

Genre Structure and Writer Identity in EFL Students' Application Letters

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Abstract: Writing for academic and professional purposes has been increasingly challenging for applicants as it requires a certain degree of proficiency to promote themselves as potential workers in the desired position. Considering the significance of English as the global lingua franca, there is an increasing need to ensure that formal writings, in different fields and contexts, adhere to the generic and linguistic standards necessary for effective written communication. This study presents an examination of genre features and rhetorical strategies of job application letters written by Tunisian Business students. More specifically, it intends to investigate how far novice non-native English candidates can successfully use the genre components and persuasive strategies of the target language. A corpus of 30 undergraduate job application letters was subject to move analysis, using the top-down approach, based on Khan and Tin's (2012) model as an analytical framework. The results indicated that the participants showed different types of rhetorical pattern preferences used in various sequences and frequencies to articulate the same communicative purpose of the genre. The analysis revealed also that Addressing, establishing credentials and ending politely proved to be the most preponderant moves in the corpus. Yet, although the majority of applicants have commonly attempted to use an appropriate schematic structure in writing their job application letters, most of them failed to prove any creativity in elaborating their unique characteristics and achievements. The paper concludes with the possible linguistic and pedagogical implications of the study.

Keywords: Application letter, EFL, identity, moves, rhetorical analysis

1. Introduction

The job application letter has increasingly become significant in the employment procedure and in Business communication especially with the globalization of the world economy. Indeed, this document serves to create a positive impression of the candidate to the prospective recruiter. Bhatia (1993) argued that this letter intends to clarify the detailed information mentioned in the attached CV or resume as well as to connect this information to the desired qualifications and skills highlighted in the job advertisement. He also pointed out that job applications are deemed as one particular realization of a broad category of promotional genres such as advertisements, sales letters, company brochures and leaflets. With the increasing interest in Business Communication modules around the world, it is highly significant that learners are exposed to a good variety of genre types to be able to identify its communicative purpose, the audience's expectations, and to recognize as well as to develop the common features and the rhetorical structure of a given text (Bronia, 2005; Nadif & Benattabou, 2021; Kartite, Nadif & Benfilali, 2021). As such, the primary goal of a job application letter is to elicit a positive response from the reader, that is an interview for the candidate, as it serves "both as an introduction of yourself and as a strategy to interest employers sufficiently to read your resume and to grant you an interview" (Baugh, 1991, p. 125). To achieve this, the applicants are supposed to present

their credentials by establishing a favorable, positive and pertinent description of their skills and abilities in relation to the advertised position's requirements or specificities. Hence, the applicants' description should be consciously selective in the sense that it highlights the most significant aspects of the candidature.

In reality, many students struggle to produce successful and effective letters as they seem to suffer from poor writing performance in various genres such as academic essays, application letters, university personal statements etc... The challenge is certainly greater for applicants in the contexts, such as Tunisia, where English is a foreign language. In fact, the students' texts display various organizational and semantic problems such as the limited range of arguments and their unfamiliarity with the genre's rhetorical and linguistic conventions which render these letters ineffective. This can be mainly attributed to the inadequate emphasis placed on the genre teaching and learning. In fact, it can be argued that the school and university curriculum generally overlooks the different types of genres which are supposed to be taught to students both at the secondary and tertiary levels. Further, instructors generally tend not to lend enough weight to the genre teaching activities by leaving room for students to produce their own texts. The lessons are purely theoretical and there is no chance for the learners to practice their writing. In this respect, students are not directly sensitized to the generic requirements of the target genre. That is, they do not investigate in detail the genre's purposes, conventions and writing style. In this concern, Bhatia (1993) argued that "grammatical competence has traditionally been given the most important place" (p. 318) in language teaching, yet generic competencies have always been neglected.

Genre analysis studies in job application letters have been conducted by various linguists since the early 1990's. Indeed, Bhatia (1993) first determined cover letters as a specific genre in business writing. He investigated the job application letters as well as sales promotional letter basing on the use of schematic structural analyses and he identified also the similarities of both types of documents with regards to their communicative purpose as well as their rhetorical patterns. The obtained results stimulated many researchers' interests in this genre.

Tatsanajamsuk (2017), for instance, investigated the archetypal pattern and grammatical features observed in English application letters produced by English native applicants applying Bhatia's (1993) model. The findings indicated that all the model's moves were present in the corpus; however, three of them appeared as obligatory moves in the analyzed data, namely Move 1: *Establishing Credentials*, Move 2: *Introducing Candidature* and Move 7: *Ending Politely*. In addition, the use of tenses was examined in relation to the communicative function of the genre. Nevertheless, the reliability as well as the generalizability of the obtained results of this research are still questionable as the corpus is gathered from different internet websites the fact which may affect the authenticity and originality of the data used. Similarly, Wang (2005) analyzed the rhetorical patterns of 40 motivation letters using Bhatia's seven-move analytical pattern as the basic unit of analysis. Nonetheless, the findings indicated the presence of six moves in the analyzed letters including Establishing self, offering self, referring to enclosed materials, using pressure tactics, inviting further actions, and a good willing ending. The researcher found that only two moves, namely Move 2: *Offering self* and Move 5: *Inviting further actions*, appeared to be obligatory in the corpus as they were present in all the letters. This pragmatic-oriented analysis may be of valuable insights for novice applicants as well as genre analysis practitioners.

Nahar (2013) explored the common communicative moves in 13 motivation letters which were directed to one purposive company. The findings showed that the rhetorical analysis was confusing as there were moves within a move, that is, according to the researcher, different layers of moves such as the case of Move 5, which is the main part of the letter, which embeds other functional moves. Besides, the rhetorical examination of the corpus revealed the unclear sequencing and structural disorder at the level of the different moves in the corpus which was explained by the influence of the cultural context. On the other side, due to the small data set (13 letters), any generalization from this research should be tentative.

Khan and Tin (2012) conducted another research in which they investigated whether the genre conventions in job application letters written in Pakistan have witnessed certain changes since Bhatia's (1989) study in the South Asian context. They inferred that applicants totally omitted the *Self-degradation* moves as mentioned in Bhatia's model. Nonetheless, they resort to *glorifying the employer's* move as a persuasive strategy to persuade the reader of their suitability for the intended

position. They concluded also that despite their good use of the typical formulaic expressions, the majority of applicants failed to use language creatively and elaborately to portray an appealing image about themselves without showing too much imposition. Khan and Tin concluded their study by providing a final rhetorical scheme which will be adapted in the present study.

Table 1. Khan and Tin's (2012) model of moves and steps in job application letters.

Moves and steps	Definition
1. Addressing (A)	The writer's first communicative act and identification with the audience, often in formal and polite manner.
2. Referring to the source of information (RSI)	The applicant refers to advertisement in which the job was advertised, or to another source.
3. Offering candidature (OC)	The writer shows interest in the position.
4. Establishing credentials (EC)	This move carries the main thrust of the communicative purpose. Several steps/ strategies are usually applied to establish credentials.
• Referring to the enclosed CV/ documents (REC)	Reference is made to the CV, and other documents enclosed.
• Listing qualifications (LQ)	The writer lists educational accomplishments, especially the tertiary and postgraduate.
• Detailing experience (DE)	Details of work experience are provided.
• Emphasizing skills & achievements (ESA)	Professional skills and achievements are emphasized.
• Highlighting personality strengths (HPS)	Strengths of personality and character are highlighted.
• Predicting success (PS)	The applicant is optimistic about the outcome of his/ her letter.
5. Glorifying the employer (GE)	The greatness of the target organization or employer/ addressee is emphasized.
6. Ending politely (EP)	Courtesy and respect is shown through expression of gratitude, requesting positive response, and offering further information.
• Soliciting response (favorable) (SR)	Here polite request for a response (mostly favorable one) is made.

Building on previous studies, the present paper aims to investigate the way undergraduate EFL students position and project themselves in their motivation letters. More importantly, it intends to examine the frequencies and types of genre features and moves preference employed by Business candidates. This will certainly unveil the rhetorical and linguistic challenges encountered by non-native English speakers in writing English letters of application. To this end, the following research questions are formulated:

1. What are the major rhetorical moves and their linguistic realization used by undergraduate EFL students to articulate the communicative purpose of the genre of application letters?
2. To what extent did the Business applicants succeed in producing persuasive application letters?

2. Methodology

The present study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods of research.

2.1. Participants

A corpus of 30 application letters written by Tunisian-English bilingual job applicants was collected. The letters were obtained from 3rd year undergraduate students studying towards a BA degree in Business at the Higher Institute of Business Administration (public university). All the participants who were involved in this study were native speakers of Arabic. 67% were female students, whereas 33% were males. Their ages ranged from 21 to 26. They studied English as a compulsory subject for more than seven years, as English is taught as a Foreign Language in Tunisia. To ensure the participants' confidentiality, all personal information such as name, age address etc. or any other information likely to identify their identity were removed as the researcher should ensure "the protection of individuals from harm through guarantees of confidentiality, anonymity and informed written consent" (Walsh & Downe, 2006, p.116).

2.2 Data collection and description

In this study, students were put in a fictional situation in which they were asked to write job application letters as if they were actually applying for a job advertisement. However, they were informed also that their letters would be used for research studies to assess their writing abilities. The activity was carefully explained to the students without receiving any guiding instructions from the teacher regarding the genre features or characteristics. The time given to accomplish this task was 60 minutes. After obtaining the corpus, the letters were sampled and coded from one to 30.

Table 2. Description of the collected corpus.
Application letters

Discipline	Business
Total n of ALs	30
Total n of words	12.660
Average of length	422
Range	239- 513

2.3. Data analysis procedure

Employing Khan and Tin's (2012) model of move analysis, each application letter was carefully investigated and had-tagged for the moves and steps identification. This involved analyzing how the writers strategically employed such functional components in terms of frequency, type, position in the letter and number of occurrences. The top-down approach to corpus analysis, which is considered a key approach in move and genre analysis (Lieungnapar & Todd, 2011), was applied. This approach is comprehensively described and widely adopted in ESP contexts (Biber, Conner & Upton, 2007; Cotos, 2018). At this level, the collected letters were segmented into separate paragraphs adopting Khan and Tin's (2012) model as a starting point to investigate the discourse functions and the communicative purpose of the identified moves and steps. The determination of the recurrent moves and steps boundaries was basically relied on the used semantic criteria as well as the explicit lexical expressions that may signal the beginning of each move/ step. This will be best illustrated in the results and discussion section.

As the generic investigation i.e. the identification and classification of moves and steps may involve a certain degree of subjectivity (Holmes, 1997), the researcher requested other coders to validate the obtained preliminary results, as validity is a compulsory requirement for all types of study (Oliver, 2010). Indeed, two Linguistics assistant professors worked independently and coded all the moves in all the letters applying the same model. Minor variations were reported in the first phase of analysis; however, the coding guidelines were reviewed and the corpus was recoded to ensure a level of agreement between the researcher and the specialists consulted. After mutual discussions, the analytical differences were removed and they reached a consensus. The moves and steps determination were mainly based on the "knowledge of the generic rhetorical organizational conventions; inference from the content; text divisions, such as openings and closings; and explicit linguistic clues indicating functions, lexical or phrasal" (Al-Ali, 2004, p. 7).

The schematic structure investigation of the present paper adopts Swales' (1981) "move" and "step" as the basic unit of analysis which serves to "interpret regularities of organization in order to understand the rationale of the genre" (Bhatia, 1993, p. 32). Indeed, this analytic strategy aims to uncover the style, structure, content and communicative purpose of the corpus under study. A move can be defined as a text segment with a definable rhetorical function (Swales & Feak, 2009). It is worth mentioning also that each rhetorical move may be realized by one or more sub-moves or steps which is the case in the model applied for the present study. Yet, not all moves include constituent steps. In this respect, Cortes (2013) argued that examining the sub-moves in a corpus "would facilitate the analysis of any type of linguistic or organizational feature" (p.37). As for determining the levels of presence and significance of the identified moves and steps, this study relied on the employed standard categories adopted from Zhang and Wannaruk (2016) and Ye's (2019)-research. In this regard, a move or step is considered optional if it appears in 50% or less of the letters, whereas it is deemed obligatory if they are present between 51% and 99% of the data. However, a move is considered as obligatory if it occurs in 100% of the corpus under study.

3. Results and discussion

The generic investigation of the collected data revealed a certain degree of variability in the frequency and ordering of moves as it is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Moves and steps frequency in the corpus.

MOVES/ STEPS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Move 1: Addressing	28	93%
Move 2: Referring to the source of information	7	23%
Move 3: Offering candidature	22	73%
Move 4: Establishing credentials	30	100%
Step a: Referring to the enclosed cv	8	26%
Step b: Listing qualifications	24	80%
Step c: Detailing experience	5	16%
Step d: Emphasizing skills and achievements	7	23%
Step e: Highlighting personality strengths	10	33%
Step f: Predicting success	12	40%
Move 5: Glorifying the employer	2	6%

Move 6: Ending politely	30	100%
Step a: Soliciting response	9	30%
Step b: Offering to provide further information	16	53%
Step c: Expressing gratitude	23	76%
Step d: Closing with courtesy	23	76%

3.1 Move 1: Addressing

Occupying the header position on the application letter is the move which addresses the reader. It is the opening move of the letters and one of the most frequent moves with 93% occurrence. According to Khan and Tin (2012), it is the writer's first communicative act where the applicants identify and salute the target addressee or audience. Based on the findings, the majority of students initiated their letters by using the Adjective+ Noun combination such as Dear Sir/ Madam. Other applicants opted to greet the addressee by their professional titles or position such as: Dear Manager or Dear Mr. the director of human resources, while some others resorted to the use of simple noun forms such as Sir/ Madam (AL 5). This suggests that the candidates are obviously conscious of the social hierarchy between the addresser and the addressee and even try to put the prospective recruiter's status more explicitly. By opening their application letters with this move, Business students wanted to create an atmosphere of cordiality and respect (Santos, 2002, p. 187) with their prospective recruiters. However, the most striking aspect of the salutation move is that all the candidates avoided greeting the addressee by his/ her real name. This could be attributed the writers' tendency to keep a distance from their managers and maintain a high degree of respect and a formal relation. Indeed, it could be considered a face-saving move in which Tunisian candidates did not dare to take the risk of establishing a close relationship with their employers, on the contrary, they tended to employ more neutral and formulaic greeting expressions to mitigate the imposition and acknowledge the distance from the addressee, thus establishing a social inequality between them. It may be also inferred that Tunisian applicants' writing style may be affected by the French one which is characterized by "a more rigid observance of formality and respect" (Jekins & Hinds, 1987, p. 333).

Other students opted to employ an impersonal and even an open-ended form of address by initiating their letters with the expression "to whom it may concern" which reveals that the applicant could not explicitly address the right person who is the prospective employer to whom the letter could directly be addressed. In this concern, Loughed (2003) argued that in certain cases the sender is not restricted to the use of frequently employed expressions such as "Dear" + the addressee's full name. Instead, they may simply write Dear + the addressee's position or the formulaic expression 'To whom it may concern'. As such, the use of various greeting phrases of the Business applicants depends on their personal choices and individualistic styles in opening their motivation letters.

3.2. Move 2: Referring to the source of information

In this move, applicants are supposed to refer to the source of information through which they came to know about the job offer. It serves to ensure the readers that candidates rightfully apply for the purposive job offer. However, the findings revealed that a minority of the candidates adhered to the typical structure of the job application letters concerning the move of "Referring to the source of information". In fact, only seven (out of 30), (23%) students were aware of the necessity of mentioning the source of information of the position's advertisement. This move may considerably help the candidates to legitimately express their willingness to apply and request further consideration of their letters. Additionally, by referring to the job offer vacancy and stating how they knew about the position, applicants may prove their high interest in their addressee's concerns and thus they could be considered for a positive reply. As for the linguistic feature employed for this move, the most common syntactic items used by the Tunisian Business students were as follows: posted/advertised+ prepositional phrase, that I found/ you posted + prepositional phrase.

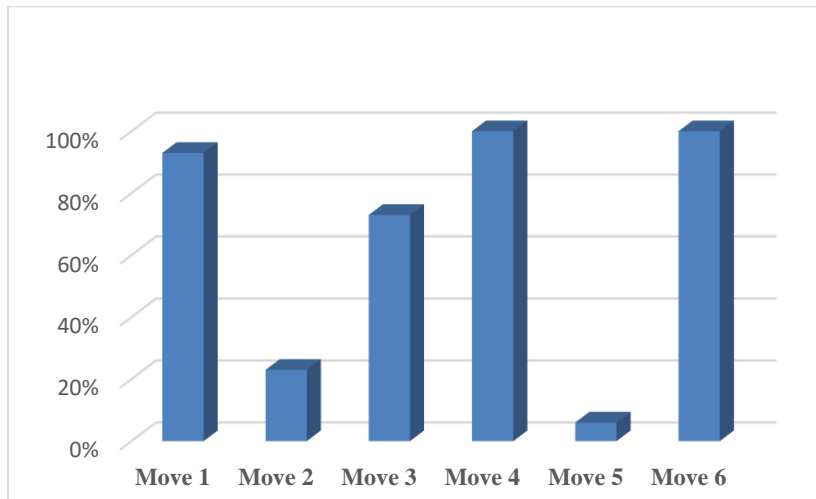


Figure 1. Rhetorical patterns of Tunisian application letters.

The scarcity of this move in the Business students' letters, as illustrated in Figure 1, may be attributed to the fact that these novice students are unfamiliar with the communicative function of this move. As such, they may unintentionally forget to refer to the source of information of the job advertisement or they may simply skip it assuming that mentioning the advertisement in which the position was named and described will not be of great value in promoting their candidature.

This move could be illustrated in the following extracts:

Extract 1:

I am highly interested in the job offer that you posted on your website [AL 27].

Extract 2:

I am really excited to know about the Business developer position on your company website. [AL13].

These samples show a great interest on the part of the candidates in the target position which is employed by the writers to put more pressure on the reader to accept their request. This move is commonly realized through the use of some intensifiers such as 'highly, really...' and with lexical items such as 'great pleasure', and 'sincere interest' so that they can succeed "to elicit a specific response from its reader(s)" which is an invitation for an interview (Bhatia, 1993, p. 59).

Contradictory results, nonetheless, were reported in Al-Ali's (2004) cross-cultural contrastive study of Arabic and English job application letters regarding this move. In fact, the rhetorical analysis of the collected data proved that Move 2: *Referring to the source of information* occurred as an obligatory move both in the English and Arabic application letters where it appeared in almost 93% of the letters in which applicants showed their interest in the addressee's offer by referring to the job advertisement. This strategy allows the students, in this case, to legitimately express their wish for application and consideration.

3.3. Move 3: Offering candidature

As for Move 3, it introduces the main purpose of the application letter. In this move, the majority of candidates stated explicitly the job vacancy they are applying for. This move may be regarded as a way of starting the letter since it explains the reason why this letter has been written. In other words, it serves to lead the reader's attention to the main subject of the letter. It appeared to be a quasi-obligatory move as it was present in 73% of the data under investigation. In some cases, this move merged with other moves or steps, most often, it appeared with Move 2: *Referring to the source of information*. This move did not include a variety of details or any personal information, instead, it appeared brief and concise, most commonly realized in one sentence or as a part of a sentence. However, at the level of sentence number and percentage, Tunisian Business students devoted approximately 20% of the whole letter to Move 3: *Offering candidature*. The analysis revealed that Move 3 can be realized directly or indirectly. Indeed, the most frequent lexical feature employed for the direct strategy was the intensive use of the verb "apply" which, according to the linguistic statistics, appeared in almost most occurrences of this move. As for the linguistic items employed by the other applicants who opted for the indirect strategy in this move particularly the verb phrase "I like to express my interest in the web

developer position” or “I am very interested in the offer advertised...” to ensure the letter’s communicability.

Though this move appeared as poorly developed, lacking linguistic proficiency, its heavy presence early in the letters demonstrates the students’ awareness of the importance of this strategy when applying for a job and it reflects their deliberate tendency to directly state the main purpose of the letter. Indeed, “*offering candidature*” move together with Move 2 “*Referring to the source of information*” are generally considered as prototypical strategies for the opening of the application letter (Bhatia, 1993, p. 63). However, Lees (2011), a UK-based career strategist, considers the *Offering Candidature* move, together with the *Referring to the source of information* move, a common generic opening which proved to be ineffective in getting the hiring staff’s attention, thus a mere “waste”. In the same context, Glickman argued that a successful application letter should be initiated by a strong opening sentence where candidates are supposed to ‘start with the punch line- why this job is exciting to you and what you bring to the table’, as cited in Lees (2011), rather than stating your intention to apply for the target position or saying where did the applicant know about the offer.

Interestingly, at the level of this move, it is worth mentioning that the rhetorical analysis of the corpus under study revealed serious language problems in some letters. In fact, students’ linguistic repertoires seem to be highly limited as some of them failed to successfully employ a standard academic language with formulaic expressions which are commonly used in the Business sector. Further, there is a clearly irrelevant use of vocabulary and inappropriate choice of language which is obviously inconsistent with the generally employed style in Business application letters such as the case in the extract below which denotes that the student’s realization and use of Move 3 seems inadequate in such a formal business context and the letter’s opening seems to be unsuccessful.

Extract 3:

I hope you are fine, then I am currently looking for a job, and I would like to apply for your offer for the position of software engineer. [AL 11]

3.4. Move 4: Establishing credentials

Still in adherence to Khan and Tin’s (2012) model, the most predominant and detailed move is *Establishing credentials*. It is considered the central move of the letter as it carries the main weight of the candidate’s communicative purpose. According to Bhatia (1993), the main communicative function of this genre is to highlight the candidates’ qualifications and professional experiences which are relevant to the job’s requirements to persuade the employer of their suitability for the target position. Being the core of the application letter, this move seems to be of an obligatory nature in the selected data. Indeed, it was significantly present in 30 ALs, that is 100% of the corpus. In this regard, the findings seem to be congruent with Khan and Tin in their generic investigation of job letters written by Pakistani applicants, where Move 4 occurred in all the investigated corpus. Similar findings were also found in other studies, (such as Al-Ali, 2004; Saleem, Sharif, Shah, 2019; Patanasorn & Thumngong, 2020), in which the *Establishing credentials* move was totally present in all the motivation letters. This suggests that with the remarkable frequency and prevalence of this move in the Business application letters, undergraduate Tunisian applicants attempt to enhance their chances to meet the expectations of their prospective employers by glorifying most of their academic and professional achievements, favorable qualifications and relevant experiences, insisting mainly on their determination to the applied position. Bhatia (1993) describes this step as crucial as it may determine the successfulness of the proposed candidature. In this strategy, applicants tend to use the self-appraisal and self-glorification strategies by enumerating their qualifications and relevant skills to emphasize their value as potential workers.

The significance of this move does not only reside in its preponderance in all the Tunisian application letters, but also in its length compared to other moves. The *Establishing credentials* move preoccupied approximately 54.6%, on average, of the whole application letter. In other words, the vast majority of undergraduate applicants devoted more than half of their letters to Move 4 only. This might imply that Tunisian Business students perceived this move as the essence of their letters this is why it appears to be the most prevailing and elaborated in their texts. This could be strongly expected in the data under study as it can be deemed as the central part of the letter where they are supposed to emphasize their academic achievements and promote their qualifications aiming at persuading the readers. These findings confirm with Mohamed, Halim, Husin, and Mokhtar’s (2017) research on genre

analysis of job application letters produced by Malaysian writers adapting Khan and Tin's (2012) latest framework of moves and steps. They found that this move was applied to 100% of the samples arguing that all the applicants shared the same tendency to rely on this move to highlight their valuable strengths and skills to the desired job by providing relevant supportive details concerning their personal, academic and professional backgrounds. They found also that this move is realized by six steps: Step 1: *Referring to the enclosed CV*, Step 2: *Listing qualifications*, Step 3: *Detailing experience*, Step 4: *Emphasizing skills and achievements*, Step 5: *Highlighting personality strengths* and Step 6: *Predicting success*.

Step 1: Referring to the enclosed CV

This step intends to inform the prospective reader about the attached document, generally a CV or a resume, that will complement the letter. The analysis of the collected letters revealed that this step is not part of the rituals or the rhetorical scheme of this particular genre produced by Arab students. In fact, it did not feature a remarkable presence in the corpus as it occurred only in eight application letters, that is nearly 26% of the texts. It was employed by the applicants, as a persuasive strategy, to provide more informational evidence that might be needed regarding their academic path, educational certificates and professional trainings. However, from the analysis it was observed that only quarter of the students took the initiative to refer to their enclosed CVs or other necessary documents. This may suggest that the participants did not realize the significance of including attached documents which may enhance their chances in securing the job they are applying for. This view is confirmed by Rahim and Arifin (2014) who claimed that this strategy is considered to be of a paramount importance in the letter of application and by omitting this move "writers do not have enough supporting references to support their applications. Thus, it can hamper their chances to secure the job" (p. 121). As such, it can be inferred that the absence of this step causes the prospective employer not to have a comprehensive image regarding the candidates' relevant skills and achievements, thereby losing the potential to get admitted to the target position. On the contrary, the few candidates who opted to include this move in their letters wanted to make their applications more detailed and attractive by providing tangible evidence of their suitability. Additionally, by offering more details in the Curriculum Vitae, which could not be exhaustively described in the application letter, the applicants would obviously prove their professionalism, sincerity and politeness towards their prospective readers. This move could be illustrated in the following samples:

Extract 4:

Please take a moment to review my attached resume [AL 15].

Extract 5:

You will find all details of my career in the attached CV [AL 20].

The low frequency observed at the level of this move seems to be congruent with Tatsanajamsuk's (2017) results of English application letters written by native speakers which indicated that Move 4: *Enclosing documents* featured lower presence compared to other moves and steps and thus it was considered as optional.

The paucity of this step in the studied corpus may be attributed to the students' unawareness of this genre's conventional pattern and the necessity of mentioning certain strategies. Obviously, they lack experience in writing successful application letters, thus it could be highly expected that they neglect such important moves or steps in their letters. One might argue also that most applicants took this step for granted, that is they assumed that their prospective employers would read their enclosed documents without explicitly referring to them.

Step 2: Listing qualifications

After providing information on self-identity, the next step is: *Listing qualifications*. This step presents the most detailed and central part of the letter where candidates attempt to provide the most relevant information about themselves and persuade their recruiters of their suitability for the advertised position. It seems to have the highest frequency rate, compared to other steps, in the *Establishing credentials* move as it dominated 80% of the analyzed corpus. It generally comprises details describing "qualification and experience, interests, abilities and achievements etc." (Bhatia, 1993, p. 65) to promote the applicants' candidature. This step serves to present an extensive description of the students' academic, personal and professional strengths based on the self-promotion and self-representation of themselves to demonstrate their suitability and appropriateness for the job, hence, satisfying their prospective employer's expectations and requirements. Similar results were found in

Warsidi's (2022) study of job application letters written by English and Indonesian candidates, where this step marked frequency in approximately 95% of the total corpus. By using this rhetorical strategy, applicants strive to create an early positive impression about themselves, ensuring to their readers that they are the right persons to choose for the offered position. This step can be illustrated in the extracts below.

Extract 6:

I am very familiar with the field of web development and App programming as I have the basics of programming through the experience I gained from my institute and also I am able to write well-known programming languages such as Java, Python, C, JavaScript and Flutter [AL 21].

Extract 7:

I am a motivated and disciplined person and I am talented in doing many things, I have a good adaptability. I do already have a good mastery of programming languages such as Python, Symfony, Java, Flutter, JavaScript and C# [AL 22].

The rhetorical exploration of the letters revealed that the majority of participants appeared willing to share their valuable qualities and relevant academic abilities as it is a mere listing of the possessed degrees, certificates, institutions etc. Nonetheless, none of the candidates succeeded in relating these qualifications and achievements to the applied position's relevant skills and competencies which they gained during their educational careers. In this respect, Bhatia (1993) pointed out that:

a potentially successful application needs to stress that the writer is aware of the requirements of the job and that he has sufficient qualities and potential in the form of qualifications, relevant experience, personal attributes, strength of character etc. to meet these requirements satisfactory. (p. 65)

Although the participants of this study seem to be familiar with the *Listing qualifications step*, the rhetorical investigation of the corpus revealed that they are facing problems in the realization of this step. It was observed that this step was not well developed and elaborated in the letters in the sense that the sentences appeared to be very brief and concise, lacking detailed description, thus unable to convince the recruiters of the candidates' competence in handling the job. Indeed, the majority of applicants tended to provide a general and superficial overview of their educational path the fact that may affect the application's authenticity and credibility. This inadequate and informal writing style may be attributed to the students' lack of self-confidence, experience and inability to write effectively as they failed to explore in depth their skills in writing. This may threaten the authors' positive identity and hinder their self-promotion and self-appraisal although they do have the necessary academic qualifications. These findings can be confirmed by an earlier study carried out by Al-Ali (2004) investigating English and Jordanian application letters in terms of rhetorical and linguistic strategies. He argued that the participants tend to use short and rather general statements concerning their candidature. He asserted also that "Most participants were found to be using these letters just to enclose the documents required, without taking advantage of the opportunity of promoting themselves to convince the prospective employer of the strength of their professional or academic qualifications" (p. 16). As such, this particular step fails sometimes to fulfill the communicative purpose of the genre.

Step C: Detailing experience

This step intends to discuss the candidate's relevant experience in the related field. It is the space where they can enumerate the missions they were responsible for, list their voluntary activities and highlight their most successful professional achievements. Accordingly, it seems to have a significant persuasive function as it describes the writers' professional background in relation to the expectations of the prospective recruiters. Nonetheless, the analysis demonstrated that it appears to be the least frequent step in Move 4 as it occurred only in five application letters, which is 16% of the corpus. These few applicants have successfully attempted to include the *Detailing experience* step in the form of their previous professional trainings, internships and projects undertaken as part of their current studies. More successful applicants, however, were more interested in describing the extent to which their experiences are relevant to the intended position and how they will contribute to the company's progress rather than merely listing them to meet their employers' goals and expectations. The inclusion of this step by this small number of candidates proves their awareness of the prospective employer's needs on the one hand and the genre conventions and the students' writing skills on the other, despite the presence of certain shortcomings. It can be illustrated in the samples below:

Extract 8:

My previous responsibilities included the management and development of websites, checking the daily content programming and producing several websites [AL 3].

Extract 9:

I have an experience in developing and testing soft wares and also integrating web service analysis. I am also experienced in the IT management field which helped me to develop my sense of problem solving [AL 13].

A possible explanation for the scarcity of the *Detailing experience* step is the paucity, or even absence, of the professional activities of students, especially at the undergraduate level which is the case of this research. Indeed, the participants in this study might have fewer or no relevant prior work experiences to mention. In this concern, Khan and Tin (2012) argued that this step can be considered obligatory for experienced graduates, whereas it is supposed to be optional for 'fresh' graduates. In the same way, Samraj and Monk (2008) averred that "the step, work and education, seems crucial for the construction of a relevant self" (p. 201). However, it is worth mentioning also that all students in this particular section had at least two professional trainings during which they are supposed to acquire valuable skills and competencies. Thus, it can be concluded to a certain extent, the neglect of this step can be deemed as a rhetorical flaw that stems from the applicants' lack of familiarity with the genre's requirements with regard to its linguistic and organizational aspects. This indicates the significance of realizing the genre needs in the overall writing competencies of the candidates.

Step D: Emphasizing skills and achievements

As its preceding one, this step featured low frequency compared to other steps in the same move. Indeed, it was present only in seven application letters, that is 23% of the corpus. According to Khan and Tin (2012), this step has the most significant persuasive function as it illustrates the transformation of the candidates' academic and professional backgrounds into qualities which the prospective employers are looking for in their potential employees. Indeed, some of the students in this study confidently attempted to use this strategy to remind their recruiters that they have the required and sufficient competencies and potential in terms of skills, academic and professional achievements to meet their expectations. In other words, it is a kind of self-appraisal and self-glorification of the students to market or sell themselves and convince the readers to acknowledge the strengths of their candidature, thus their suitability to the target position. Interestingly, this step recorded 100% presence in Mohamed, et al (2017)'s study on Malaysian job application letters where all the candidates appeared to be so self-confident enough to devote a significant space in their letters to shed light on their relevant qualities and skills to establish their relevance to the expectations of the intended offer.

Although Step D: *Emphasizing skills and achievements* may be regarded as a good strategy to capture the reader's attention and impress prospective employers by glorifying the students' relevant skills and qualifications; however, the majority of them missed this opportunity where they could push their readers to consider their application. The scarcity of this step in the large majority of Tunisian application letters can be a deliberate choice opted by the Business students to prove a certain degree of modesty to their prospective readers. In this concern, Hofstede (1991) argued that "you trust your prospective employer to make the right decisions; there is no need for you to come on strong or glorify yourself" (p. 45). As such, according to him, candidates should confidently rely on their readers to read between the lines and make decisions on the students' relevance and suitability to the advertised job. Or it could be argued that the paucity of this step may be attributed to the Business students' lack of linguistic and rhetorical proficiency in English Language writing. In fact, they may have avoided the inclusion of this step as it is not a mere listing of previous educational and professional achievements, it is rather the creation of a certain logical development of ideas and strategies that would satisfy the communicative purpose of the genre under investigation. In other words, applicants are supposed to prove their proficiency in developing their ideas logically and coherently. They are also required to convince their audience of their suitability for the target company or institution, which is actually beyond the students' writing abilities at this level.

Step E: Highlighting personality strengths

In this step, applicants are supposed to present their personal qualities and characteristics which they believe are relevant to the requirements of the intended position. It is meant to explicitly highlight the students' unique strengths and skills to distinguish them from the large pool of candidates. Hence, if

depicted properly and structured perfectly, it may be deemed as one of the main strategies used by the students to persuade their prospective employers to consider their candidature. Vossler (2007) assumed that “part of valuing the personal includes valuing originality and individuality” (p. 52). By contrast, despite its rhetorical function and its significance in creating a positive impression of the candidates, this step appeared to be optional as it was present in 33% of the corpus, that is 10 letters only.

This step may be illustrated in the following samples:

Extract 10

I have a great ability to work with a team. I can collaborate with web engineers to resolve technical issues, I am highly competent in hard and software, and also I am hard working [AL 3].

Extract 11

I am not only a well-organized person but also I have a great passion for creating a positive and competitive working environment [AL 23].

These applicants shared the same tendency to include the *Highlighting personality strengths* step in their application letters believing that this would be appreciated by their readers since they tend to consider that stating personal issues, concerning their personality, character, interests etc. is highly welcomed. They assumed also that this type of self-promotion helps them to know what kind of personality the applicants have and whether it meets their intentions. Nonetheless, applicants are not advised to delve into too many details talking about their personal attributes, ending up with a self-narrative, autobiographical document. This may not sound appealing to the readers and they may doubt the candidates' credibility. Hence, the application letter would appear as a mere “unsupported claim of the writer's own superiority based simply on feelings or desires rather than a rational judgement (that) lacks credibility and is likely to be viewed by the readers as purely subjective” (Bhatia, 1993, p. 70). Students should rather select the personal information and issues which are most relevant to the employer's expectations. Bhatia referred to this concept as the ‘relevant self’. He pointed out that “the applicant has a real self, based on which he has to create a relevant self’ to meet the foci and interests of the target institution. This relevant self should represent “a relevant, positive and convincing selection of the applicant's real self” and by contrast, it should “skillfully disguise or conceal the irrelevant, negative and less convincing aspects of the real self” (p. 65).

The remarkable challenge that the students are facing in the current study is the absence of a clear idea of the professionals' intentions, as such they find themselves unable to anticipate their employers' selection criteria.

Step F: Predicting success

It is the last step in Move 4: *Establishing credentials*. It was frequent in 40% of the collected data, that is 12 letters and it generally takes the last position in Move 4. It can be deemed as the candidates' last chance to persuade their recruiters of their suitability to the intended job especially when they do not have strong credentials to present or an adequate writing style that can satisfy the genre's communicative purpose and lead the readers to a positive consideration. This step serves as a motivational strategy meant to portray the applicant as a valuable asset to the company concerned. It consists mainly of the applicants' claims and expectations for success in the applied job in which they attempt to demonstrate their feelings of confidence in their suitability. They strive to convince their recruiters that they are the right person to be selected. This would certainly maximize the applicants' chances to get accepted by the company employer. Khan and Tin's (2012) study reported a higher frequency as far as this step is concerned. Indeed, more than 80% of the applicants realized the significance of signaling to the potential employer their enthusiasm and certainty in succeeding in the job's responsibilities.

The following are two excerpts taken from the original students' application letters:

Extract 12:

I am confident that I will be of a valuable add to your company and I will quickly become a key element in your institution [AL 7].

Extract 13:

I am sure that I will exceed your expectations for this position [AL 24].

As illustrated in Extracts 12 and 13, the candidates applying to the position made use of the *predicting success* step to illuminate their confidence in their effective performance in their professional careers.

3.5. Move 5: Glorifying the employer

In this move, applicants tend to offer some compliments to the potential employer and the intended company or institution. Though this move featured a remarkable occurrence in Khan and Tin's (2012) study of Pakistani job application letters as it appeared in more than 60% of the corpus, it was found to be the least frequent move in this research. In fact, its presence did not exceed 6%, that is it appeared in two application letters only. Bhatia (1993) referred to this move as "Adversary glorification" in which candidates generally tend to directly glorify the addressee and pleasantly praise the prospective recruiter to solicit a favorable reply. Maasum, Darus, Stapa, and Mustaffa (2007) argued that this move is commonly used by some applicants as a pressure tactic not only to gain a positive impression from the reader, but also to be more distinguished from the large pool of candidates applying to the same position. It is, as such, a kind of rhetorical, persuasive strategy that is meant "to indicate not only appreciation but also a kind of glorification of the target organization" (Al Ali, 2006, p. 131) through its appeal to the reader's emotions.

This move can be illustrated in these extracts:

Extract 14:

While reviewing the company's website I was impressed to know that your firm is successful and it operates in a wide variety of fields [AL 16].

Extract 15:

It is an honor to be one of this company's programmers. Working with competent people will add a lot to my CV [AL 21].

Both extracts indicate that the applicants made use of various positive adjectives to glorify the addressee or the target institution to incite the reader to make an agreeable decision. The omission of this move from the Tunisian Business students' letters could be attributed to their deliberate choice in shaping their letters. It may be concluded that the participants of this study did not consider any persuasive value in this move. They appeared to be more aware of the significance of presenting their credentials, qualifications and personal strengths towards prospective employers than praising and glorifying them or their companies. Indeed, instead of intensively praising the target institution, applicants would rather provide statements and pieces of evidence demonstrating the connection between their academic and professional background and the target company's strategic plans and projects which will increase their opportunities for acceptance in the applied position.

3.6. Move 6: Ending politely

It is one of the most frequent moves in the corpus under study which marks the conventional polite ending of an application letter to make a final appeal the prospective employer for favorable consideration. This final move appeared to be obligatory, present in 100% of the letters used by all the candidates attempting to create goodwill in the mind of their potential recruiter (Wang, 2005). It consists mainly in the use of conventional formulaic phrases for a polite closing of the letter which helps to create a positive impression of the applicants. This move is comprised of four steps namely, Step A: *Soliciting response*, Step B: *Offering to provide further information*, Step C: *Expressing gratitude* and Step D: *Closing with courtesy*.

Step A: Soliciting response

In this step, the candidates request a favorable reply from their readers, that is inciting them to a positive response regarding their candidature. In fact, it is used by nine students to ask the prospective employer to make desired decisions such as: inviting for an interview, making further contacts, adding more references etc. It shows as well that students are optimistic and positive about their chances of getting accepted to the applied position. This step appeared in only 30% of the data which implies that not all students are cognitively aware of the use of this strategy. The paucity of this step in the other 70% of the letters may be explained by the cultural factors which generally affect the rhetorical structure of the genre. Martin (2003) averred that "discourse is not universal, and there are socio-cultural factors which may condition the preference for certain rhetorical strategies by the members of different scientific communities" (p. 27). Indeed, it may be argued that in the Tunisian context and culture, students could not explicitly demand for a response from unfamiliar people.

Step B: Offering to provide further information

This strategy is deemed as another form of solicitation in which students attempt to kindly invite their readers to refer back to them in case they need further information, documents, clarifications etc. It is typically employed when the applicants feel uncertain about the sufficiency and the relevance of the information they provide. This step was more frequent than its preceding, it was adopted by 53% of the candidates who were more aware of the significance of facilitating further contact. This step can be illustrated in the following samples.

Extract 16:

It would be a privilege to discuss my qualifications with you in more details [AL 18].

Extract 17:

Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any question [AL 24].

Applicants attempt to write more appealing and convincing job application letters by inviting their prospective employer for further correspondence. Indeed, they strive to prove their flexible availability by providing additional information and enthusiasm in getting the job.

Step C: Expressing gratitude

This step was frequently used in the Business application letters as it reached 76% of the corpus. This implies that the majority of Tunisian students were aware of the social value of showing their gratitude towards the reader in general and conscious of the significant value of expressing appreciation in Business writing more particularly. By using this strategy, the writers shared the same tendency to close their letters by extensive use of some formulaic expressions in an attempt to follow the prototypes of the application letters used by English native speakers. This would persuade their potential employers of their modesty and gratefulness. Besides, Tunisian applicants relied heavily on the use of the Expressing gratitude strategy as a means to soften the amount of imposition upon their readers and as an implicit way to show that they are expecting a positive response. In this respect, Loughheed (2003) claimed that expressing gratitude to the addressee with brief formulaic expressions is a conventional approach which indicates that the writer is bringing his letter to an end. The high frequency of the use of this step in the data under study reveals that the participants are quite aware of the significant value of this approach though it lacked more development and elaboration.

This strategy was implemented through the utilization of the following expressions:

Extract 18:

Thank you for your time and consideration [AL 26].

Extract 19:

Please accept the expressions of my respectful greetings [AL 14].

The use of this proper tone would succeed in redressing the inherent face-threatening nature of the request (Zheng, 2015) without exerting any pressure on the recruiter's freedom of choice. Accordingly, this polite application may succeed in leaving a favorable impression on the potential recruiter and in increasing the candidates' chances of getting admitted to the intended job.

Step D: Closing with courtesy

It is the last strategy deployed by the Business applicants for the closing salutation. They relied on the use of formulaic expressions such as 'sincerely' 'faithfully' 'respectfully' etc. which are typical of formal job application letters. They are considered as 'institutionalized expressions' functioning as 'bookends' to the text (Nattinger & Decarrico, 1992, p. 39, as cited in Henry and Roseberry, 2001). Thereupon, it is considered as an ending strategy rather than a persuasive strategy which serves to maintain an "equal yet adequately respectful" stance (Connor, 2011). This step featured considerable presence as it dominated 73% of the letters which reveals that the majority of the participants opted to follow the generic pattern of closing with courtesy.

As far as the rhetorical structure is concerned, it should be noted that although applicants succeeded, to some extent, in elaborating the needed moves to meet the purpose of the application letters, their positive identity appeared to be fairly weak or even absent in some cases. Indeed, most of them did not take the initiative to use any implicit pressure tactic on the reader to enhance their chances of landing a job. The use of such strategies in self-promotional genres in general may reveal more about the writer's distinguished identity, self-confidence and persuasion abilities to demonstrate "an explicit authorial presence in the text" (Hyland, 2005, p. 51). Nonetheless, the lack or absence of such significant rhetorical and linguistic strategies may affect the applicants' employment opportunities although they possess the necessary academic and professional qualifications. This phenomenon could

be attributed to the limited attention from instructors to teach novice applicants how to effectively use more pressure tactics in their motivation letters (Lipovsky, 2013). Hence, their writings would commonly remain structurally flawed and poorly persuasive as they do not follow any strategy in using any creative tactic to provide relevant information to incite the reader to consider them as appropriate for the intended position.

4. Conclusion

The rhetorical analysis revealed that although the job application letters are not a genre familiar to Tunisian students, an overwhelming majority of applicants attempted to adhere to the typical structure of the genre proposed by Khan and Tin (2012) to reach its communicative purpose. *Addressing*, *Establishing credentials* and *Ending politely* are the most predominant and compulsory moves to be included in this study. As expected, most applicants shared the same tendency to open their letters with Move 1: *Addressing* and consider it as an obligatory move in their letters. This was also the same case for Move 4: *Establishing credentials* which was adopted by all the participants. In this move, candidates attempted to present themselves by introducing their relevant academic qualifications and personal strengths so as to promote their candidature and suitability for the intended position. As expected, it appeared to be the most central and elaborated move which was realized through various steps.

Similarly, Move 6: *Ending politely*, the last move in Khan and Tin's (2012) model, in which students relied on the intensive use of formulaic expressions to convey their thanks and polite ending to their recruiters. However, regarding Move 4: *Referring to the source of information* and Move 5: *Glorifying the employer*, they were hardly observed in the data under investigation as it occurred in two application letters only. This may be attributed to the students' tendency to provide relevant details concerning their academic and professional background, on the one hand, and attempt to avoid the inclusion of certain persuasive or imposition tactics on the reader on the other hand.

The analysis shed light on some discursual challenges encountered by the candidates, especially in their unawareness of some necessary components which are deemed obligatory in this genre and their tendency to intensively use some generic strategies which are not commonly expected by their prospective evaluators. A possible explanation for this might reside in the students' unfamiliarity with the basic generic and linguistic features appropriate to the self-promotional genres in general and to the genre of job application letters more particularly. More interestingly, the participants seem to frequently suffer from poor writing performance where the researcher observed remarkable problems related mainly to grammar, content and Language inappropriateness. Further, applicants experienced various difficulties in transferring their information from their native language (Arabic) to the target language (English). Indeed, due to their limited repertoire of English vocabulary and their ignorance of the standard expressions and formulaic phrases frequently employed in business letters, they resort to the literal translation which generally results in poor writing performance.

Hence, it is highly recommended that instructors, in this field, examine the feasibility of introducing such academic self-promotional genre as potential pedagogical support in classroom activities in teaching Business writing, especially in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts to help applicants cope with the professional writings demands. Indeed, the candidates' rhetorical and linguistic performance, as far as this genre is concerned, will be improved if they are taught explicitly the target genre in relation to its generic pattern and linguistic characteristics. As Bornia (2005) argued, "genre knowledge is a key contributor to the development of reading and writing ability" (p. 76). The academic mobility today urges writers to prove more mastery of the genre's requirements and more familiarity with the target culture's expectations. Accordingly, the present study invites EFL and ESL instructors, curriculum designers and specialists to invest more effort and pay more attention to such genres and try to incorporate them into the various academic and technical writing and communication courses. This would inevitably help to raise the "learners' rhetorical and genre consciousness" (Swales, 1993, as cited in Bhatia, 2002).

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