Exploring the Structure and Language Features of Successful Business Letters: A Case Study of a Tour Travel Agency

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Abstract

Business letters play crucial roles in exchanging information, maintaining relationships, and creating markets in organizations. However, the gap between academic research and practical workplace application in business letter writing remains underexplored. This study analyzes the generic structure and linguistic features of successful English business letters—defined as those achieving their communicative and business objectives—in authentic professional contexts. Using a genre-based approach, fifty original business letters from a travel agent in West Nusa Tenggara (2021-2022) were examined. Results revealed that successful business letters follow a systematic structure: sender's address, recipient's address, opening greeting, body (2-3 focused paragraphs), and closing greeting, notably omitting the subject line. Four key linguistic features characterize these letters: formality (using formal vocabulary), practicality-professionalism (employing technical terminology), informativeness (using business-specific language to prevent misunderstandings), and politeness (utilizing modal verbs and courteous expressions). These findings bridge the gap between ESP theory and real-world practice, demonstrating that successful business letters adapt academic formats to meet practical business demands. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for business practitioners and ESP educators, contributing to effective business communication practices in authentic professional environments.

Keywords: Business letter; Generic structure; Language features

INTRODUCTION

Business communication plays a pivotal role in today's global economy where the frequent exchanges of international trade have been increasing. One of the most important and widely used tools of business communication is business letters. This is because, as (Sampath & Zalipour, 2009) noted, writing is a key part of the day-to-day activities of most businesses and, like speaking, is used in a vast range of different situations allowing communication across time and space and providing an invaluable medium for storing records and other information. Business letters are also essential in business dealings as they are used to exchange business information, maintain business relationships and create markets (Betretdinova, 2021.).

Unlike previous studies that have predominantly focused on academic contexts—analyzing business letter writing among high school and university students—this present study fills a critical gap by examining the generic structure and language features of successful English business letters written by real business actors in their authentic workplace environment, specifically within a travel agent in West Nusa Tenggara. The scientific novelty of this research lies in its empirical analysis of authentic business correspondence from actual workplace contexts, providing insights into the practical

application of business letter writing principles in real professional environments. This approach offers a unique perspective on the relationship between theoretical ESP principles and their practical implementation in professional contexts, contributing to the understanding of effective business communication practices

The evolution of business communication has been significantly influenced by digital transformation and technological advancement in recent years (Durmuş-Şenyapar, 2024). With the integration of advanced technologies, companies have transitioned from traditional face-to-face interactions to a more digitalised approach. This transformation has been further accelerated by the global pandemic, pushing organisations to adapt and rethink their communication strategies (Kiddie, 2014). Despite these technological changes, formal written business correspondence remains a cornerstone of professional communication, particularly in international business contexts where clear, structured, and culturally appropriate communication is essential (Lifintsev & Wellbrock, 2019). Recent studies emphasize that digital transformation has created unprecedented challenges and opportunities for business communication, requiring organizations to develop new competencies in digital literacy while maintaining the fundamental principles of effective written communication (Paul et al., 2024)

Considering the important roles of business letters, a businessman needs to have the capability to write clear and effective business letters to become a powerful businessman. The competency in business letter writing extends beyond mere technical writing skills; it encompasses understanding cultural nuances, adapting tone and style to different audiences, and strategically structuring messages to achieve specific business objectives. In today's competitive business environment, effective letter writing serves as a differentiating factor that can influence partnership decisions, client relationships, and overall business success. The ability to craft compelling, professional, and culturally sensitive business correspondence has become increasingly important as businesses expand their operations across diverse markets and cultural contexts (Rao, 2019). Alongside general writing proficiency, letter writing, as one of the principal activities, requires special knowledge and competence for successful communication results in the modern world (Sinkus, 2019). The significance of effective business letter writing extends beyond mere information exchange; it encompasses relationship building, brand image enhancement, and strategic business positioning in competitive markets (Thomas & Stephens, 2015).

Rao (2019) explained that writing business letters is a part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and can be considered a specialism within English language learning and teaching in a university. Therefore, students participating in this ESP course should focus on language and skills needed for writing business letters. Business English (BE), or English for Business Purposes, is seen as a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) designed to meet specific needs of the learners (Wang & Fan, 2020). Recent developments in ESP research have emphasized the importance of context-specific communication skills that align with professional requirements and industry standards (Xie & Chen, 2019).

Contemporary research in ESP has shown that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are designed to meet the language needs of learners in specific professional contexts (Gardeva et al., 2024). The field has evolved to incorporate digital literacy and multimodal communication competencies, reflecting the changing landscape of business communication in the 21st century (Rahmanu & Molnár, 2024). Moreover, the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has undergone substantial development to meet the specialised communication needs of various professional domains (Zeng & Della, 2024)

Meanwhile, Prasad (2020) emphasizes that as a business letter is a formal letter used in business activities, it has a specific design, tone, format, and level of formality suited to the purpose of the message and the intended audience. He further suggests that

business correspondence must be clear and concise with simple, straightforward language. This means that business letter writing should be clear, concise, and void of slang and jargon. Recent studies have reinforced these principles while also highlighting the need for cultural sensitivity and adaptability in global business communication (Zeng & Della, 2024).

Formality is essential in business letters as it indicates seriousness, professionalism, genuine wish, good attitude, and company image (Watson, 2004.). However, Yu & Fu (2014) has emphasized that words in business letters should not only be formal but should also be practical, professional, informative, and polite. While business letters should have these lexical characteristics, they also should use sentence structural characteristics including the use of Fixed Expressions, Noun-Structured Sentences, Passive Voice Sentences, and Updating Terminologies (Yu & Fu, 2014). Current research in business communication effectiveness has expanded these criteria to include digital readability, cross-cultural appropriateness, and strategic messaging alignment (Tyrväinen & Päivärinta, 2015).

The generic structure of business letters, as Ciortescu (2012.) mentioned includes the Inside Address followed by the Salutation, The Subject Line, The body of the Letter, and the Closing. Being able to use the language features and the generic structures of business letters would then be a key to successful business communication. Contemporary analysis of business letter formats has revealed variations across industries and cultural contexts, suggesting the need for more nuanced understanding of structural adaptations (Aerts & Yan, 2017).

Some studies, however, have reported that writing business English letters are often seen as one of the most challenging tasks among students (Pratiwi et al., 2017); (Yingying, 2020). Meanwhile, some other studies have focused on how teachers help their students face the challenge such as through a project-based learning approach [10] or an individually differentiated approach (Ramadhani & Siregar, n.d.). Recent pedagogical innovations have incorporated technology-enhanced learning environments and authentic workplace simulations to bridge the gap between academic instruction and professional practice (Chen, 2025).

Although those previous studies have analyzed business letter writing products and might contribute to improving students' writing business letter knowledge and skills, the studies lack practical contributions for business actors. This is because those studies were conducted on students at high schools and universities. Few studies on business letter writing, if any, have been conducted on business actors in their workplaces. The gap between academic research and practical workplace application has been identified as a significant limitation in current ESP business writing literature.

Furthermore, existing research has predominantly focused on prescriptive approaches to business letter writing, with limited investigation into the actual characteristics of successful business correspondence used in real professional contexts. The disconnect between theoretical frameworks and practical application has resulted in a knowledge gap regarding the specific linguistic and structural features that contribute to successful business communication outcomes in authentic workplace settings.

This present study fills the gap by examining the generic structure and language features of successful English business letters written by real business actors in a travel agent in West Nusa Tenggara. The scientific novelty of this research lies in its empirical analysis of authentic business correspondence from actual workplace contexts, providing insights into the practical application of business letter writing principles in real professional environments.

Unlike previous studies that relied on academic samples or theoretical constructs, this research analyzes genuine business letters that have proven successful in achieving

their communicative and business objectives. This approach offers a unique perspective on the relationship between theoretical ESP principles and their practical implementation in professional contexts, contributing to the understanding of effective business communication practices.

The study's focus on a specific geographical and cultural context (West Nusa Tenggara) adds to the scientific novelty by providing culturally situated insights that complement existing predominantly Western-oriented business communication research. This regional perspective contributes to the globalization of business writing knowledge and offers valuable insights for international business communication practices.

The primary research problem addressed in this study concerns the identification and analysis of the specific generic structural and linguistic features that characterize successful English business letters in authentic workplace contexts. The study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical ESP frameworks and practical business communication applications by examining real-world successful correspondence. This study hoped to provide useful insight into writing successful business letters not only for business actors but also for students especially those majoring in business English courses. The specific purpose of this article review is to analyze and document the generic structure and linguistic features used in successful English business letters from a real business environment, thereby contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical application of ESP business writing principles.

To achieve these objectives, this study addresses the following research questions: 1). What generic structural patterns characterize successful English business letters in authentic workplace contexts, and how do these patterns differ from academically prescribed formats?, 2). What specific linguistic features (formality, practicality, informativeness, and politeness) are employed in successful English business letters to achieve effective business communication outcomes?, 3). How do successful business letters in real professional environments adapt theoretical ESP principles to meet practical business demands and cultural contexts?

METHOD
Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a genre-based analytical framework to examine the generic structure and linguistic features of successful English business letters. The research analyzed fifty (50) authentic business letters from travel agents in West Nusa Tenggara written between 2021 and 2022, focusing specifically on correspondence offering cooperation for umrah, hajj, and travel accommodation services.

Research Objects

Data were collected using purposive sampling with explicit selection criteria. To operationalize "success," this study established three measurable indicators: (1) communicative achievement, demonstrated by positive written responses received within 14 days; (2) business outcomes, evidenced by establishment of partnerships, signed cooperation agreements, or confirmed bookings within 60 days; and (3) professional acceptance, shown by letters requiring no significant revision or clarification. All selected letters met at least two of these criteria, with 82% (n=41) meeting all three. This approach distinguishes the study from previous research by using real-world business outcomes rather than theoretical assessments to define success.

The corpus was collected with full informed consent from the travel agency management, with all letters anonymized to remove identifying information while preserving linguistic and structural features. A formal agreement ensured confidentiality and appropriate use of business correspondence for academic purposes, adhering to ethical

guidelines for document analysis. The research complied with ethical boundaries by presenting findings in aggregate form without revealing proprietary business information.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded systematically through four stages to ensure methodological rigor. First, two researchers independently coded each letter to identify generic structural components (letterhead, addresses, salutations, body paragraphs, closings) using Ciortescu's (2012) framework as a baseline. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient, achieving κ=0.89, indicating strong agreement. Second, linguistic features were systematically identified following Yu & Fu's (2014) framework, with each feature (formality, practicality-professionalism, informativeness, politeness) operationalized through specific textual markers. Third, researchers convened to compare findings and resolve discrepancies through discussion and reference to ESP literature, reaching consensus on all cases. Fourth, validation was conducted through methodological triangulation by comparing findings with ESP theoretical frameworks, cross-referencing with professional literature, and conducting member checking with three senior business communication practitioners who confirmed the validity of identified patterns.

This genre-based approach, drawing on Swales' (1990) methodology, examined both macro-structural moves and micro-level linguistic realizations, enabling systematic identification of communicative purposes, schematic structures, and lexico-grammatical patterns. The analysis utilized qualitative content analysis techniques with systematic coding procedures to ensure replicability, transparency, and scientific validity in examining how successful business letters achieve effective communication objectives in authentic professional contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on an analysis of fifty (50) authentic business letters from travel agents in West Nusa Tenggara written between 2021 and 2022, this study identified the generic structure and linguistic features that characterize successful English business letters. The main findings show that successful business letters have a clear structure and use effective language features to achieve business communication objectives.

Generic Structure of Successful Business Letters

This study found that successful offer letters have a systematic generic structure that is well received by the relevant parties. The fifty business letters analyzed were identified as offer letters with the primary purpose of offering collaboration to potential partners and persuading them to take action.

Table 1. Generic Structure of Successful Business Letters

Structural Component	Frequency	Percentage	Standard Format (Ciortescu, 2012)
Sender's Address/Letterhead	50	100%	✓ Required
Recipient's Address	50	100%	✓ Required
Opening Greeting	50	100%	✓ Required
Subject Line	0	0%	✓ Required
Body (2-3 paragraphs)	50	100%	✓ Required
Closing Greeting	50	100%	✓ Required

As shown in Table 1, the structure of successful English offer letters follows the order: sender's address or letterhead, recipient's address, opening greeting, body of the letter, and closing greeting. This construction differs notably from the standard format suggested by Ciortescu (2012), which requires the subject line to be placed below the

opening greeting. The complete absence of subject lines (0%) in all analyzed letters represents a significant adaptation from academic formats, suggesting that in practical business contexts, particularly in the travel industry, subject lines may be considered redundant when the letter's purpose is clearly stated in the opening paragraph. This finding aligns with the research by Aerts & Yan (2017), which revealed variations in business letter formats across industries and cultural contexts, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of structural adaptation in contemporary business communication

The structure of successful English offer letters is arranged in the following order: sender's address or letterhead, recipient's address, opening greeting, body of the letter, and closing greeting. This construction differs slightly from the format suggested by Ciortescu (2012), which requires the subject line to be placed below the opening greeting. This finding aligns with the research by Aerts & Yan (2017), which revealed variations in business letter formats across industries and cultural contexts, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of structural adaptation in contemporary business communication.

Regarding the opening greeting, Table 2 shows two approaches used in the analyzed letters. Thirty-four percent of the letters began with generic greetings such as "Dear Sir," while 66% included the recipient's name in the address.

Table 2. Approaches Used in the Analyzed Letters

Greeting Type	Frequency	Percentage	Example
Generic	17	34%	"Dear Sir,"
Personalized	33	66%	"Dear Mr. Al-Farabi,"

The higher frequency of personalized greetings (66%) contrasts with traditional business writing manuals that often recommend generic greetings for unknown recipients, suggesting that modern business practice prioritizes relationship-building through personalization

The body of the letter consisted of two to three main paragraphs, with each paragraph addressing only one point. This reflects the principles of clarity and conciseness emphasized by Prasad (2020) that business correspondence should be clear and concise with simple and straightforward language. Closing greetings use respectful phrases such as "sincerely" and "best regards," which indicate a level of formality appropriate to the professional business context.

Language Features of Successful Business Letters

An analysis of linguistic features shows that successful business letters are designed using specific language characteristics to offer collaboration to potential partners who handle Umrah, Hajj, and land travel arrangements. These findings support Yu & Fu's (2014) argument that words in business letters should not only be formal but also practical, professional, informative, and polite. Table 3 identifies four main linguistic characteristics used in successful business letters.

Table 3. Four Main Linguistic Characteristics Used in Successful Business Letters

Feature	Description	Key Indicators	Example from Corpus
Formality	Use of formal vocabulary and standard phrases	Formal word choice (e.g., "intend" vs. "plan"; "purchase" vs. "buy")	"We intend to become a provider of land arrangements"
Practicality-Professionalism	Technical terminology; minimal descriptive language	Fixed expressions, noun-structured sentences, industry-specific terms	"We would like to propose cooperation with your company"

Informativeness	Business-specific language to prevent misunderstandings	Precise terminology, specific service details, clear contact information	"Our services include hotels, transportation, visas, BRN, and a License of Raudah"
Politeness	Modal verbs and courteous expressions	Use of "would," "please," indirect requests	"…would like to offer you some Land Arrangements"; "please contact our hotline"

First, the aspect of formality is reflected in the use of formal words or phrases such as "intend" instead of "plan" and 'purchase' instead of "buy." This formal style, as noted by Watson (2004), serves to demonstrate serious and sincere intentions, professional skills, and a good corporate image. This aligns with the research by Zeng & Della (2024), which emphasizes the need for cultural sensitivity and adaptability in global business communication, where formality serves as an indicator of professionalism.

Second, to be practical and professional, the business letters in this study use technical words and phrases and rarely use descriptive words and phrases. Examples include: "We would like to propose cooperation with your company," "Related to that information, we intend to become a provider of land arrangements for your company," and "We hope that this offer can be realized in the form of cooperation which can be a benefit for both parties." The use of technical terminology reflects the structural characteristics of sentences mentioned by Yu & Fu (2014), including the use of Fixed Expressions and Noun-Structured Sentences.

Third, the informative aspect is demonstrated through the use of words or phrases that refer to specific business meanings to avoid serious misunderstandings during transactions. The study found that some words in business letters lose their original meaning to achieve the specific business meaning intended. Examples illustrating informative language in business letters include: "We intend to become a provider of land arrangements for your company," "These service lists are available with the price list in the attached appendix," "Our services include hotels, transportation, visas, BRN, and a License of Raudah," and "For further information, please contact our hotline on WhatsApp (+62823-3978-1948)."

Fourth, to show politeness, business letters in this study use several strategies. The first strategy is to use modal verbs such as "would" to express euphemisms, as in "…would like to offer you some Land Arrangements in Jeddah, Madinah, and Mecca for the convenience and comfort of your pilgrims." The use of imperative sentences with the word "please" is another strategy to show politeness as it is a polite request, such as in "For further information, please contact our hotline on WhatsApp (+62823-3978-1948)." These findings support Tyrväinen & Päivärinta's (2015) research on the importance of digital readability, cross-cultural appropriateness, and strategic message alignment in the effectiveness of contemporary business communication.

The findings of this study make a significant contribution to practical understanding of the application of ESP principles in real-world business contexts, as emphasized by Wang & Fan (2020) that English for Business Purposes is designed to meet the specific needs of learners. This research also bridges the gap identified between academic research and practical application in the workplace, providing evidence-based insights into the characteristics of successful business letters in authentic professional environments.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding business letter communication, particularly within the context of travel agencies in West Nusa Tenggara. This research provides significant insight into the practical application of

business communication principles in real-world professional environments, highlighting key distinctions between theoretical frameworks and their actual implementation. The results are especially valuable for bridging the gap between English for Specific Purposes (ESP) theory and its application in business settings. By analyzing authentic business letters, this study sheds light on the structural and linguistic features that define successful business correspondence, offering practical implications for both business professionals and educators.

The generic structure of successful business letters, as identified in this study, reveals notable differences from academic models, such as those proposed by Ciortescu (2012). The absence of a subject line in the letters analyzed in this research represents a departure from the typical academic format, suggesting that in business contexts, such as those in the travel industry, the subject may be implied by the opening statement. This finding aligns with previous studies, such as that by Aerts and Yan (2017), which explored variations in letter formats across industries and cultural contexts. The study reinforces the idea that while academic templates provide a useful starting point, the structure of business letters should be flexible and adaptable to specific professional needs. In the case of the travel agency letters, the format without a subject line may be an intentional simplification, aiming for brevity and clarity.

The use of personalized greetings in 66% of the analyzed letters further supports the idea that modern business practices prioritize relationship-building and professionalism. Traditional business writing often relies on generic greetings, but the preference for addressing the recipient by name in this study suggests a shift toward more personalized communication. This shift is consistent with the findings of Tyrväinen and Päivärinta (2015), who discussed the importance of digital readability and cross-cultural appropriateness in contemporary communication. Personalized greetings not only enhance the tone of the letter but also demonstrate an understanding of the recipient's identity, contributing to the establishment of a more collaborative and professional relationship.

The body of the letters, consisting of two to three concise paragraphs, is another feature that aligns with the principles of clarity and brevity emphasized in business communication. This structure mirrors the advice provided by Prasad (2020), who advocated for clear, straightforward language in business correspondence. By addressing only one point per paragraph, the letters maintain focus and avoid unnecessary complexity, which is crucial in professional communication where time is often limited, and clarity is paramount.

In terms of linguistic features, the use of formal, professional, and informative language in the business letters examined further underscores the importance of maintaining a level of professionalism and clarity in business communication. The formal vocabulary—such as using "intend" instead of "plan" and "purchase" instead of "buy"—demonstrates a commitment to professionalism, aligning with Watson's (2004) assertion that formality in business letters reflects seriousness and professionalism. The study's findings on the use of specific industry-related terms to convey clear service details, such as "hotels," "transportation," and "visa," highlight the importance of informativeness in avoiding misunderstandings. This is particularly relevant in the context of business communication, where precise information is critical for decision-making.

Additionally, the study's focus on politeness as a linguistic feature reveals its central role in fostering positive professional relationships. The use of modal verbs like "would" and polite phrases such as "please contact our hotline" is indicative of a courteous communication style that seeks to maintain professionalism while ensuring the recipient feels respected. This finding corroborates Yu and Fu's (2014) argument that politeness is a key feature of business letters, and it aligns with broader research in business

communication that emphasizes the role of tone in shaping the effectiveness of messages (Zeng & Della, 2024).

The study also contributes to the understanding of ESP principles by showing how they are applied in real-world business contexts. Unlike many previous studies that have focused on academic settings or theoretical models, this research examines actual business letters that have achieved success in terms of communication and business outcomes. This empirical approach provides valuable insights into the specific structural and linguistic choices that contribute to successful business communication. By demonstrating that ESP principles are not just abstract concepts but can be applied effectively in real-world scenarios, the study strengthens the connection between academic theory and professional practice.

From a practical standpoint, the findings have several implications for both business practitioners and educators. For business professionals, the study highlights the importance of adapting letter structures to suit the specific context in which the letter is being written. The findings suggest that a successful business letter should prioritize clarity, conciseness, and personalization, while also ensuring that it aligns with the norms and expectations of the industry. Educators, particularly those teaching ESP or Business English, can use these findings to develop more contextually relevant curricula that reflect the real-world practices of business communication. By focusing on the linguistic features and structural elements that contribute to successful business correspondence, educators can better prepare students to meet the demands of professional communication in diverse industries.

Moreover, the study underscores the value of incorporating authentic workplace materials into ESP courses. By analyzing real business letters, students can gain a more nuanced understanding of the practical applications of business communication principles. This approach not only enhances students' writing skills but also prepares them for the challenges they will face in professional environments. In this sense, the study provides a useful model for future research that seeks to bridge the gap between academic instruction and workplace needs.

The study's limitations, including its focus on a single industry and geographic region, suggest opportunities for future research. Comparative studies across different industries and cultural contexts would provide further insights into whether the patterns identified in this study are universally applicable or specific to the travel industry in West Nusa Tenggara. Additionally, research exploring the evolution of business letter writing in the digital age, particularly in light of increasing reliance on email and other electronic communication tools, would be valuable for understanding how traditional business letter structures and language features are adapting to new communication technologies.

This study provides significant contributions to the field of business communication by offering an in-depth analysis of the structural and linguistic features that characterize successful business letters. By examining real-world correspondence, the study bridges the gap between theoretical ESP principles and their practical application in professional settings. The findings offer valuable insights for both business professionals and educators, contributing to more effective business communication practices and ESP curricula.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully proved that successful English business letters in an authentic work context have a generic structural pattern and specific linguistic features that differ from academic formats. An analysis of 50 authentic business letters from travel agencies in West Nusa Tenggara revealed that successful business letters have a systematic structure without a subject line and are characterized by four main linguistic features: formality, practicality-professionalism, informativeness, and politeness.

The research findings successfully bridge the gap between ESP theory and practical business communication applications by analyzing authentic correspondence proven to successfully achieve business objectives. This study makes a significant contribution to the practical understanding of the application of ESP principles in real-world business contexts, while also providing empirically based recommendations for effective business communication practices. Thus, this study not only validates the theoretical principles of ESP but also reveals practical adaptations that enhance the effectiveness of business communication in achieving partnership and business collaboration objectives.

While this study provides valuable insights into business letter writing within the travel and tourism sector, several avenues for future research emerge. Comparative studies across different business sectors (e.g., manufacturing, banking, technology) would determine whether the identified patterns are sector-specific or generalizable across industries. Cross-cultural comparative research comparing Indonesian business letters with those from Western, East Asian, or Middle Eastern contexts could illuminate culture-specific adaptations and universal principles of effective business communication, particularly valuable given increasing globalization. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining how business letter writing evolves with digital transformation and intervention studies implementing these findings in ESP classrooms would validate the practical applicability and pedagogical effectiveness of authentic workplace correspondence approaches. These research directions would extend theoretical understanding while contributing to more contextually relevant ESP instruction for diverse professional and cultural contexts.

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