

## **RAISING ESP STUDENTS' AWARENESS TO LINGUISTIC FEATURES AND MOVE STRUCTURES OF THE GENRE OF JOB APPLICATION LETTER**

**BELMEKKI Amine**

Full Professor, University of Tlemcen

**ALGERIA**

&

**SEKKAL Faiza**

Assitant Professor, University of Mascara

**ALGERIA**

### **ABSTRACT**

Teaching low proficiency students to write whole texts is often fraught with difficulties. The latter has to create a text that is both rhetorically and linguistically appropriate. As a result, the teaching of writing tends to be taught in a way that focuses at the sentence level and these learners often have minimal, if any, awareness at the level of complete texts. Thus, in order to empower ESP students with the consciousness to recognise rhetorical and linguistic features that are used to construct and shape whole texts especially business related text-types, there has been a move towards explicit teaching of genres in many contexts. In this respect, the current study aims at investigating the impact of explicit instruction of the genre of job application letter on the written English performance of management students in the faculty of Economics and Management, Algeria. These students were exposed to a range of model-texts and they were involved in a range of learning activities that were related to discourse and language features of the target genre. Additionally, pre- and post-tests were conducted. Results indicate that the scores obtained by the students in the post-test showed improved performance in writing the target genre in comparison with the pre-test scores.

**Keywords:** ESP, genre-based instruction, writing performance.

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is no denying the dominance of English in today's world as a lingua franca of the international business scene. The importance of writing, especially business genres such as business letters and e-mails, advertisements and business reports which require proficiency in written communication cannot be overestimated. However, motivating ESP students in a writing class is often difficult because they do not even think writing is that important, at least not in the real or content courses such as Economics, Accounting and Management or do not see clearly how it relates to their degree or future career. The root of the problem is in fact due to the students' failure in relating the language to their communicative needs in real life.

Accordingly, ESP involves learners who have clearly defined professional communities; therefore, contextualizing language within the learners' study environment makes the language learning experience more relevant and meaningful, thereby increasing the learners' motivation to learn English Language. Thus, it is the task of ESP teachers to situate or contextualize language learning within a specific and relevant context because ESP students are concerned with the communicative needs of particular academic and professional groups and so genres are seen as the purposive actions routinely used by community members to achieve a particular purpose. So while genres are seen more specifically as related to groups, they are also seen in the wider context of the activities that surround the use of texts. As far as

management students are concerned, they are required to write in an ESP context. Thus, ESP writing classes have to focus on writing business related documents to help ESP students improve and experience ways on writing different business genres to be used in their future career.

Management students in Algeria, however, face a number of problems in acquiring writing due mainly to:

- The limited attention being paid to the teaching of writing.
- The in-class writing activities lack meaningful contexts and often fail to deal with issues learners might be confronted with in the real world.
- The use of out-dated teaching methodology.
- Students are not generally motivated to generate any kind of writing, owing to their poor level in the skill.
- ESP teacher has to rely on himself /herself to provide the material which is not usually tailored for ESP students to learn business writing in English intensively.

With those difficulties, the teaching of English for business communication in general and writing business documents in English in particular is therefore a challenging job for ESP teachers because it not only requires high language competence among the teachers themselves, but also the application of appropriate and effective writing instruction methodology that may help students understand how to create a text that is both rhetorically and linguistically appropriate and design useful exercises for practicing both rhetorical and language aspects.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The genre approach to the teaching of writing is closely associated with the development of genre analysis as a key approach to text in ESP. Work on various genres such as the academic article (Swales, 1990), the dissertation (Dudley-Evans, 1994) and business letters (Bhatia, 1993) have shown how the establishment of a number of moves can capture the regularities of writers' communicative purposes in certain genres. The genre approach, however, does much more than teach these moves; it encourages writers to consider their role as members of a discourse community and what this implies in terms of the style and stance that they should adopt.

Genre-based approach (GBA) is seen as product-oriented, and characterized by a clear consciousness of the functional relationship between the text and context (Hyland 2004). The teaching of writing is based on the results of genre analysis, i.e. structural and linguistic patterns. As stated by Swales (1990:12):

A genre-centered approach is likely to focus student attention on rhetorical action and on the organizational and linguistic means of its accomplishment.

Bhatia (1993: 59) proposed the seven-move structure in job application letters. In the present research, only six moves were used for they were easier to label the samples. The following table illustrates the framework used in the present study:

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Move 1:</b> Establishing credentials                                    | Obligatory |
| <b>Step 1A:</b> Establishing a niche                                       |            |
| <b>Step 1B:</b> Referring to the source of job information about a vacancy |            |
| <b>Move 2:</b> Introducing candidature                                     | Obligatory |
| <b>Step 2A:</b> Offering candidature                                       |            |
| <b>Step 2B:</b> Essential detailing of candidature                         |            |
| <b>Step 2C:</b> Indicating the value of the candidature                    |            |
| <b>Move 3:</b> Enclosing documents   | Obligatory |
| <b>Move 4:</b> Soliciting response   | Obligatory |
| <b>Move 5:</b> Using pressure tactics                                      | Optional   |
| <b>Move 6:</b> Ending politely   | Optional   |

**Table 1. Job Application Letter's Move-Structure Template**

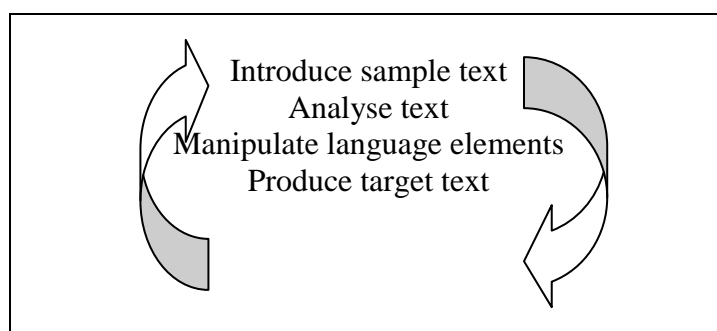
The above generic structure is represented in the following example of a job application letter adapted from Lenka (2005):

|  |   |
|--|---|
| The staff Manager<br>M.D Bank, 226,<br>Bond Street,<br>London<br>Dear Sir,   | John Smith<br>Bridge street,<br>Newtown.<br>19 <sup>th</sup> May, 2009. |
| I would like to apply for the post of accountant advertised in the "Times".  | (M1), (S1B)<br>(M2), (S2A)  |
| As you can see from my CV, I have already worked for central bank for 2 years as an accountant.  | (M2), (S2B)   |
| During this time, I have become quite knowledgeable with all the accounting functions. It includes accounts payable, accounts receivable and billing. I am also a hard worker, flexible team player, with excellent IT skills. | (M2)(S2C)   |
| I enclosed my CV   | M3  |
| and will be available for an interview next week and I can be reached at 566-1907 after 6pm. I really hope that I will be suitable for this work and you will employ me.   | (M4)<br>(M5)  |
| I look forward to hearing from you.  | (M6)  |
| Yours faithfully<br><br>John Smith   |   |

**Table 2. Job Application Letter's Generic Structure**

Genre-based teaching helps students participate effectively in the broader discourse community. This approach holds the view that learning language is a social activity and the process of learning language is a series of “scaffolded developmental steps” that address different aspects of language. The genre-based approach also offers students a relatively fixed discourse model that they can use for reference. Thus, students will gain confidence in producing texts that serve their intended purposes.

Accordingly, Dudley-Evans (1997) identifies the following stages in genre-based writing instruction. First, a model of a particular genre is introduced and analysed. Learners then carry out exercises, which manipulate relevant language forms and functions, finally produce a short text. Generally speaking, the following procedure is followed:



**Figure 1. Procedures in Genre-Based Approach (Badger, 2002)**

The aim of this paper is thus to investigate how can genre-based instruction improve the students' low proficiency level in writing the target genre by reading, discussing, and analyzing examples of it and raising their awareness of its generic structures and linguistic features. Therefore, empowering them with the genre-based strategies necessary to replicate these features in their own production.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher used a classroom action research design with pre and post writing instruction tests to investigate the impact of explicit instruction of the genre of job application letter on management students' writing performance. This classroom action research (CAR) was implemented in one class which consists of 24 students majoring in management both male and female. The sampling chosen is purposive in the sense that these students are supposed to write in an ESP context, that is to say, management students would aim to use English in their future professional life. Therefore, they would probably aim for employment in either the oil and gas industry in Algeria, which is dominated by multi-national companies. Owing to the time limit, the researcher focused only on the genre of job application letter because it is an important professional genre in business writing and it is used in most professions for hiring decisions. Moreover, JAL has a relatively uncomplicated move or generic structure.

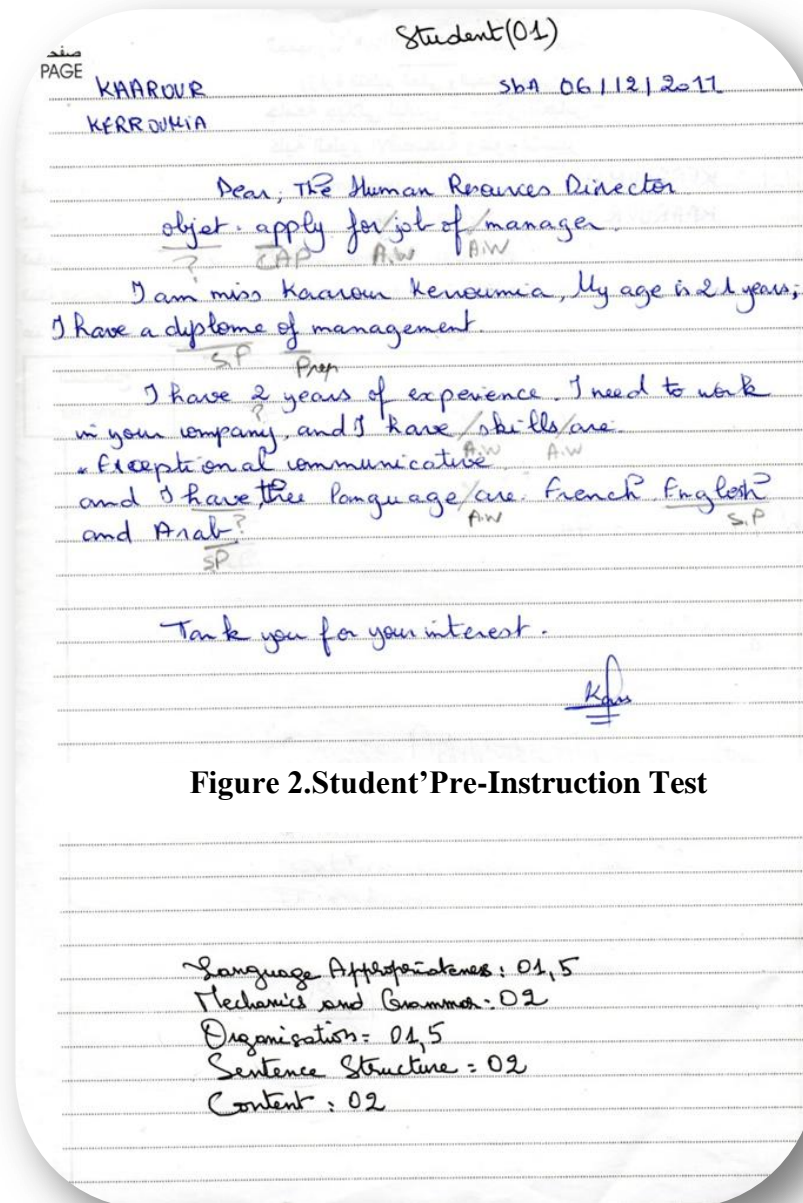
A thirteen-hour and a half genre-based instruction was designed to raise ESP students' awareness of genre analysis. During this instruction, the students were sensitized to the schematic or generic structure, overall communicative purposes of the target genre and that of its individual moves, linguistic features and variations in move-structure, and so forth. As far as teaching material is concerned, 6 sample texts related to the target genre were used. The students writing scripts of the pre and post-instruction tests were analysed following the

model proposed by (Bhatia, 1993:59) which is concerned with the move-structure of the genre of job application letter as well as the scoring procedure based on an analytic scoring rubric from the Act Workplace (2007).

## RESULTS

The task of writing is obviously more challenging for the novice writer who is not a native speaker which is the case of the present study. According to Dudley-Evans (1994), “genre analysis is particularly useful for students with relatively little experience of writing”. Therefore, genre pedagogy offers ESP students opportunities to analyse examples of the genre that they will later attempt to write themselves. For inexperienced students in particular, opportunities to study models of the target genre and identify rhetorical patterns assist them in developing a clearer sense of what to aim for in their own writing. However, model texts should be appropriate for students’ background knowledge, linguistic ability, and motivation (Dudley-Evans, 1994). In this vein, Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998: 310-311) states: “Model texts can reduce students’ writing anxiety and help them to develop the confidence needed to become effective writers”.

Based on the students’ weak performance in the JAL writing pre-test and their unawareness of formal business letter writing in English, explicit teaching of genre knowledge with respect to its generic structure and linguistic features at a level of whole text was therefore required. Those results led the researcher to investigate whether explicit teaching of JAL generic structures and linguistic features through modeling of the target genre would increase 3<sup>rd</sup> year management students’ overall writing performance. To find the answer to this question, the data obtained from the pre-test (administered at the beginning of the first GBI session) and the post-test (administered at the end of the last session) were treated both quantitatively and qualitatively. The difference between them was used to infer the participants’ writing improvement. On the whole, one would be tempted to conclude on the bases of the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the results obtained in the post- writing test that explicit instruction of the genre of JAL had a positive impact on the students’ writing performance. In fact, the overall analysis of the students’ pre-instruction writing samples showed that their texts was limited in word length, lacked clarity in terms of structure, and contained errors in the use of verb tense, prepositions, articles, plurals, comma splices, while appraisal of their the students’ post-instruction writing samples showed that their texts had a clearer structure in that their texts included an opening, body and closing structure, contained various language features of the target genre, and was more coherent, grammatically correct, and readable. Consequently, students’ texts before and after the application of explicit instruction of the target genre were markedly different as shown in the following figures 2 and 3.



Student (01)

PAGE  
 Hassi Messoudj Services  
 President of Hassi Messoudj  
 Algeria

KAAROUR KERROUHIA  
 52, Anahim El Khat.  
 Saïda  
 07 February, 2012

Dear sir;

I would like to apply for the job: accountant advertised  
 in "El cRouak".

I am 26 years old, I am single, in my CV you can see  
 that I hold a license degree in <sup>Bus</sup> management. I have  
 already worked for Naftal company in Saïda; During  
 this time, I was responsible for: Managing all a accounting  
 and administrative functions of the office in Naftal, and  
 analysing quarterly balance sheets, financial reports;  
 and managing salary payment and I have become knowledgeable of  
 Microsoft Excel; and I have a solid track record in accounting and  
 good knowledge of administration aspects of business in Algeria,  
 and I have three years of experience, also I have a lot of skills.  
 I have good numerical and analytical skills, and I have strong verbal  
 and written communication skills in English, French and Arabic,  
 and I am a good worker, flexible and team player.  
 you will find in my copy of CV more details from  
 my education, you can call me at 07.47.88.07.69.  
 I really hope I can be suitable for this work and you can  
 employ me.

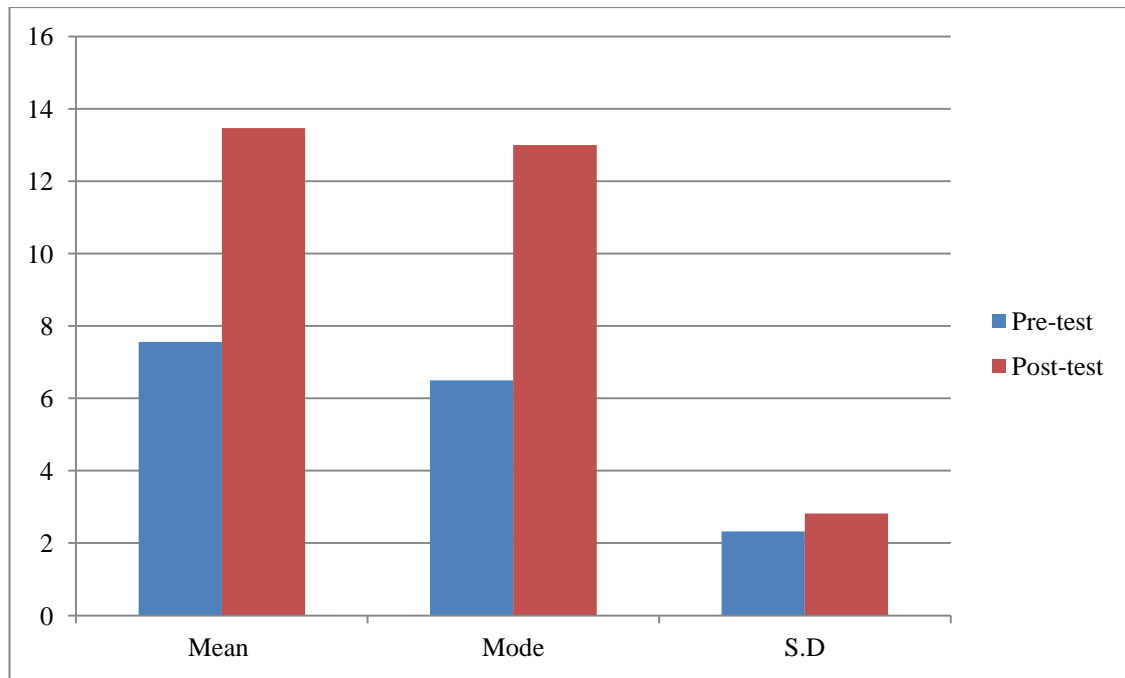
I forward to hearing from you.  
 Yours faithfully,  
 SP

KAAROUR KERROUHIA

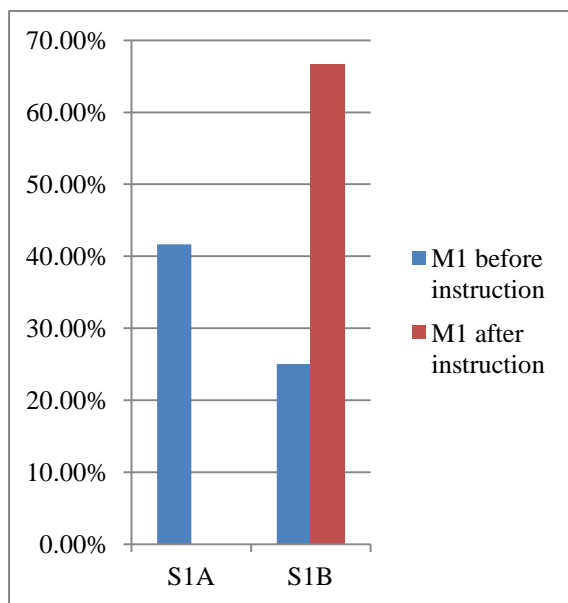
Language Appropriateness: 04  
 Mechanics and Grammar: 03  
 Organization: 035

Figure 3. Student' Post-Instruction Test

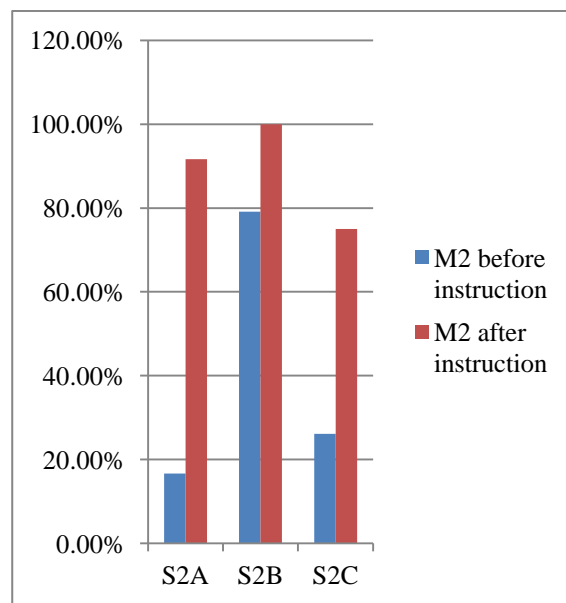
The following bar-graph better clarifies the results:



**Bar-Graph 1. Students' Performance in the Pre and Post-Tests**

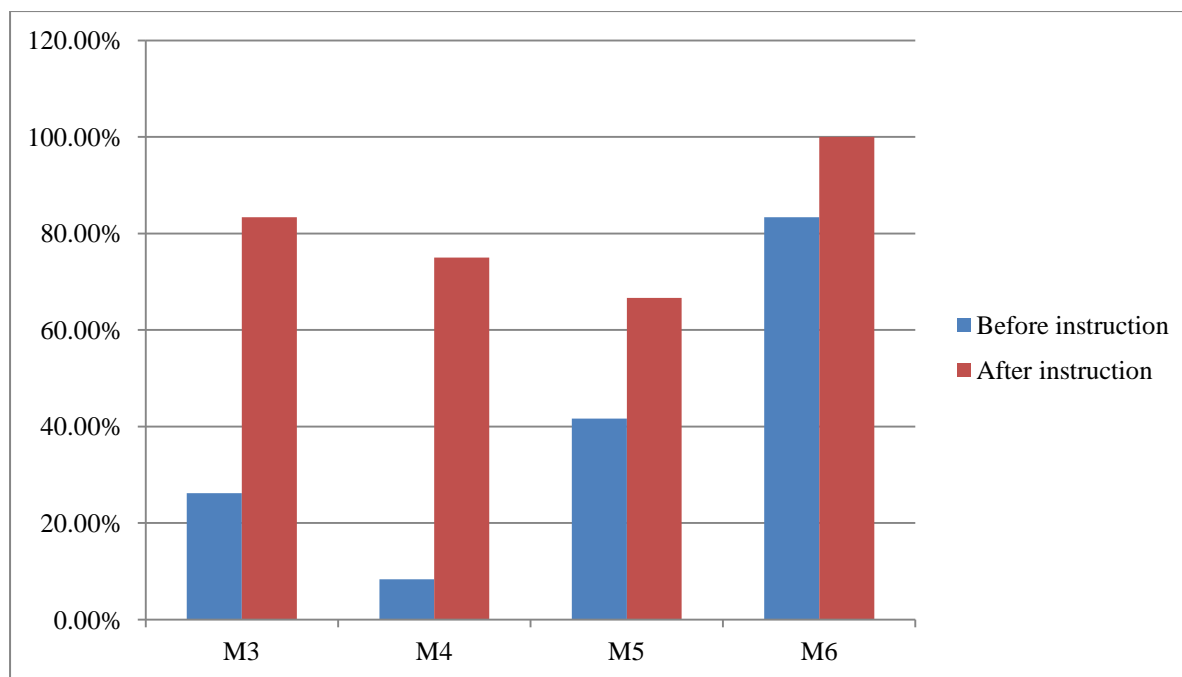


**Bar-Graph 2. The Presence of M1 in the Pre and Post-Test**



**Bar-Graph 3. The Presence of M2 in the Pre and Post-Test**





**Bar-Graph 4. The Presence of M3, M4, M5 and M6 in the Pre and Post-Test**

## DISCUSSION

With low-level awareness of the genre in the pre-test, the students have grown to be confident writers in the post-writing test. In other words, their writing reflects the generic structures and linguistic features in their post-writing test, after having been sensitized to the rhetorical move structure, the communicative purpose, and linguistic features that realize the move-structure over a period of eight weeks. This has been possible because the genre-based instruction seems to have enabled the learners to gain insights into the working of the target genre. Accordingly, the genre-sensitivity developed through this instruction has empowered the students not only to understand the generic structure of the target genre but also to identify the moves and the steps generally used to achieve their communicative purpose. Besides, the students' ability to reflect the crucial moves in their JALs' post-tests speaks for the impact of the genre sensitization to the communicative purpose. So, it is possible to conclude that genre knowledge developed students' clarity about the communicative purposes of the target genre. In this concern, Reppen (2002: 322) pointed out: "A genre-based approach to writing instruction can help students to better understand how to make a piece of writing more effective and appropriate to the communicative purpose".

Therefore, learners involved in the study appeared to benefit from the approach adopted even though they were exposed to it for only eight weeks (twelve hours). It can be concluded that even a limited exposure to genre-based writing instruction could lead, in the case of novice writers with limited language proficiency, to overall improvement in the quality of their written texts and increased awareness of the textual features of the target genre. As a result, explicit genre-based instruction seems a suitable way or method of teaching the students different business letter even in a very limited time period and with limited proficiency level in English.

## CONCLUSION

This research work is based on the theory of genre analysis in ESP; it aims to help future graduates to perceive the discourse of business letter so as to better write the latter in agreement with international conventions. In fact, writing for business and professional purposes presents many challenges to learners as it involves many different areas of knowledge and skills. As a result, students should be prepared in advance for the kind of requirements in order to increase their overall marketability in the Algerian job market. Hence, the present paper aimed at examining the feasibility of applying genre-based instruction in teaching business writing and its effect on ESP students' writing performance. The scores obtained by the students in the post-test showed improved performance in writing the target genre in comparison with the pre-test scores. Furthermore, an analysis of these test scripts revealed that the students improved not only their writing ability but also their confidence to handle genres as well as their attitudes toward the writing skill in general.

Nevertheless, the current paper is no more than a tentative attempt concerning the teaching of business writing based on the results of genre analysis with a view to demonstrate how students can be taught to adapt to and acquire a genre. It is undeniably true that future research is needed to determine if the approach of genre-based instruction is effective in teaching other genres. Moreover, the findings of this study are limited to a small selected group of third year management students from the faculty of Management and Economics in Algeria, therefore, the effectiveness of genre-based instruction cannot be generalized to larger population. More research should be conducted in different regions and with more participants in order to make results more applicable to similar groups of students.

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