

Knowing the subject 2:

Register and appropriacy

By Katherine Bilborough

This series of articles explores twelve professional practices that are important for the development of English language teachers.

Development in these practices moves through a series of key stages, from being aware of the practice to being able to help other teachers to progress. These articles will help you to develop your understanding, skills and confidence in these areas.

Useful vocabulary	
appropriacy	When we talk about the appropriacy of something, we mean whether it is suitable or acceptable in that situation.
context	The context is the situation where something happens.
formal	In a formal situation, people have to behave and speak correctly and politely.
informal	An informal situation is relaxed and unofficial, e.g. at home or with friends.
register	Register refers to the type of English you speak or write. Register can be formal or informal.

English teachers have to learn many skills. They need to know about how children learn and different ways of teaching. They also need to understand the language and how it works, including its grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Like any teacher, they need to know their subject well. **Register** and **appropriacy** is another important area of English. Teachers need to understand what it is so they can teach it to their students.

Register refers to the type of English a person uses, depending on the **context**. We usually classify language into **formal** or **informal**. Register can refer to both speaking and writing.

Sometimes we also use the term appropriacy. This refers to the appropriate use of language in a particular context. Register focuses on how a word, an expression or grammar pattern is natural or acceptable in a particular situation. Appropriacy focuses on the type of language that you use in a particular situation or with a particular group of people.

Look at these examples of spoken English. The sentences in each row have the same meaning but the A sentences are formal and the B sentences are informal.

A	B
'Please could you be quiet?'	'Shh!'
'Good morning! How are you?'	'Hi! How's it going?'
'Could you give me the pencil, please?'	'Pass the pencil.'

Register is equally important in written English. We use informal language in emails to friends and family but we use formal language when we write a job application letter or when we write to someone we don't know.

Follow these rules for formal writing.

- Use formal, polite language (e.g. *I would like*, not *I want*).
- Do not use contractions (e.g. *I am studying*, not *I'm studying*).
- Begin and end emails with formal greetings (e.g. *Dear Sir*, *Dear Mrs Smith*, *Yours sincerely*, *Yours faithfully*, etc.).



Useful classroom phrases

For the teacher

Is it OK to use this language here?
Please don't (use contractions).

For the student

Is it OK to say (...)?
How can I say (...) in a formal/informal way?

Activity: Thinking about register

Write these informal phrases on the board. Ask your students to rewrite them in formal English in groups. Monitor the students while they do the task. Help them if necessary.

- 1 *Hi there!*
- 2 *See you later!*
- 3 *Help me make these sandwiches!*
- 4 *Thanks a lot for the present.*

Now do the same with these formal phrases. Ask your students to rewrite them in informal English.

- 5 *How do you do, Mrs Smith?*
- 6 *It is a pleasure to meet you.*
- 7 *Thank you very much for your help.*
- 8 *Please can you pass me those books?*

Key points to remember

- We use different kinds of English in different situations. This is called register. Teachers need to understand register so they can teach it to their students.
- Register can be formal or informal.
- Appropriacy is similar to register. It focuses on the type of language that you use in a particular situation.
- Register is important when we speak and write.

Over to you

Discuss these questions with a colleague.

- Are there different registers in your first language?
- When is it important to use formal spoken or written English?
- Why is it important to understand the difference between formal and informal English?

Formal and informal language
1. informal; 2. formal; 3. formal; 4. informal; 5. informal; 6. formal
Thinking about register
1. Hello / good morning; 2. Goodbye / hope to see you soon; 3. Please could you help me make these sandwiches?; 4. I'm very grateful for the present. Thank you; 5. How's it going, Mrs Smith?; 6. Nice to meet you!; 7. Thanks for helping me; 8. Give me those books, please.

Suggested answers: