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## **THE ABILITY OF STUDENTS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION TO APPLY RELEVANT MOVES AND CONTENT IN JOB APPLICATION LETTERS**

This paper presents an analysis of 22 job application letters written by students at the level of Master’s studies. The letters were analyzed regarding their structure, i.e. the moves they contained and their content, in order to determine whether students are able to write effective job application letters. When analyzing the documents, the main emphasis was put on the issues students had regarding the structure and content – the type of information included in each move. The small-scale research we conducted is mostly descriptive and qualitative with some quantitative data as well. The conclusions reached indicate that students are well aware of the correct structure of this type of document, but there is still room for significant improvement in terms of the content and the means to connect their skills to the requirements and present themselves in the best way possible. The findings reveal the necessity of explicit genre teaching with the focus on formal register and the ways in which applicants could attract potential employers.

*Keywords:* job application letters, genre, moves, structure, content

### **INTRODUCTION**

Within English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses at the tertiary level, students are introduced to different genres which they are going to use in practice, after finishing their Bachelor’s or Master’s studies. One of these genres is a job application letter, also called a covering letter. This type of document is, essentially, a type of a business letter written to a potential employer by a candidate interested in a certain position. An aim of a job application letter is to promote a person who applies for a certain job. The ability to write a good job application letter is very important for students since it directly influences the possibility of finding employment after the graduation.

Numerous elements need to be taken into consideration when writing this type of document. Job application letters need to have certain structure, clarity, and

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accuracy in terms of grammar, spelling, and vocabulary items. Bhatia (1993) points out that a job application letter enables a candidate not only to clarify the information from the résumé – an outline of someone’s educational and professional history, but also to show the connection between those pieces of information and the qualifications required in the job advertisement. Above all, these letters have to be persuasive in order to fulfill their communicative function and obtain the next step in the employment procedure which is, most typically, a job interview.

This paper represents small-scale research conducted on the job application letters written by the students of Engineering Management at the level of Master’s studies. Twenty-two letters we analyzed were written within an elective course called Written Communication in English.

An aim of the study is to determine whether the students are able to write job application letters successfully in terms of the letters’ structure, content, and the presentation of an applicant in an adequate way that would attract the attention of potential employers.

## JOB APPLICATION LETTER AS A GENRE

Hyland (2003: 21) claims that “*Genre* refers to an abstract, socially recognized way of using language.” Language is embedded in social realities and it is assumed that every successful text displays that its writer is aware of the context and potential readers of the text. Henry and Roseberry (2001) define genre as a sociolinguistic activity whose participants are able to achieve specific goals.

According to Bhatia (1993), an aim of a job application letter is to promote the job applicant and attract attention or invite responses from potential employers. This letter is, typically, accompanied by an applicant's résumé. This form of writing is an influential one since the writer should be able to promote him/herself by showing that his/her competences are compatible with the requirements from the job advertisement (Bhatia 1993, Henry–Roseberry 2001). Corfield (2009) emphasizes that a job application letter needs to contain, above all, information about someone's skills and work experience.

Genres are, typically, analyzed through their structural elements – *moves*. A move represents a phase within a particular genre and it has its own communicative purpose which contributes to the overall communicative purpose of a certain genre. According to Swales (2004), moves are units of discourse possessing coherent communicative function. Henry and Roseberry (2001) state that moves contain

linguistic elements which make them uniform and clearly indicate discourse characteristics.

As a specific genre, a job application letter needs to have a certain *structure*. We consider an appropriate combination of the moves by the term structure. There is not only one acceptable structure of a job application letter, several options are proposed by different authors.

Numerous researchers studied job application letters as a genre. Henry and Roseberry (2001) studied forty job application letters written by native speakers of English. These authors suggest a complex structure of a covering letter which includes the following moves: 1) "Opening", 2) "Referring to job advertisements", 3) "Offering candidacy", 4) "Stating reasons for applying", 5) "Stating availability", 6) "Promoting the candidacy", 7) "Stipulating terms and conditions of employment", 8) "Naming referees", 9) "Enclosing documents", 10) "Polite ending", and 11) "Signing off".

Bhatia's model (1993) of a covering letter is the one we used in the research. It was chosen due to the fact that it is not a very complex one and it is practical to be taught in ESP writing classes. Therefore, this model is going to be presented in greater detail.

Bhatia (1993: 49) made a comparison between promotional and covering letters and drew conclusions regarding similarity in the structure of these letters. Due to that, covering letters are classified as the promotional genre, as well as advertisements, brochures and leaflets. According to this author (1993: 62), a job application letter contains the following moves: 1) "Establishing credentials", 2) "Introducing the candidacy", 3) "Offering incentives", 4) "Enclosing documents", 5) "Using pressure tactics", 6) "Soliciting response", and 7) "Ending politely". Bhatia (1993) emphasized that not all of the moves are obligatory and their order can be rearranged. Wang (2005) also studied the structure of covering letters, based on Bhatia's model (1993), claiming that "Establishing credentials", "Introducing candidature" and "Soliciting response" are the most frequently found moves.

"Establishing credentials" is the first move which contains a reference to a specific job advertisement. Applicants are expected to mention where they found an advertisement and a specific position they are applying for. It is also preferable to express admiration and respect for the potential employer. The second move introduces the candidacy. It should present essential information about the applicant, such as formal education, current position, previous work experience, etc. The third move, "Offering incentives", is similar to the previous one, but a candidate should put a special emphasis on his/her qualities which are desirable and match the criteria of a potential employer. For example, specific skills, previous

experience and personal qualities could be mentioned in this section. In the fourth move, a candidate needs to state which documents are enclosed together with a job application letter. These could be a résumé, diplomas, certificates, references, etc. In the following move, an applicant implicitly or explicitly requests a job interview, so certain pressure tactics could be employed here. The sixth move expresses writer's hope for a reply and being taken into consideration. Finally, "Ending politely" shows applicant's gratitude and contains a formal closing of the letter.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several studies dealing with students' covering letter writing at the tertiary level of education. A few of these studies were interested in the structure of job application letters (Rizan–Darus–Stapa–Siti Hamin & Rosniah 2007, Upton–Connor 2001, Bophan 2008), while some of these analyses were comparative (Zaree-ee 2008, Mirzai–Aliabadi 2013, Latipah–Gunawan 2019) and cross-linguistic (Hou 2013, Thumnong–Tongpoon–Patanasorn 2017).

Zaree-ee (2008) compared covering letters written by the students divided into two groups. The first group of students was familiar with the characteristics of the genre, while the second group was not familiar with them. The final conclusion this author reached was that the students belonging to the first group received significantly higher marks.

Rizan et al. (2007) found that Malaysian students used only three moves in their covering letters. This led to a conclusion that they were not able to write effective covering letters, so they needed to be trained to write more persuasive covering letters containing larger number of moves. Similar research was conducted by Mirzai and Aliabadi (2013), with a special reference to the impact that written corrections from the teachers had on the students' covering letters. The authors concluded that a group of students that received a direct written feedback significantly improved results when it comes to composing job application letters, which was shown on the post-test, i.e. the next assignment. On the other hand, the group that did not receive direct written corrections achieved lower scores on the following assignment.

Hou (2013) compared structures of the application letters written by Canadian and Taiwanese college students. The author found that Canadian students wrote longer covering letters than Taiwanese students, in order to convince potential employers of their qualifications. On the other hand, Taiwanese students used a direct approach in asking for interviews by writing short and general statements.

Latipah and Gunawan (2019) conducted interesting research in order to determine whether students are able to write persuasive covering letters. Students' letters were compared to the ones written by experts. The most significant gap that was identified between these two groups of letters referred to students' inability for self-appraisal. This study suggests that explicit instruction could raise students' ability to use persuasive register.

Upton and Connor (2001) authored a multi-level analysis of 153 covering letters written by undergraduate students. Their research was cross-cultural since the application letters were written by American, Belgian and Finnish students. Authors found seven moves in their sampled letters and analyzed their function. They were especially interested in lexico-grammatical patterns of politeness strategies. The final conclusion was that American students used many formulaic expressions, style of Belgian students was more personal, while the style of Finnish students was somewhere in between these groups.

Bophan (2008) analyzed 22 letters of application with an aim to determine the pattern of moves. Following the move structure and order suggested by Henry and Roseberry (2001), Bophan (2008) determined that a definite move order could not be identified although most of the moves were present in the analyzed documents. Main pedagogical implication of this study was that students need to be aware that writing a successful job application letter requires specialized writing skills in addition to the general ones. As suggested, this could be achieved by explicit teaching how to write obligatory moves through the use of available linguistic resources.

Thumnong and Tongpoon-Patanasorn (2017) authored a cross-cultural research of moves contained by thirty job application letters written by participants belonging to six different nationalities. Authors reached a conclusion that all participants used a very similar way of writing application letters. Slight differences were noticed in terms of a rearranged order of the first three moves.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

This small-scale research was conducted on 22 job application letters written by the students of Engineering Management at the Master's level of studies. It was previously assessed that the students were at B2 level according to CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

Students were given explanations on the structure and purpose of a job application letter. They were introduced to Bhatia's model (1993) of a covering letter, containing seven moves. One of the moves – "Using pressure tactics" – was

mentioned as not being obligatory, so the focus was on the six moves a covering letter should contain. The students were also acquainted with a few sample job application letters written by native speakers. These sample letters referred to the job openings in the professional field of Engineering Management and were obtained online. It was necessary for the students to read a few actual covering letters so that they could realize how they should be written. Theoretical explanations without real pieces of writing would not be enough.

In the following class, a task was given to the students – to write a job application letter for a specific manager’s position. The students were also given the company’s name and the specific requirements. The requirements were as follows: Bachelor’s degree in the field of Engineering Management, knowledge of English (at least B1), computer skills, leadership skills, flexibility, decision making skills. They had 30 minutes to complete the task and were instructed to do it according to the explanations and examples they were provided with in the previous class.

Job application letters were collected after the class and analyzed in terms of the structure, i.e. the moves used in each of them, as well as the type of information they contained. Spelling, grammar and vocabulary characteristics were not included in this analysis. The analysis was mostly descriptive and qualitative – it was determined which specific moves were used, whether certain moves were left out (and which ones), whether their order differed from the one suggested. Certain quantitative data were presented as well, such as the percentage of the letters which contained all the moves, the percentage of the letters which had a rearranged order of the moves, etc. Besides the description of the structure, the moves were described in terms of the content. A special emphasis was placed on the type of information the moves contained, whether significant pieces of information were missing, and the way in which the information was conveyed – implicitly, explicitly, too directly, etc.

The main purpose of the research was to identify whether the students are able to write job application letters successfully. The focus was put on the errors they made regarding the structure and the content of the letters as well.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Number and Order of the Moves*

If we consider the overall structure of the letters, about 81% (18 letters) contained all of the moves we termed as obligatory. None of the letters contained a move called “Using pressure tactics”. We suggest that the students avoided writing

this move since it was mentioned as optional. It is also possible that the students lacked the language skills to express a kind of pressure on the prospective employer in an implicit way that would be indirect and polite.

We found that three letters did not contain the third move – “Offering incentives”, while two letters did not include two moves. In one of the letters missing multiple moves, the third and fourth moves (“Enclosing documents”) were not written, while the other letter did not contain “Enclosing documents” and “Soliciting response”.

The fact that a high percentage of the students utilized all of the obligatory moves can be attributed to the explicit instructions they received in terms of the covering letter structure. Zaree-ee (2008) came to similar conclusions since the group of students that was explicitly taught about the genre achieved better scores than the group that did not receive explicit instructions.

The following table summarizes the use of the specific moves throughout the research.

Table 1. The percentage of the use of the specific moves

The move	The percentage of the use
“Establishing credentials”	100%
“Introducing the candidacy”	100%
“Offering incentives”	86%
“Enclosing documents”	90%
“Soliciting response”	95%
“Ending politely”	100%

The order of the moves was the one professor suggested (following Bhatia (1993)) in high percentage of the letters. Only three letters had a different order of the moves. In one of the letters, “Offering incentives” was written before the candidacy was introduced. The other two letters had “Enclosing documents” move after “Soliciting response”. In these two letters, the enclosed documents were mentioned prior to the polite ending of the letter. Although the moves in these three letters were somewhat rearranged, that did not seem to have affected the communicative purpose of the letters and promoting of the applicant. Similarly, Bophan (2008) and Thumngong and Tongpoon-Patanasorn (2017) found variations in the move order that did not essentially affect the communicative purpose of the documents.

*Content of the Moves*

The first move – “Establishing credentials” was identified in all 22 letters. Students were expected to mention two important pieces of information within this move – the source of information about the job vacancy, as well as an interest in applying for a specific position. Not all of the letters contained both of these pieces of information. Namely, in ten of the letters (about 45%) a piece of information about the source was missing. Also, there was one letter in which an interest for a certain position was not mentioned at all. Obviously, majority of students deemed that it was more important to state the exact position they are applying for than to state where they obtained the information about the job opening. Being specific about the position is crucial if one company has several job advertisements published on one website, magazine, etc.

Different strategies were used when it comes to showing interest. Some students were rather clear and explicit, while others used more implicit ways to express their wish to apply for a job vacancy. In order to illustrate different ways of expressing interest, the following examples are taken from the letters:

- 1) I would like to apply for the position of a production manager at your company.
- 2) Since I graduated last year, I started considering finding an employment at the company such as yours.

Example (1) illustrates a direct and explicit way of expressing interest for a certain position since the candidate is explicitly saying that he/she would like to apply for an explicitly mentioned job opening. Unlike example (1), example (2) presents an interest in an implicit and less direct way. The applicant mentioned the recent graduation and wanting to apply for an employment without explicitly naming the position and a wish to work for the company in question – this wish was implied (“the company such as yours”).

“Introducing the candidacy” is the second move, identified in all of the letters. All of the students put this move into a separate paragraph and it was significantly longer in comparison to the other sections of the job application letters. This is understandable and justified due to the fact that an applicant is supposed to introduce him/herself throughout this move.

Within the second move, specific pieces of information and the order students used to present them differed significantly among letters. One group of letters contained mostly information about formal education (14 letters, about 63%),



while eight letters were more concerned with the skills and personal qualities. In the latter, students wrote mostly about their organizational and leadership skills, as well as their knowledge of foreign languages. Being flexible, hard-working, responsible and detail-oriented were frequently mentioned among personal qualities. The ability to function in a team also appeared in a high percentage of the letters (about 81%).

“Offering incentives” seemed to be the most difficult move for the students. Although it was not written in only three out of 22 letters, it is evident that students had issues when explaining why and how they fit a particular position they are applying for. In most cases, this move was very short and practically a repetition of the previous one. Similarly to Hou’s findings among Taiwanese students (2013), statements that are short and general were present throughout the covering letters. The applicant’s skills and qualities were not clearly related to the requirements in 11 out of 19 documents. Some students were very implicit when it comes to this section (about 31%) as if they were reluctant to present themselves in the best way possible. On the other hand, there were a few more explicit examples which lacked an explanation, i.e. the connection with the specific requirements. The following examples belong to this specific move:

- 3) I might fit your requirements because I have good organizational skills.
- 4) My last job was similar to this one, so I think you might choose me.
- 5) I may be the right candidate.

Examples (3) and (4) belong to the group of the more implicit statements. Candidates stated that they believe they should be chosen in a polite way. Being less direct was achieved through the use of a modal verb – *might*. They also offered an explanation – *why* they should be considered as the suitable candidates. Contrary to examples (3) and (4), example (5) seems to be more direct since it utilized *may* as a modal verb which conveys a higher degree of certainty. However, the statement does not relate the applicant’s qualifications to the criteria as it does not offer a reason why someone should be chosen for a particular position.

The fourth move refers to the documents that are, in most cases, enclosed together with a covering letter. As it was mentioned above, two of the letters did not contain this move. “Enclosing documents” was included, in other letters, as a short paragraph containing a single sentence. Most typically, the following sentence was used:

- 6) I am enclosing my CV as a PDF document.

As expected, students explicitly mentioned the type of documents they were sending together with an application letter, without giving any additional information. We may assign this to the fact that all sample letters they read in the previous class contained a very short paragraph related to the documents which accompanied the covering letter.

“Soliciting response” presented a bit challenging move. Despite not being written in only one of the letters, this move contained different forms of expressing hope for a reply, including the ones that were too direct. In approximately 45% of the letters, vocabulary items and sentence constructions used within this move did not belong to the formal register that should have been used. This move can be illustrated by the following examples taken from the sample:

- 7) I want your urgent reply.
- 8) I hope your HR department will contact me soon.
- 9) I expect your email as soon as possible.

All of these examples ((7), (8) and (9) are rather direct since the verbs such as *want* and *expect* were used, as well as the expressions *urgent* and *as soon as possible* which indicate impatience of an applicant. Soliciting response should have been expressed via more implicit statements, such as the ones listed in the following examples found in the sample:

- 10) I was hoping I would receive your reply.
- 11) I would appreciate if you took some time to send me a reply.

Examples (10) and (11) are more formal, implicit and polite in comparison to the examples (7), (8) and (9). We consider them as being more appropriate, which was achieved by the use of progressive verb forms, conditional clauses and modals such as *would* that made them more implicit and polite. Judging by the overall content of this move within the letters, findings of Latipah and Gunawan (2019) were in line with ours – students lacked tactics to persuade potential employers to invite them to a job interview.

Similarly to the previous move, the last move – “Ending politely” – contained inadequate ways of expressing gratitude, such as “Thanks for your time” and other expressions that were somewhat too informal. This was especially reflected in the closing of six out of 22 job application letters (approximately 27%) which contained expressions such as “Best” or “Regards” instead of their more formal equivalents – “Yours sincerely” and “Yours faithfully”.

## CONCLUSION

Job application letters present a genre which is very significant for ESP courses at the tertiary level of education. It is generally known that, after they graduate from their Bachelor's or Master's studies, students are going to write their résumés and covering letters frequently in practice. Even though job application letters present a genre of great importance, they are not studied sufficiently, especially within ESP classes. The type of research we conducted is equally beneficial for students and teachers since it sheds light on the issues that need to be overcome so that the students would be successful at creating job application letters.

Our results showed that the students from the group were well aware of the correct structure of the document as a high percentage of the letters contained all of the moves in the suggested order. Slight rearrangements of the move order did not disturb the overall communicative function of the letters.

When it comes to the content of the specific moves, more significant differences were identified. Students put emphasis on different information when they were introducing their candidacy, which means that some of them believed their formal education was more important, while others gave greater importance to the skills and personal qualities. However, relating these pieces of information to the specific requirements was more challenging and demanding. Students were either too implicit or could not explain adequately how exactly they fit the company's criteria. Latipah and Gunawan (2019) derived similar conclusions in terms of the fact that students are not persuasive enough when it comes to writing this type of document. Therefore, they need to be explicitly taught how to use persuasive vocabulary and structures. The use of informal register was also evident in this section, as well as in the moves called "Soliciting response" and "Ending Politely". Knowledge of formal register and raising the level of pragmatic competence appears to be necessary in order to improve students' writing skills, which was evident in the last two sections of the analyzed letters.

Judging by the results of this small-scale research, students are well acquainted with the structure of job application letters, but their content is an area which needs to be improved in order to write these letters successfully. Our findings go in line with many other studies, for example Rizan et al. (2007), Hou (2013), Latipah and Gunawan (2019) and Bophan (2008). In our opinion, a special emphasis should be placed on the content referring to an applicant's skills and their relation to the requirements so that the candidate is presented in the best way possible and invited to a job interview. In order to do so, it is necessary to use adequate vocabulary and sentence structures belonging to the formal register. We

suggest that all of these elements should be explicitly taught in ESP writing classes. Besides explicit teaching, it is highly recommendable to expose students to the authentic texts written by native speakers or the texts of an equal quality written by non-native ones.

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SPOSOBNOST STUDENATA NA TERCIJARNOM NIVOU OBRAZOVANJA DA  
KORISTE RELEVANTNE UTVRĐENE STAVOVE I SADRŽAJ U PRIJAVAMA ZA  
POSAO

*Rezime*

U ovom radu se vrši analiza 22 prijave za posao koje su napisali studenti master studija. Napisane prijave su analizirane na osnovu strukture, to jest, utvrđeno je da li prijave za posao sadrže sve utvrđene stavove i da li su oni u odgovarajućem redosledu. Struktura prijave za posao je preuzeta iz rada čiji je autor Bhatia (1993). Takođe je razmatran sadržaj, odnosno tip informacija koje su dokumenti sadržali u okviru svakog utvrđenog stava. Sprovedena analiza je, pre svega, deskriptivna i kvalitativna, uz navođenje osnovnih kvantitativnih podataka. Dobijeni rezultati pokazuju da su studenti ovladali strukturom ovog žanra. Svi utvrđeni stavovi su bili zastupljeni u velikom broju radova, a eventualne promene u redosledu stavova nisu uticale na komunikativnu svrhu ovog žanra. Međutim, sadržaj je predstavljao izazov i uočen je veći broj pisama u kojima se nije koristio odgovarajući registar. Najznačajnijih poteškoća je bilo u smislu povezivanja osobina i kvalifikacija kandidata sa kriterijumima poslodavca. S obzirom na važnost korišćenja ovog žanra u praksi, neophodno je eksplicitno podučavanje u okviru nastave pisanja na tercijarnom nivou obrazovanja. Nalazi ukazuju na to da je poseban akcenat potrebno staviti na upoznavanje studenata sa formalnim registrom i načinima na koje mogu da se prikažu u najboljem svetlu, to jest privuku potencijalne poslodavce.

*Ključne reči:* prijava za posao, žanr, utvrđeni stavovi, struktura, sadržaj

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