibility of register use in various communication situations (Pasquarella et al., 2025) .

An approach that integrates psychological, social, and cultural factors is crucial for understanding how learners manage identity and emotions in language use. Bilingual experiences and meaningful social interactions contribute to the formation of learners' self-perceptions and linguistic identities, which in turn influence their decisions in selecting appropriate registers for everyday communication contexts (Shaikh et al., 2025) . Thus, register use ability is the result of a complex interaction between social conditions, psychological readiness, and learners' cultural orientations.

3. **Cultural Awareness in Contextual Interpretation and Register Shifting**

Cultural awareness is a crucial cognitive-pragmatic factor in determining the appropriateness of language register use because it helps learners identify differences in communication norms across situations, including variations in formality, politeness strategies, and social distance (Aminah et al., 2025b) . Learners with high cultural awareness tend to be more sensitive to subtle contextual cues and therefore able to perform register shifting appropriately; this ability is evident when a student shifts from an informal digital style to a more formal academic register in presentations or academic writing (Mizell, 2020) . Conversely, low cultural awareness often leads to pragmatic errors, such as the introduction of colloquial expressions into academic writing or the rigid use of formal registers in casual interactions, thus reducing the effectiveness of cross-contextual communication (Aminah et al., 2025b) .

Cultural awareness also deepens learners' interpretive abilities in selecting language styles appropriate to social and cultural nuances, thereby enriching the

meaning and quality of social interactions (Tsintsadze, 2025) . In the realm of technology, the application of cultural awareness is relevant for the development of large language models so that the resulting responses can be tailored to the user's cultural background, supporting inclusive and culturally contextual communication (Pawar et al., 2025) . The application of context awareness principles to the fields of cultural heritage and digital media emphasizes the need to tailor the user experience based on cultural profiles and social situations to increase audience engagement and understanding. Thus, cultural awareness serves as a key in managing register shifts and interpreting complex communication contexts, particularly in cross-cultural interactions influenced by digital dynamics and modern communication technologies (Michalakis & Caridakis, 2022) .

4. **Cultural Awareness as a Moderating Variable between Social Background and Register**

The synthesis of findings suggests that cultural awareness serves as a crucial moderating variable in the relationship between social background and register competence. In many studies, learners from disadvantaged social backgrounds who possess high levels of cultural awareness are able to interpret communication norms more accurately and thus adapt their registers accordingly; this ability enables them to overcome limitations in language exposure stemming from socioeconomic conditions or unfavorable learning environments. On the other hand, broad social access and high linguistic exposure do not automatically guarantee accurate register use when cultural awareness is low, thus demonstrating that cultural awareness can strengthen, weaken, or even neutralize the influence of social background on register competence. Although this moderation pattern has emerged in several studies, empirical evidence directly testing the moderating mechanisms of cultural awareness on register competence remains relatively limited, particularly in the Indonesian context, opening up opportunities for more in-depth research utilizing quantitative or mixed-method designs to examine the interactions between these variables (Alraggad, 2025) .

Previous research also confirms that social interactions and cultural contexts jointly shape academic performance and social adjustment, with cultural awareness playing a central role in helping individuals navigate diverse and often overlapping communication norms (Baumert et al., 2023) . From the perspective of pragmatic and intercultural theory, cultural awareness enhances learners' cognitive and interpretive capacities, enabling more adaptive register shifting practices that are sensitive to contextual nuances (Leung et al., 2021) . Conceptually, positioning cultural awareness as a moderating variable deepens understanding of how social and cultural factors interact to shape language pragmatic abilities and confirms that pedagogical interventions that only increase language exposure without developing cultural sensitivity risk being less effective in improving register accuracy. Therefore, developing research that tests this moderation pathway and developing contextually valid cultural awareness measurement instruments are priorities to strengthen empirical evidence in this area (Antón-Solanas et al., 2021) .

5. **Implications Theoretical and Pedagogical**

The synthesis results provide clear theoretical implications: an understanding of language registers must be placed within a pragmatic competency model that integrates social, psychological, and cultural dimensions, with cultural awareness as a key component determining the appropriateness of language use in diverse contexts (Preksha & Kaur, 2024) . This placement requires the development of a conceptual framework capable of explaining how social capital and cultural capital interact to shape learners' register repertoires, and how educational interventions can mediate these dynamics to achieve more adaptive and relevant communication outcomes.

Pedagogically, these findings encourage the need to redesign the EFL curriculum in Indonesia to include explicit pragmatic exercises, real-life social context-based scenarios, and structured register shifting activities to enhance students' language sensitivity and flexibility (Paluanova, 2024) . Explicit integration of cultural education into language learning enables students to better read and interpret social contexts and thus be able to choose appropriate registers, while the use of authentic materials and cross-cultural interactions provide meaningful and contextual practice opportunities for the development of pragmatic competence (Putri et al., 2024) . Furthermore, increasing teacher capacity through training in pragmatic teaching and developing cultural awareness is crucial for the learning process to be responsive to students' cultural diversity and the demands of global communication (Paluanova, 2024) .

Pedagogical implementation focused on cultural awareness must also be supported by the development of assessment instruments sensitive to pragmatic and cultural aspects, so that the effectiveness of the intervention can be measured validly and reliably. Thus, the integration of cultural awareness into pragmatic competency models and EFL teaching practices has the potential to increase the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication, reduce register errors, and enrich learners' communicative capabilities holistically (Preksha & Kaur, 2024) . This approach also opens an empirical research agenda oriented towards evaluating learning interventions, validating instruments in the Indonesian context, and testing cultural awareness moderation models in various educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that *language register variation* in EFL learners in Indonesia is the result of an interrelated interaction between social background, psychological conditions, and cultural orientations that shape how learners understand and adapt language to the communication context. Social background, reflected in family education, literacy level, and language experience in everyday environments, influences the level of linguistic exposure and learners' tendencies to use formal, informal, or academic language varieties. Psychological factors and cultural identity also play an important role by determining the self-confidence, anxiety levels, and interpretive skills needed to choose an appropriate register. Throughout this process, cultural awareness serves as a cognitive foundation that enables learners to read communication norms and shift registers appropriately as the situation demands.

A key finding of this study positions cultural awareness as a moderating factor in the relationship between social background and register accuracy. Strong cultural awareness can mitigate limitations caused by differences in social background and help

learners navigate a variety of communication contexts more accurately, while low cultural awareness can hinder pragmatic skills even if learners have good social access and language exposure. The limited empirical studies on this moderating mechanism in the Indonesian context indicate that further research is still urgently needed. From a pedagogical perspective, the study's findings emphasize the need for learning that integrates cultural education, context-based pragmatics exercises, and activities that encourage reflective register shifts, along with strengthening teachers' abilities to teach the social and pragmatic dimensions to make language learning more responsive to cultural diversity and the needs of global communication.

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