# Analysis of E-mail Genre: a New Perspective to EAP Writing

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## Abstract

Current advances in computer technology and the growing application of "e-mail" in academic settings as the main communication tool demands EAP practitioners' awareness of the rules and conventions of this genre which determine the choice of discoursal and lexico-grammatical features used to materialize its communicative purpose. In line with such studies as Biria and Tahririan's (1997), Erickson's (1997), Henry and Roseberry's (2001), and Nagel's (1999), this study was an attempt to analyse the electronic messages from the perspective of genres; it contrasted the electronic messages with the parallel corpus of conventional letters in order to find in which level of organization – move schemata, strategies, or lexico-grammatical features –, the differentiating factors between the two corpora lie. The results of statistical tests employed to different parallel features revealed significant differences between the two corpora regarding the generic and formal features under investigation. This study has implications for teaching writing to EAP/ESP students.

**Keywords**: Email genre, EAP writing, corpus, analysis, features, move.

## Introduction
## Background

One of the earliest approaches to the description of the varieties of language is "register analysis" that focuses mainly on the identification of the statistically significant lexico-grammatical features of a linguistic variety (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990). The motivation for such studies was providing statistically significant accounts of distributional frequencies in the target language variety

which offered a basis for prioritizing teaching items in specialized ESP materials (Swales, 1990: 2). However, some authorities have challenged register theory because it emphasizes linguistic forms over contextual features. They also claim that the term "register" is frequently used to refer to the sections within a text which are characterized by certain linguistic forms and does not interpret the text as a whole socio-semiotic phenomenon (Ghadessy, 1993; Swales, 1990).

The inadequacies of the register theory have therefore led to a generic approach to the text analysis. Genre theorists claim that any description of linguistic forms is meaningless unless it incorporates the broader social context in which the forms occur. According to Chandler (1997), genre analysis situates texts within textual and social contexts and underlines their social and cultural features. Bhatia (1993: 13) defines a genre as " a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often, it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form, and functional value". Therefore, it can be inferred that the linguistic forms selected by the writer present the particular communicative purposes, which in turn are determined by the conventions of the discourse community to which it belongs. In other words, genre theorists seek to understand the ways in which lexico-grammatical patterns in texts are globally contextualized so as to realize particularly important social functions (Ghadessy, 1993: 3). At a broader level, genres derive their specific conventions from a general socio-semiotic system. In the same vein, the conventions and presuppositions of the academic culture determine the ways in which the ideas and concepts are linguistically realized in a specific discipline.

Quantitative analyses of texts have been undertaken by different researchers committing large-scale corpus-based statistical studies aimed at providing lists of lexical and grammatical features, which most frequently occur in specific varieties of language. According to Jordan (1997), Michael West was the true originator of register

analysis. He presented a list of 2000 most common words as the basic vocabulary for learning English as a foreign language. Jordan further mentions two ESP books taking a register analysis approach which reveal a number of lexico-grammatical features essential to basic scientific English (Jordan, 1997: 228). Eggins, Wignell, and Martin (1978) analysed history texts. They studied grammatical metaphors, particularly nominalizations in the history texts, and identified two functions of grammatical metaphors in their corpus: to allow readers to organize information in ways that give prominence to their main points, and generalize individual discrete experiences into generic acts, behaviors, and times. Moon (1994) analysed the texture, structure, and lexis of the fixed expressions of an editorial from "The Guardian". He concluded that the analysis of fixed expressions in a text reveals something about the discourse itself, and the strategies adopted by the speaker/writer to communicate his/her message.

Later approaches to text analysis involve the generic description of language, which considers it within the culture-specific pragmatic conventions. According to this approach, the structural interpretation of the text-genre highlights the cognitive organizations or "moves" of the text. Dudley-Evans (1988) revealed a clear cyclical patterning in the writer's choice of the moves by analyzing the discussion section of M. Sc. theses. In addition, Swales (1990) analyzed the introductions to 48 academic articles. He found that the majority of the introductions followed a four-move pattern. Following him, Bhatia (1993) mentions a 7-move schema for sales promotion letters and a 4-move structure for legal discourse in professional settings. Following previous studies, Holmes (1995) investigated the ways in which the rhetorical structure of social science research articles differed from that of natural science articles, and the ways in which social science articles vary. It was found that social science articles shared a common communicative purpose with natural science articles. However, social science articles displayed some distinctive features in the "introduction" and even more so in the "discussion" sections. Following Dudley-Evans (1988) and Swales (1990), Biria and Tahririan (1997) analysed the discussion part of the articles in an issue

of *The Sociology of Education* journal. The results revealed that the texts under analysis were organized according to some explicit move cycles shared by all the texts. The uniform cyclicity of moves indicated that the text is a complete event with formularized organizational schemata.

### Studies on e-mail genre

One of the main questions which plays the role of an immediate impetus for undertaking a study like this relates to the nature of probable differences, supposed or expected to be there between e-mail composition and academic writing. This matter seems to be the concern of many EFL practitioners over the world. Some of these studies have been descriptive in nature, others contrastive. For instance, Yates and Orlikowski's (1992) traced the evolution of the business memo genre around the turn of the century in response to institutional and technological changes and social pressures. They examined changes in the memo genre brought about by the shift from typewritten paper memos to e-mail ones. Their overall claim is that genres evolve over time through reciprocal interaction between institutionalized practices and individual human actions.

In another study, Yates and Orlikowski (1993) investigated the linguistic and textual patterns of electronic communication in a group of participants collaborating on a specific task. The results indicated that the syntax and word choice often evoke conversational informality, emphasis, rhythm, and even vocalization. On the other hand, the messages evince such characteristics of written discourse as formal wording, careful composing and editing, and textual formatting. In addition, they found that the messages display graphic and typographical features or subject line humor, which are unlikely in written and oral discourse.

Weasenforth and Lucas (1997) investigated the differences between on-line and off-line texts of non-native speakers in terms of features that produce textual cohesion, text length, and contextualization. Regarding cohesive features, the results did not provide obvious differences between on-line and off-line texts. On the contrary, they observed differences with respect to the text length; on-

line texts tended to be shorter than their off-line counterparts. This finding is in line with that of Tella (1992) who observed that the word count for texts written on-line tend to be lower than that for texts written off-line. Furthermore, it was found out that all essays, both on-line and off-line, got longer over the course of study. Considering contextualization, they observed a distinct tendency in students' off-line writing towards initial contextualization in contrast with their parallel on-line texts. Therefore, they concluded that the absence of contextualizing information might account for generally shorter on-line texts.

Erickson (1997) analyzed the move patterns of café Utne, an on-line conversational salon run by the Utne Reader Magazine providing an informal gathering place. He identified declaration of experience, participation hedge (expressed by new members) and welcoming/encouraging (presented by regular participants) as the most frequent moves in café Utne on-line conversations.

In line with the above studies, the present research, taking a contrastive approach, was an attempt to analyze electronic letters swapped with the purposes of "requesting information" and "providing information" among EFL practitioners around the world, in order to identify their move schemata, strategies, and most typical lexico-grammatical features, and compare them with a parallel corpus of traditional pen and paper letters regarding similar generic and formal features.

## Method
### Corpus
In this study, at first 300 electronic messages were randomly selected from among professional electronic letters swapped among the TEFL academic community on the LTEST listserv. After examining this multifarious corpus for qualification, 60 letters sent for the purposes of "requesting information" and "providing information" were selected for closer analysis (30 messages in each group). Then, for the purpose of comparison, 100 archived professional letters sent to the departments of English and International relations of Isfahan

University from different countries were randomly selected. After studying this corpus, 20 letters parallel in communicative purpose with the electronic corpus were selected (10 letters in each group). All attempts were made to select the letters which were as close as possible to the electronic corpus regarding the communicative purpose, and discourse community.

## Procedure

Initially, two models of move patterns proposed by Keene (1993) for traditional letters sent with the purpose of "requesting information" and "providing information" were chosen. The models were verified against the 20 traditional letters. In order to have two corpora equal in number, 20 letters were randomly selected from among the electronic messages afresh. Then, for the purpose of identification and easier access, the letters of each group were coded separately. The electronic corpus was then carefully analyzed, and obligatory and optional moves as well as their frequencies and sequences were identified.

In the next stage, the electronic corpus was qualitatively analyzed to identify the strategies that realize each move. The frequency of occurrence of each strategy was also calculated. The most frequent formal (lexico-grammatical) features of each strategy were then identified. The data included the most typical lexical phrases, syntactic structures, and modes of discourse (e.g. narration, exposition, etc,) through which each strategy is realized. Finally, chi-square tests were applied for different linguistic features in order to find out whether the differences between them in the two corpora were statistically significant.

On the basis of this frequency analysis, the extended models of move schemata and the formal realizations of these two kinds of messages were developed hoping to help the TEFL professionals make fast and effective electronic communication.

**Results**
**Identification of the moves and strategies**
After meticulous analysis of the electronic messages, the extended models of move schemata and the related strategies through which they were realized were identified as summarized in Tables 1. and 2.

**Table 1.  The proposed model of move schemata of " requesting information"
electronic letters**

| Move | Strategy | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| (Salutation)<br><br>(Initiation) | -complimentary phrases, and/or<br>-congratulations, and/or<br>-greetings<br>-evoking the audience, and/or<br>-making the ground/describing the situation | 9<br>1<br>4<br>14<br>6 | 30<br>3.3<br>13.3<br>46.6<br>20 |
| Asking the question | -stating the problem immediately, and/or<br>-elaborating the issue / explaining the issue | 30<br>15 | 100.<br>50 |
| (Promoting the receiver's answer) | -stating the cause of raising the question,     and/or<br>-referring to the question again, and/or<br>-thanking in advance / appreciating the response, and/or<br>-inviting for sharing information | 8<br>3<br>10<br>9 | 26.6<br>10<br>33.3<br>30 |
| ( Ending) | -using personal names, and/or<br>-using complimentary phrases & words | 6<br>8 | 20<br>26.6 |

**Table 2. The proposed model of move schemata for "providing information"**
**electronic letters**

| Move | Strategy | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| (Salutation) | -complimentary phrases, and/or | 2 | 6.6 |
| | -personal names, and/or | 3 | 10 |
| | -greetings | 5 | 16.6 |
| (Initiation) | -sharing the need to find the answer with the person who asked the question, and/or | 6 | 20 |
| | -welcoming the question, and/or | 6 | 20 |
| | -reference to the question, and/or | 2 | 6.6 |
| | -thanking | 1 | 3.3 |
| Addressing the issue | -reporting personal opinion, experience, or evidence; and/or | 16 9 | 53.3 30 |
| | -explanation or further elaboration of issue, and/or | 3 11 | 10 36.6 |
| | -exemplification, and/or | 3 | 36.6 |
| | -suggesting resources for information | | |
| (Expressing good will) | -summing up, and/or, | 2 | 6.6 |
| | -convincing the receiver of the usability of the given information, and/or | 6 | 20 |
| | -expressing willingness to help more , and/or | 1 | 3.3 |
| | -hoping that the suggestion will be helpful, and/or | 4 | 13.3 |
| | -promoting further communication | 5 | 16.6 |
| (Complimentary closing) | -using personal names | 4 | 13.3 |
| | -using complimentary phrases | 4 | 13.3 |

## Identification of the lexico-grammatical features realizing the moves of "requesting information" letters

### Move 1: Salutation

This move has been realized through a number of strategies presented in Table 1. There are such formulaic expressions as complimentary phrases, greetings, congratulations, and personal names used to materialize these strategies represented respectively in the following examples:

1) *Dear Annie* (E. request 26)
2) *Hello* (E. request 19)
3) *Happy New Year* (E. request 2)
4) *Gary* (E. request 13)

5*) Dear John, hello* (E. request 15)

## Move 2: Initiation:

This optional move consists of two strategies: evoking the audience and making the grounds. It is necessary to mention that these two strategies can be called "steps" in Swales' (1990) terms because whenever the first one is used, it is immediately followed by the second, making the grounds. The most conspicuous feature of the first strategy is the vast use of personal pronouns I, we, and you. The mode of discourse in this strategy is expository (descriptive or explanatory) reflected in the use of present tense verbs (simple present or present progressive).

The second strategy, as its name suggests, is used to attract the audience's attention. This strategy being persuasive in mode of discourse, attempts to encourage the audience to pay attention to the question/problem stated in the next move. This is realized by stating explicitly the fact that the writer is going to raise a question or look for answers:

6*) I am an ESL teacher looking for answers* (E. request 21).
7*) I have a few general questions that keep popping up in different forms in various meetings and in the data I am analysing* (E. request 11).

## Move 3: Asking a question

In this strategy, a variety of interrogative/statement forms have been employed to realize the function of instruction. Here, there are some instructions in the form of interrogatives:

8*) Would you please give me the ISBN of the books you mentioned?* (E, request 19).
9*) Could anyone help me with a contact e-mail for Dan Reed?* (E. request 15).
10*) Could someone please tell me what to do or where to go when I have correlated 2 tests and want to interpret the strength of the relationship in the light of the reliabilities of the two tests?* (E. request 8).

11) *Is it true that undocumented learners can not get a GED because they can not get a SSN and therefore they can not get a GED?* (E. request 22).

However, the following example represents an instruction in the form of direct imperative:

12) *Please tell me how to design ESL evaluation methods that give the students effective feedback and be easy to administer* (E. request 13).

**Move 4: Promoting the receiver's reply**

This move is most frequently realized through "appreciating the response". There are such formulaic syntactic structures observed in the corpus to realize this strategy as follows:

13) *Thanks very much* (E. request 21)

14) *Thank you in anticipation* (E. request 4)

15) *Any advice will be appreciated* (E. request 16)

The second most frequent strategy used is inviting the addressee for sharing information. The conspicuous point about this strategy is that in most cases, "if clauses" are used to realize it. Here are some examples:

16) *If I collect a list of titles, I'd be happy to post it back for everyone.* (E. request 1)

17) *If you have any information, please share.* (E. request 4)

Another strategy rarely observed is referring to the question. This reference is implicitly realized through such informal interrogative expressions as *"Any thought?"* or *"Any ideas?"* which seem specific to spoken discourse (McCarthy, 1998: 104).

**Move 5: Ending**

This move is realized through mentioning personal names or complimentary phrases or words. Complimentary phrases subsume a wide range of phrases applied in accordance with the participants' social status.

**Frequency of the lexical features of "providing information" letters**

**Move 1: Salutation**

The realization of this move is almost through the same strategies used in the first group of electronic letters; however, "using personal names" is an added strategy not observed in the first group. Using vocatives, (mentioning the receiver's first name) in written discourse, seems specific to e-mail genre.

**Move 2: Initiation**

In this move which has the function of creating a friendly and participatory as well as respectful atmosphere among the correspondents, two strategies are observed with the same distribution: sharing the need to find the answer with the person who asked the question and welcoming the question. The most typical linguistic structures employed to realize these strategies can be observed in the following examples:

18) *Interesting question!* (E. reply 14)

*19) Very provoking discussion!* (E. reply 22)

The other two strategies observed with lower frequencies are "reference to the question" (which is not a new strategy specific to e-mail genre) and "thanking".

**Move 3: Addressing the issue**

This obligatory move which conveys the communicative function of this group of letters represents a comprehensive example of e-mail correspondence since it includes most of the linguistic features typical of this genre. For instance, first person pronouns collocated with verbs expressing personal opinions/attitudes are used to realize the most frequent strategy, that is, "reporting personal opinion, experience, or evidence":

20) *I think all EFL students may encounter this problem* (E. reply 16).

21) *I believe the reliability of such tests is questionable (E. reply 23).*

The most frequent verb tense of this strategy is past tense used to report past events.

Another strategy used to realize this move is "suggesting resources for information" materialized through imperative sentences, for example:

22) *Check ... for more information* (E. reply 20).

Strategies of this move are "explanation or further elaboration of issue" and "exemplification" which involve using a chain of sentences to support the person's opinion. Therefore, two modes of discourse, exposition and narration are observed in different strategies of this move.

**Move 4: Expressing good will**

The communicative function of this move is putting the correspondence into the end. The most frequent strategy used to realize this move is convincing the receiver of the usability of the given information. Some examples of the linguistic structures used to realize this strategy are presented below:

23) *It will worth you effort to check it out.* (E. reply 10)

24) *It seems to me that this program may be collecting just the kind of information you are looking to put together.* (E. reply 4)

It seems that in this strategy, the writer tries to pretend that the information, suggestion, or advice proposed by him/her has proved useful for himself/herself, and now another person can use it confidently. Therefore, being persuasive in mode of discourse, this strategy uses first person pronoun to personalize the situation and the second person pronoun to make it interactive. Other strategies have employed nearly the same linguistic features, which seem to promote the sociability of the e-mail sender as well as informality of e-mail correspondence.

Finally, complimentary closing appears as an optional move that has exactly the same realizations as those mentioned for the first group of electronic messages.

**Frequency of the most typical linguistic features**

The most frequent lexico-grammatical features of e-mail genre are presented in the following tables:

## 1. Personal pronouns

The most frequent personal pronouns and their frequencies in the "request for information" and "providing information" letters tallied in a text length of 1000 words are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. The frequency of occurrence of "personal pronouns" in the electronic corpus

| Requesting information | | | | Providing information | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Electronic | | Traditional | | Electronic | | Traditional | |
| pronoun | f | pronoun | f | pronoun | f | pronoun | F |
| I | 36 | I | 9 | I | 30 | I | 19 |
| We | 22 | We | 8 | We | 22 | We | 3 |
| You | 21 | You | 13 | You | 29 | You | 14 |

## 2. Verbs

Two-word verbs and verbs expressing personal attitude were among the most frequent features of e-mail genre which appeared frequently in the parallel traditional corpus too. The frequency of occurrences of these features observed in "requesting information" and "providing information" letters is reported in Table 4.

Table 4. The frequency of occurrence of some "verbs" in the electronic corpus

| Frequency | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Requesting information | | | | Providing information | | | |
| Verbs expressing attitude | | Two-word verbs | | Verbs expressing attitude | | Two-word verbs | |
| Electronic | Traditional | Electronic | Traditional | Electronic | Traditional | Electronic | Traditional |
| 11 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 0 |

## 3. Constructions

All the sentences were classified according to their structures — statement, imperative, or interrogative. The frequency of occurrence

of each structure in "request for information" letters is reported in Table 5.

**Table 5. The frequency of occurrence of "structures" in the electronic corpus**

| Frequency | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Structure | Requesting information | | Providing information | |
| | Electronic | Traditional | Electronic | Traditional |
| Statement | 44 | 61 | 63 | 64 |
| Imperative | 2 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| Interrogative | 19 | 0 | 2 | 0 |

## 4. Sentences

All the sentences of the corpus were classified in four groups: simple, compound, embedded, and semi-sentences. The frequency of occurrence of each kind observed in "requesting information" letters is reported in Table 3.

**Table 6. The frequency of occurrence of "sentence types" in the electronic corpus**

| Frequency | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sentence type | Requesting information | | Providing information | |
| | electronic | Traditional | Electronic | Traditional |
| Simple | 20 | 23 | 18 | 17 |
| Compound | 6 | 6 | 2 | 12 |
| Embedded | 37 | 36 | 40 | 36 |
| Semi-sentence | 2 | 0 | 5 | 0 |

## Discussion and conclusion

Frequency counts of the structural elements reveal that some of the elements vital to the acceptability of traditional letters (e.g. salutation, closing, and complimentary closing) are optional for electronic correspondence. This means that the format of letters is no longer so

much conventionally determined; there is more freedom and less conventionality for opening or closing a letter. This issue, in line with Nagel's (1999) statement that e-mail correspondence is not subject to the conventionality of formal academic writing, may probably be due to the fact that in e-mail what is important is the message itself and the speed and ease of its communication not the form and conventions of its writing. This point confirms another observation that body, the element that conveys the communicative purpose of the letter, is the only obligatory move common between the two corpora.

Regarding the move schemata, no statistically significant difference was observed between the frequencies of parallel moves in the two corpora. Contrasting the move patterns of traditional letters proposed by Keene (1993) with the observed model of electronic messages reveals that the difference between the two corpora does not lie in the absolute presence or absence of moves but in their degree of optionality. In other words, the communicative purpose of messages, asking/providing professional information in this case, should be accomplished through a number of moves, similar in the two corpora. However, what differentiates the two corpora is that most of the moves that are considered obligatory for the traditional messages proved to be optional in the electronic corpus. In other words, the only obligatory moves in the electronic corpus were "asking a question" in the first group, and "providing information" in the second group. Moreover, the optional moves were not distributed by the same frequency in the two corpora either.

The comparison of the electronic corpus with the traditional letters at the level of strategies revealed a far wider range of strategies in both groups of electronic messages. The senders of e-mail messages used a variety of functional choices to materialize the communicative purpose of each specific move, whereas the parallel moves in traditional corpus were realized through a limited number of strategies. The wider range of strategies in electronic corpus seems to be in line with Nagel's (1999) suggestion that e-mail exchange affords the learner a more liberating opportunity for correspondence. In other words, in e-mail correspondence, the sender has more freedom or a

wider range of choices to express his/her communicative purpose. These choices might be different in surface realization but in terms of discourse value, all serve the same purpose.

However, some electronic messages apparently preserve the conventional format of formal letters. Closer investigation revealed that the messages that stuck to conventional patterns were of two kinds: either they were sent by a non-native speaker or from a member of lower professional status to another member of the listserv with a higher professional status. In other words, two factors reveal to create some variations in the strategies used by the sender. These differentiating factors are "nativity" and " status" of the participants. Considering the first factor, the non-native sender may be encountered with two problems: a) the interference of organizational patterns imposed by his native culture (Connor & Kaplan 1987) at two different levels of organization – moves and strategies, and b) the insufficient linguistic knowledge that would make the sender adhere to the conventional rules and strategies.

Regarding the second factor, the messages sent by the members of the list were usually longer, more authoritative in tone, and instructive in mode of discourse (containing direct imperatives). The interesting point about these letters is that although they commonly initiated without salutation, opening, and closing, they favored dignity and politeness in composition. On the other hand, when a member of lower status was addressing a person of higher status, (s)he usually used indirect forms of request, sent a shorter message, and employed such explicit lexical markers of politeness as "please". However, the correspondence between the ordinary members of the listserv – nearly of the same or similar professional status – possessed such strategies and lexico-grammatical features as "asking frequent questions to involve the reader", "using first and second person pronoun", and "vocatives" which enhance the friendliness of the relationship.

The comparison of the lexico-grammatical features, however, revealed clear differences between the use of personal pronouns *I, we,* and *you"* in the two corpora. This finding may be attributable to the highly interactive nature of e-mail genre. As Macauly (1990) states,

the writer involves his reader interpersonally by using "we" which makes information as shared.

Another striking point was that "passive mood" was absent in the electronic corpus under investigation. The absence of passive mood in electronic corpus may be accounted for if e-mail genre is considered along the Ochs' (1979) planned/unplanned dimension. Ochs distinguishes planned from unplanned discourse by four criteria, one of which is that planned discourse makes use of morphosyntactic structures (passive voice and verb tense) that are relatively late to emerge in language.

To sum up, the linguistic features observed in this study confirm the highly interactive and intimate nature of this kind of correspondence as a salient sample of on-line discourse.

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