

Genre Analysis of Enquiry Business Emails in English as an International Language

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Abstract

This study examined the generic and linguistic features of enquiry-based business emails exchanged between an Iranian shipping company and its international business partners, using English as a lingua franca (ELF). The data for this study comprised 300 emails exchanged between the Iranian company and its partners from Japan, South Korea, and China. Drawing on a combination of Santos's (2002) and Mehrpour and Mehrzad's (2013) models of genre analysis, the research investigated the structural and linguistic characteristics of these emails. The findings revealed the presence of four primary moves: establishing the negotiation chain, providing information, requesting action, and concluding the email. Notably, several modifications to the generic structure were identified, reflecting significant flexibility in move ordering. This adaptability underscores the importance of practicality and efficiency in international business communication. Additionally, the study highlights the frequent use of imperative structures, unconventional abbreviations, and acronyms, which are influenced by cultural and contextual factors. These findings enhance our understanding of how ELF functions in professional settings and provide valuable insights for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners and instructors.

Keywords: business communication, enquiry emails, English as a lingua franca, genre analysis

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1. Introduction

Business communication was traditionally conducted through letters and other modes, such as fax, until the emergence of a new genre: electronic mail, or email. The advent of email can be attributed to the growing demands of international business and rapid technological advancements. Characterized by its convenience, speed, and flexibility—unconstrained by time or place—email has become the predominant medium of business communication worldwide. This significance and widespread adoption have, in turn, prompted extensive research into the genre, employing various analytical approaches (Abbasian & Tahririan, 2008; Sarbandi et al., 2017).

Genre analysis, one of the most widely used models in email studies, has been instrumental in identifying both the generic and lexico-grammatical features of emails across various contexts, including academic, commercial, and others (Farangi & Rashidi, 2022). According to Swales (1990), a genre is defined as a set of communicative events that share a common communicative purpose. This shared purpose influences the schematic structure, content, and style of the communication. At the macro-level, genres are realized through a series of moves and steps. A move represents a structural unit that fulfills a specific communicative intention and contributes to the writer's overall purpose, while steps are smaller units or strategies within a move that help achieve this intention (Swales, 1990). Consequently, since its introduction, the concepts of moves and steps have become key analytical tools in research on written communication. It is worth noting that the interest in genre analysis has largely been driven by pedagogical considerations. Specifically, genre studies are seen as beneficial for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students and teachers, as they provide insights into formal and content schemata. This pre-knowledge of generic conventions and the linguistic resources used to realize them can significantly facilitate learning and improve writing proficiency (Bhatia, 1993; Farangi et al., 2024).

Although email has become the dominant medium in business correspondence, it remains a relatively new genre compared to traditional forms such as letters and faxes (Farangi & Zabbah, 2023). Consequently, fewer studies have explored its generic features, and those that exist often face one or more of the following limitations:

a) Limited access to authentic data due to the tendency of companies in today's competitive business environment to safeguard their information and market position (e.g., Jalilifar & Beitsayyah, 2011; Mehrpour & Mehrzad, 2013).

b) Data sets typically comprising emails exchanged between only two groups, often a native and non-native speaker pair.

c) Most critically, these studies predominantly adopt an etic perspective, analyzing the phenomenon from an external viewpoint rather than considering the insider perspective.

Email communication is a vital tool in professional settings (Ho, 2018; Millot, 2017). A 2013 Microsoft survey of 9,908 employees across 32 countries found that over 93% relied on email as their primary workplace communication method. Emails are favored for their speed, ability to reach multiple recipients globally, and their role as a communication record. In international business, where English is the common language, emails are used by both native and non-native speakers (Farangi & Nejadghanbar, 2024). In global business contexts, emails serve specific purposes, such as requesting, ordering, complaining, or informing. Requests are particularly common and are often communicated through emails (Ho, 2018). These emails reflect the sender's expectation of the recipient's action, but the act of requesting can risk offending counterparts or threatening their face. The style of request emails, including directness or politeness, is shaped by cultural and contextual factors (Warren, 2016), influencing how messages are interpreted.

Despite the fact that research on business English emails has grown, key questions remain unresolved, such as the types of moves in request emails, how move sequences or lengths correlate with specific lexical and syntactic features, and the pragmatic strategies essential in modern workplace communication. As language evolves rapidly, business emails are becoming increasingly complex in international settings (Gimenez, 2006). This complexity highlights the need for both L1 and L2 professionals to grasp diverse pragmatic features of business emails in English as a lingua franca context (Millot, 2017). This study addresses a research gap by examining business emails exchanged between an Iranian company and several international firms. Workplace communication, especially business emails, often follows prototypical patterns shaped by social contexts. Factors like power dynamics and culture can

influence the form and content of these texts (Warren, 2016). If professionals fail to account for cultural and contextual variables when writing English request emails, misunderstandings may arise, potentially harming business relationships (Farangi & Khojastemehr, 2024).

2. Literature Review

Several genre analysis studies have been conducted using models proposed by Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993), and Santos (2002) to explore the generic features of business correspondence. For instance, Abbasian and Tahririan (2008) analyzed emails exchanged between EFL teachers and biology professionals for the purpose of obtaining and providing information, employing Santos's (2002) model of Business Letters of Negotiation. Their findings revealed multiple irregularities in parallel moves, strategies, and formal linguistic features, which they attributed to cross-disciplinary variations and the prevalence of intertextuality.

In an interdisciplinary study, Hayati et al. (2011) examined request emails written by postgraduate students in EFL and physics, following Swales's (1990) model. At the macro-level of move structure, similarities were observed between the two corpora; however, differences emerged at the micro-structural level. The researchers suggested that these discrepancies were influenced by the writers' exposure to previously learned texts. Similarly, Jalilifar and Beitsayyah (2011) conducted a comparative analysis of 200 Persian and English business letters using Santos's (2002) model. They found that both corpora generally adhered to the moves identified by Santos (2002), with only minor differences in sub-steps. However, significant distinctions were noted at the lexico-grammatical level, particularly in the use of structures such as passive voice, personal pronouns, and politeness strategies. These differences were attributed to sociocultural factors.

Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013) compared English business emails written by Iranian and native English speakers, also based on Santos's (2002) model. At the macro-level, both groups employed similar generic structures to achieve their communicative goals of requesting and providing information. At the micro-level (lexico-grammatical level), however, notable differences were identified, which the authors attributed to the distinct socio-cultural backgrounds of the two groups. On the other hand, Asztalos (2014) investigated the move structure of emails written by first-year commerce-marketing students at Budapest Business

School, utilizing Zsubrinszky's (2009) Email Genre Model. She concluded that Zsubrinszky's model could be applied to describe the students' confirmation emails with slight modifications. However, the study's small dataset may limit its generalizability.

Qasim et al. (2015) examined 100 business emails written in English by Pakistani employees, applying Bhatia's (1993) model for sales letters. While their analysis of generic features largely confirmed Bhatia's model, modifications were made to Move Four due to observed differences in its realization. Additionally, the lexico-grammatical analysis revealed frequent use of words like "*please*" and "*kindly*," reflecting an emphasis on warmth and affability to address partners' negative face. Warren (2016) examined how intertextuality enhances coherence in business emails by analyzing the use of recurring words and phrases. The study used a corpus of email exchanges from two Hong Kong professionals, identifying key terms with corpus linguistics tools and analyzing their context to determine if they signaled intertextuality and its directionality. Findings indicated that these terms are linked to intertextual references. The study also highlighted how power dynamics between writers and readers influence language choices, providing implications for ESP education.

In addition, Ho (2018) investigated how professionals employ metadiscourse to persuade through workplace emails. Using the interpersonal model of metadiscourse, the study analyzed 659 request emails from Hong Kong professional settings. It identified and compared the types and frequency of metadiscourse categories in emails with those in non-computer-mediated persuasive communication. Findings indicated that (1) emails provide a convenient platform for persuading colleagues by appealing to logic, credibility, and emotions; (2) persuasive strategies in emails differ from other communication channels in their use of metadiscourse; and (3) specific persuasive strategies may be preferred in different sections of workplace request emails. Millot (2017) investigated the interpersonal functions of language in English as a Business Lingua Franca. The study analyzed 400 emails exchanged by 14 French professionals using English for internal and external communication. After examining the concept of positioning in professional discourse, the research explored the hypothesis that English users adopt not only an L2 voice but also professional and corporate voices. These voices reflect how professionals assess situations based on their field of work and the strategic

decisions of their companies. The findings, derived from quantitative and qualitative analysis, focused on linguistic features that either "include" or "exclude" the voices of other participants.

Finally, Park et al. (2021) compared request emails written by Korean (L2) and American (L1) professionals in workplace settings. Using an online survey, 60 emails (30 from each group) were collected and analyzed with NVivo, Lexical Complexity Analyzer, and L2 Syntactic Complexity Analyzer. The study focused on move frequency, sequence, length, and related lexical and syntactic features. Findings revealed that L1 writers often included supportive moves like compliments or compensation offers, while L2 writers preferred concise, direct requests. The research offered insights into intercultural communication in business English, with implications for L2 business writing and ESP.

3. Method

3.1. Data Selection

The data for this study comprised 300 emails exchanged between an Iranian shipping company and its international business partners from Japan, South Korea, and China over the period of 2011 to 2015. These emails were initially categorized based on their communicative purposes, resulting in the selection of 100 enquiry emails for detailed analysis. These emails were chosen because they specifically addressed the purposes of providing and requesting information or action. The researcher, having worked as an employee of the Iranian shipping company, was granted access to these authentic emails for research purposes. Formal consent was obtained from the company to utilize these documents as research data, ensuring compliance with ethical and legal standards. To ensure confidentiality, all names, email addresses, and identifying details were replaced with fictitious information.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The analysis employed a combination of Santos's (2002) Business Letters of Negotiation model and Mehrpour and Mehrzad's (2011) adapted framework. This hybrid model was chosen to capture both the structural moves and linguistic features unique to enquiry emails. The study utilized MAXQDA software (version 10) for data coding, enabling systematic categorization of moves and steps within the emails. The coding process began with the frameworks of Santos

(2002) and Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2011) and was iteratively refined as additional steps emerged from the data.

3.3. Procedure

Each email was meticulously analyzed to identify its structural components—referred to as "moves" and "steps"—which aligned with the communicative purposes defined in the analytical framework. Moves such as establishing the negotiation chain, providing information, requesting action or information, and ending were examined for their frequency and sequential flexibility. Lexico-grammatical features, including sentence structures, politeness strategies, and abbreviations, were also explored to understand how linguistic choices facilitated effective communication in a multilingual, multicultural business context. The study further categorized emails into three types: those providing information, those requesting information or action, and those combining both functions. The frequencies of these types were calculated, and illustrative examples from the corpus were provided. Special attention was given to unique features such as the use of acronyms and informal abbreviations, which reflected the practical constraints of the business environment.

3.4. Reliability and Validation

To ensure the reliability of the analysis, two independent raters coded the data, achieving an interrater agreement of 92%. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and reference to established coding guidelines. The iterative nature of the analysis ensured that the framework was thoroughly tested and appropriately adapted to the data. By addressing both macro-level schematic structures and micro-level linguistic realizations, this methodological approach provides a comprehensive understanding of enquiry business emails in the context of English as a lingua franca.

4. Results

4.1. Types of Emails

After analyzing the data, the following types of emails were found, each of which is illustrated by an example, and their frequency in the data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency of the Emails

Types of emails	Frequency	Percentage
Information providing	40	40%
Request emails	34	34%
Information and Request	26	26%
Total	100	100%

1) Information providing emails: The emails in this category can further be divided into two subtypes: a) Those which often provide a response to an earlier request email for information and are usually followed by further communication (Example 1); b) Those which often are more formal intended to give prior notice/information to the recipients without requiring a reply from them which will be elaborated on later under the section about Move 1: Establishing the negotiation chain. For now, Example 2 suffices to illustrate the point.

Example 1:

Good Day,

With ref. to your email requiring about the vessels berthing, please be advised that Pilot has boarded the vessel at about 0600 Hrs LT today (01/08/2011) in order to direct her to the Jetty No.2 for berthing.

Best Regards

Iran Sea Company

Mehdi Tabrizi

Branch Manager

Example 2:

Dear Mr. Naderi,

Please note, the above vessel has arrived/anchored at Pilot station on July 3rd, 2012 at 1600 LT and is ready in all respect to discharge her cargo.

However, as per the owners' instruction, due to unpaid freight, vessel will not proceed to berth till further instruction.

Best Regards,

Iran Sea Company

As Agent

2) Request emails (information/action/favor): These are used to enquire about information or ask for action, favor.

a) Requesting information:

Example 3:

Dear Agent,

Kindly advise how much time it's take for the port authorities to issue the New document.

Best regards

Jack Shark

Temporary operation superintendent,

Union Management Services (Ltd)

TEL: *****

MOB: *****

B) Requesting action/favor:

Example 4:

Dear Captain,

With reference to below, please provide us with the copy of passport & CDC of below mentioned crew in order to prepare required letters/permissions in advance.

Your prompt reply is highly appreciated.

Best Regards,

M. Hamidi

Operations Team

Iran Sea Company

3) Emails that both provide and request information/favor and action:

Example 5:

Dear Mr. Williams,

Please note that your visa has been issued by the immigration office.

Thus, provide us with your travel schedule to arrange for your stay here.

Best

A. Rezaee

Iran Sea Company
Azadi street, Tehran, Iran
Phone: *****

Example 6:

Dear Sir,
Pls confirm receipt pre-arrival info.
Fyi, Vessel discharging the cargo at Jebel Ali, next port Abu Dhabi ETA Iran 22.06.2011
Yours Faithfully,
Capt. Edward
Master of MT "Harmony"
INM Tel: ***** (Master)

4.2. Generic structure

The data analysis revealed that the following four moves introduced by Santos (2002) were also applicable here:

- Move 1: Establishing the negotiation chain
- Move 2: Providing Information
- Move 3: Requesting (information/action/favor)
- Move 4: Ending

4.2.1. *Move 1: Establishing the Negotiation Chain*

This move comes at the beginning of an email and sets the scene of the communicative act by providing information about the sender, receiver, date, reference, subject, and also greeting the addressee (Santos, 2002). Thus, more or less following Mehrpour and Mehrzad's (2013) model, this starting move consists of three steps, each having its own sub-steps. The first one has been called 'setting the scene' rather than 'defining participants' used by Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013), since in addition to participants, it includes information about other categories such as date, subject, hence the title 'setting the scene' appears more inclusive than defining participants.

- (i) Setting the scene

- (a) Sender line
- (b) Date line
- (c) Recipient line
- (d) CC line
- (e) Subject line

It is worth mentioning that today most email applications like *Outlook* has a built-in feature which provides blank spaces for sender (from), date (sent), receiver (to), subject and CC (Carbon Copy) to be filled by the writer. Thus, these sub-steps usually do not appear in the email text but at the above in the interface of the software. Therefore, most of the emails examined in the present study started with the addressing and greeting sub-step.

Example 7:

Good day
Thank you for the below message. All well noted.
Please instruct master to keep us posted with vessel's movements including ETA BNK on a regular basis.
Best Regards,
M. Fazeli,

However, when an email is replied to or forwarded to others, the categories appear in the above section of the email text to inform the new recipients of the forwarded email of the original sender, date, recipient, etc. Look at the following example which is the same message in the example above when forwarded to a new recipient.

Example 8:

From: Sea Star/Ops (11)
Sent: Monday, October 31, 2011 2:00 PM
To: ops1@marine.net
Cc: busheher@bay.net; marine@reed.net;
Subject: RE: Bw - Arrival Information
Good day,
Thank you for the below message. All well noted.
Please instruct master to keep us posted with vessel's movements including ETA BIK on a regular basis.

Best Regards,
M. Fazeli,

Furthermore, in the data, within the information providing category, a special type of email was found, which is highly formal and bears all the steps of setting the scene mentioned above. In other words, this type of email is very similar to traditional business letters. The shipping agency companies like the one from which our data was obtained have a kind of coordinating role among many parties, such as ship owners, charters or sub-owners, captains, port authorities, and the terminal. Hence, it is very important for any shipping agency to provide and transmit the related information exactly and immediately. Since any mistakes and delays in this regard might lead to heavy charges against the company. Therefore, such essential information is usually transferred by a special type of email which is formally similar to traditional business letters.

Another characteristic of such emails is that they are often sent to several people simultaneously through the CC step or features explained below. The reason behind including so many people in the CC section is to increase the legal value of the message by using the added concerned parties as witnesses in case of possible damages, accidents, and delays, their consequent fiscal disputes (Gimenez, 2006). Examples 9 and 10 below belong to this category.

Example 9:

Msg: MH-9440-EN

Date: 16/Oct/2012

Fm: Iran sea

To: B.C.C/ Tehran/ Oil Dept/ Mr.Amini

Cc: B.I.O.C/ Blusher/ Shipping Dept./ Mr. Ekrami

Cc: Sky oil/ Singapore/ Ms. Lilian cc: T.T.P.C./ Head of Jetties

Re: Viyo – ETA Pilot Station 19/Oct/2012 at 0001 LT

Please accept this message as ‘3-day’ advance notice of arrival of Sea Whale at MIS with ETA of October 19th 2012 at 0001 LT.

Best Regards

Iran Sea/Tehran

As Agents

It also should be noted that the step CC or Carbon Copy, which has a similar function to the Copy-to line step in the ending move of Santos (2002) Business Letter of Negotiation model and is missing in Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013) model of business email, is a valuable feature of emails in today's business world which makes it possible to send one email to many parties simultaneously, a necessity in today's international business interaction in which companies in different parts of the world need to communicate and make decision together (Gimenez, 2006). In the following example, an email has been sent to several recipients simultaneously with this CC feature.

Example 10:

From: Sun flower

Sent: Monday, May 28, 2012 1:17 AM

To: bushahr@bay.net

Cc: gardine@rtede...fg; lpgsct@sgage.co.jp; refops@ammo.com.sg; mares@donline.co; performance@gaslie.co.jp

Subject: Suny flower

Dear Mr. Fahimi

Please be advised that Vessel's ETA to Pilot Station is at 12:00LT on 29th May 2012. (Sailed from Fujairah UAE: 2330LT 27th May 2012)

And will revert with updated ETA notice accordingly.

Best Regards/

Capt. Shen

Opening and reference to previous contact steps: In line with the findings of Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013), the data in the present study showed the existence of the following two sub-steps within this opening step:

(ii) Opening

(a) Addressing

Greeting the address: However, the step thanking included in Mehrpour and Mehrzad's (2013) model has been considered as a type of greeting since as the following example shows here the thanking is just a way of being polite, thus considered a greeting.

Example 11:

Dear Sir,
Your below instructions well noted with thanks...
Will come back to you with draft of the B/L accordingly.
Best Regards,
M. Hamidi

Reference to previous contact step: This step was used in about 60 percent of the emails investigated. The writers of the emails usually started their message with this step by using expressions such as

Example 12: With respect to your below email, ...

Example 13: Further to below, ...

Example 14: Further to our telephone conversation, ...

Example 15: Regarding the above message, ...

The frequency of this step in the data can be attributed to the important role that this step plays in linking the present email to previous ones, while at the same time providing the reader with a hint at the subject of the present email. This step performs some part of the role played by the reference-line step in traditional letters. Reviewing the emails, the researchers found that all 60 emails were either providing an answer to a previous enquiry or adding some new information to previous emails.

4.2.2. Move 2 & 3: Providing Information and Requesting (Information/Action/Favor)

As mentioned by both Santos (2002) and Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013), these two moves account for the communicative purpose of each email. Thus, each email to be considered as an example of “enquiry” (Jalilifar & Beitsayyah, 2011) or what Santos (2002) calls Letters of Negotiation needs to have at least one of Moves 2 or 3 or both of them. According to Santos’s (2002) study, when Moves 2 and 3 accompany each other, providing information must precede requesting information. In the present study, however, they either precede or follow each other. In Example 16, the author first provides information (Move 2), then requests information (Move 3). While in Example 17, the order is reversed.

Example 16:

Dear Captain,

Please note as per Terminal instructions, your berthing prospects will be for tomorrow PM, for which Please standby on VHF to receive the latest instructions about pilot boarding time/position.

Best\Bagheri

Example 17:

Good day,

Pls confirm receipt pre-arrival info.

Vessel discharging the cargo at Jebel Ali, next port Abu Dhabi ETA BIK 22.06.2011

Yours Faithfully,

Capt. Sergey

Master of Sea Star

This flexibility of business emails in using both moves can be attributed to some reasons, among which one can refer to a) the importance of speed in international business and b) a great number of emails that need to be sent on a daily basis. This, in turn, has led to an inclination among business email writers to focus on carrying out a lot of communicative acts in one email without caring too much about the order of providing and requesting information.

Move 2: Providing Information

In the present study, this move occurred 73 times and was the most frequent move in the data. Most of the optional steps and sub-steps proposed by Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013) were supported by the present data. Each of the steps is illustrated by an example from the data:

(i) Information

(a) Introducing and providing information

Example 18: Please note that your visa will be issued by tomorrow.

(b) Continuing/adding/updating

Example 19: Besides, your ticket was purchased today.

(c) Agreeing/confirming information

Example 20: We confirm your appointing us as your agent.

(d) Showing opposition (unexpected results)/disagreeing

Example 21: Unfortunately, bunker services are not available in our port.

(e) Acknowledging the receipt of a message

Example 22: We acknowledge receipt of your below message

Example 23: Your below message was duly noted.

Example 24: Your NOR was well-received.

It should be noted that this step was missing in Mehrpour and Mehrzad's (2013) model and in Santos's (2002) original model. It was only included in the third move. In the present study, this step occurred 37 times, which shows the importance of confirming the receipt of messages in the business world, in which missing an important piece of information might lead to irreversible damage to the reputation of a given company and its subsequent market. Furthermore, acknowledging messages increases the credibility of the given company in the eyes of its business partners.

(ii) Advising about the message: This step provides readers with extra information

(a) Along with e-mail (attachment)

Example 25: Please find attached.

(b) Within the e-mail

Example 26: Please note the following chart.

(c) Via link/website

Example 27: For more information, consult our website.

Move 3: Requesting (Information/Action/Favor):

As the second pillar of enquiry emails, this move occurred 58 times in the data. For this move, based on the analysis of the data, the following steps have been proposed, which result from combining and revising the steps in both Mehrpour and Mehrzad's (2000) and Santos's (2002)

original models. The first revision was rephrasing the names of some of the steps that were found a bit confusing during the data analysis.

(i) Information

(a) Requesting explanation/clarification/information

Example 28: Please clarify what these restrictions are and what options we have.

(b) Seeking ideas/opinions/suggestions

Example 29: Please advise us of a reliable surveyor

(c) Asking for confirmation of information

Example 30: Will you confirm the amount of USD 1000 to be paid to the master?

Example 31: If you agree, our agent will contact you for the payment process?

(d) Asking for acknowledgment of a message

Example 32: Attached please find and confirm its safe receipt.

(ii) Actions/favors of:

(a) Material/document mailing

Example 33: But could you please kindly send us the draft B/L later?

(b) Service/action

Example 34: Please arrange for sb to pick us at the airport.

Steps common to both moves 2 & 3

(iii) Apologizing

This step was used with different functions. For instance, in Example 35, the person is really apologizing, while in Example 36, it has been used as a strategy to reduce imposition and to be more polite.

Example 35: Sorry for the delayed response. We will send you the bill by tomorrow.

Example 36: Sorry for disturbing you, but please resend the tide table.

(iv) Evaluating

(a) Giving personal opinions

Example 37: You had better supply your provisions in Fujairah.

(b) Making comments

Example 38: We think the fee is reasonable.

(v) Drawing attention to something

Example 39: Please note....

Example 40: For your kind attention,

(vi) Indicating wishes/plans/intentions

Example 41: We are intending to attend the vessel at berth

(vii) Applying pressure tactics

Example 42: Your prompt reply is highly appreciated

Example 43: Please sent us the document ASAP.

4.2.3. Move 4: Ending

This move, as the name suggests, brings the communicative event to an end. It consists of the following steps:

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| a) Signing off: | Best Regards |
| b) Signature: | Reza Afshar |
| c) Job status: | General manager |
| d) Contact information: | Phone: +98912***** |
| e) Company information: | Sea Tide, Bander Abbas, Iran |

The above steps are almost common in both Santos's (2002) and Mehrpour and Mehrzad's (2013) models. However, the present study revealed that in many emails, writers have used some sentences that more or less show that they are about to sign off. We called this function the pre-signing off step, which usually comes immediately before closing terms like *Best Regards*, *Respectfully*, and so on. Thus, this step consists of the following sub-steps:

i) Pre-signing off

a) Promoting further contact

1) Soliciting Response, e.g.,

Example 44: Looking forward to hearing from you

2) Indicating availability

Example 45: Feel free to reach us anytime

b) Promising further contact, e.g.,

Example 46: We will come back to you in this respect accordingly.

Example 47: We will keep you posted with further news accordingly.

According to the data, participants usually used the promising further contact step while they were answering a request for information. Through personal communication with an experienced member of the business community from which the data was gathered, we learned that business email writers usually apply this sub-step when they have not acquired the needed information yet or in cases in which they cannot reveal it. Thus, by applying this technique, they buy some time until they get the information or they get to the point in time where the confidentiality of the information is no longer an issue, so they can pass it. By doing this, they maintain the reputation of their company and avoid possible problems and keep their good relationship with their clients.

Example 48:

Dear Mr. Vijay,

Thanks for your email. Vessel is presently in the process of becoming all fast at Bahar terminal.

With respect to your below email, we are now doing our best to collect some further details regarding the delays occurred (apart from the reasons terminal brings such as the last vessel's technical problems during loading, etc.).

We will come back to you in this respect accordingly.

Best Regards,

Farhadi

Ops Manager

Based on the findings of the present study, the following revised version of the generic structure of enquiry emails has been proposed:

A Revised Generic Structure of Enquiry Emails

Moves:

Move 1: Establishing the negotiation chain

Steps:

(i) Setting the scene

Sub steps

(a) Sender line

(b) Date line

(c) Recipient line

(d) CC line

(e) Subject line

(ii) Opening

(a) Addressing

(b) Greeting the address

(iii) Reference to previous contact

Move 2: Providing information

(i) Information

- (a) Introducing and providing information
- (b) Continuing/adding/updating
- (c) Agreeing/confirming information
- (d) Showing opposition (unexpected results)/disagreeing
- (e) Acknowledging the receipt of a message

(ii) Advising about the message

- (a) Along with e-mail (attachment)
- (b) Within the e-mail
- (c) Via link/website

Move 3: Requesting (information/action/favor)

(i) Information

- (a) Requesting/ explanation/clarification/information
- (b) Seeking ideas/opinions/suggestions
- (c) Asking for confirmation of information
- (d) Asking for acknowledgment of a message

(ii) Actions/favors of:

- (a) Material/document mailing
- (b) Service/action

Steps common to both moves

- (iii) Apologizing
- (iv) Evaluating
 - (a) Giving personal opinions
 - (b) Making comments
- (v) Drawing attention to something
- (vi) Indicating wishes/plans/intentions
- (vii) Applying pressure tactics

Move 4: Ending

- (i) Pre-signing off
 - a) Promoting further contact
 - 1) Soliciting Response, e.g.,
 - 2) Indicating availability
 - b) Promising further contact, e.g.,
- (ii) Signing off
- (iii) Signature
- (iv) Job status
- (v) Contact information
- (vi) Company information

Lexico-grammatical features

In the first move, the addressing terms such as *Dear Sir*, *Dear*, and a title like *Dear Captain*, *Dear Agent*, and also *Dear Mr.* with family names like *Dear Mr. Hamidi* were repeatedly used. However, among the greeting expressions used, *Good day* was the most frequent one, occurring 50 times. This can be due to the fact that the business communicators in the present study come

from different time zones, so they preferred to use this expression to avoid possible embarrassment that might be caused by, for instance, mistakenly saying *Good morning* instead of *Good evening*.

The second move, providing information, was linguistically realized by declarative sentences. The sentences mostly started with a service or product, usually with a passive structure. (e.g., *The b/l will be couriered to you by DHL* or *The fresh water will be supplied to you at the berth*). Besides, in cases where the sentences were started with a person, it was usually in the third person (e.g., *Our colleague Mr. Rahimi will pick you up at the airport.*) or with the first-person plural subject pronoun. This finding is in line with those of Jalilifar and Beitsayyah (2011) and Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013), who attribute this inclination to focus on company and group rather than the individual among Iranian business correspondents to cultural factors.

Furthermore, the participants used the following expressions frequently in the data while providing information.

Example 49: For your information

Example 50: Please be advised

Example 51: Please be informed

Example 52: Please note

The third move, requesting (information/action/favor), was predominantly (90 % of the time) realized by imperative structure mitigated by *please* or *kindly*:

Example 53: Kindly advise how much time it's take for the port authorities to clear the vessel

Example 54: Pls confirm receipt of this msg

Example 55: Also please provide us with the following information

This frequent use of imperative structure to request information or action in the data can be partly accounted for by the importance of clarity and brevity in business email

correspondence, or it might be due to the lack of proficiency of business correspondents in English. This, however, needs to be explored by further research. In addition to linguistic realizations of the moves mentioned above, the data were also full of acronyms and unconventional abbreviations, contractions, and short spellings such as

ASAP: as soon as possible

RYM= regarding your message

FYI: for your information

Brgds: best regards

G'day: good day

Vsl: vessel (ship)

pls, plz: please

msg: message

Oprns: operations

ETA: estimated time of arrival

ETD: estimated time of departure

ETC: estimated time of completion

This feature of business emails results from the nature of email technology, which has provided its users with a kind of freedom to exert their agency (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000). However, this has not hindered the communication among the discourse community although it might be problematic for those who have newly joined the discourse community. The following interesting email sent by a Japanese to an Iranian business partner is an illustrative example.

Example 56:

DEAR Mr. AMIRI

RE BELOW APPENDED MSGS OF YR COMMUNICATION WITH THE MASTER,

PLS BE ADVD THAT UNDERSTOOD TO BE ARNGD FLWGS

(1)

FILIPINO CREW MEMBER TO BE ARNGD DOCTOR'S MEDICAL
TREATMENT AT B.I.K TODAY:

2.

IN CASE OF DOCTOR ADVD/CNFMD ABV CREW MEMBER
'UNFIT FOR DUTY

3.

PLS ARNG HM TO DEBARK IN YR END THRU TAKING
NECESSARY FORMALITIES OF IMMIGRATION N CUSTOMS.

4.

UPON DOCTOR CNFMD 'FIT FOR SINGLE TRAVEL'
KINDLY ARNG REQUIRED FORMALITIES OF
IMMIGRATION N CUSTOMS.

YR KIND ATTENDANCE/COOPERATION N PROMPT ATTENTION
FOR ABV CREW MEMBERS MEDICAL TREATMENT CASE WL BE
HIGHLY APPRECIATED.

PLS CNFM.

THANKS IN ADVANCE N BEST REGARDS/

KIM

As it is illustrated in the above-mentioned example, this Japanese writer has used his agency to the extreme by writing in capital letters and using a lot of abbreviated forms within one email.

5. Discussion

The present study investigated the generic structure and lexico-grammatical features of emails used in the Iranian shipping industry, contributing to our understanding of how these emails function as tools for negotiation and communication in international contexts. By comparing the findings with previous studies, we can better appreciate the similarities and differences across various professional settings.

5.1. Types of Emails and Their Functions

The analysis identified three primary types of emails: information-providing (40%), request (34%), and combined (information and request) (26%). These proportions align closely with Santos's (2002) model and corroborate findings from Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013), who also observed a high frequency of information-providing and request emails in business correspondence. However, the prevalence of combined emails (26%) highlights the efficiency-driven nature of communication in the shipping industry, where time-sensitive decisions necessitate concise yet comprehensive messages. This finding contrasts slightly with Qasim et al. (2015), who focused on sales letters and found that requests were more prominent than informational emails. The difference may stem from the specific context of the study—the shipping industry often requires simultaneous provision and confirmation of information, making combined emails particularly useful. Additionally, Warren (2016) noted that power dynamics influence email content; in hierarchical industries like shipping, combined emails might serve as a strategic tool to balance authority and politeness.

5.2. Generic Structure of Enquiry Emails

The revised generic structure proposed in this study was built upon models by Santos (2002) and Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013). Key moves include:

Move 1: Establishing the Negotiation Chain

The findings expanded on earlier models by introducing "setting the scene," which encompasses the sender, recipient, date, subject, and CC lines. While most emails omit these details due to software defaults, their inclusion in formal emails mirrors traditional business letters. This reflects the legal importance of documentation in the shipping industry, consistent with Gimenez's (2006) observation that CC lists enhance accountability and reduce disputes.

Move 2: Providing Information

Declarative sentences dominated this move, often using passive voice or third-person subjects. This aligns with Jalilifar and Beitsayyah (2011) and Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013), who attributed such structures to Iranian cultural norms, emphasizing group identity over individual responsibility. Furthermore, the frequent use of acknowledging phrases (*We acknowledge*

receipt...) underscores the importance of reliability and trust in long-term business relationships.

Move 3: Requesting Information/Action/Favor

Imperative structures mitigated by polite expressions (e.g., *kindly advise*, *pls confirm*) accounted for 90% of requests. While clarity and brevity are essential in business communication, this pattern may also reflect limited English proficiency among some writers—a hypothesis requiring further investigation. Park et al. (2021) similarly noted that L2 writers tend toward directness compared to L1 counterparts, who incorporate supportive moves like compliments or compensation offers.

Move 4: Ending

Pre-signing strategies, such as soliciting responses or promising future contact, were prevalent. These techniques maintain ongoing relationships and ensure follow-up actions, echoing Ho's (2018) findings on metadiscourse in persuasive emails. Promising further contact, specifically, allows writers to defer sensitive information while preserving professionalism—a strategy highlighted in personal interviews with experienced business communicators.

Lexico-Grammatical Features

The linguistic analysis revealed several notable trends:

Addressing Terms and Greetings

Neutral greetings like *Good Day* predominated, likely reflecting the global nature of the shipping industry and the need to accommodate diverse time zones. This contrasts with Warren's (2016) observation of warmth and affability in Pakistani emails, suggesting cultural variations in politeness strategies.

Sentence Structures

Passive voice and third-person subjects reinforced group-oriented language, consistent with Iranian cultural values. This finding supports Bhatia's (1993) argument that genre conventions are shaped by sociocultural factors.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

Extensive use of abbreviations (e.g., *ASAP*, *FYI*) exemplifies the influence of email technology on written communication. Although these shortcuts enhance efficiency, they may pose challenges for newcomers unfamiliar with industry-specific jargon. Example 56, showcasing extreme abbreviation usage, illustrates how personal agency shapes discourse while maintaining mutual intelligibility within established communities. Asztalos (2014) similarly noted variability in students' application of email conventions, highlighting the role of exposure and training.

6. Conclusion

Business communication has evolved significantly with the advent of email, which has become the predominant medium for professional correspondence due to its convenience, speed, and flexibility. This study examined business emails exchanged between an Iranian shipping company and international firms, focusing on their generic structure and lexico-grammatical features. The analysis revealed three primary types of emails: information-providing (40%), request (34%), and combined (26%). These proportions align with previous studies but highlight the efficiency-driven nature of communication in the shipping industry, where combined emails balance multiple communicative purposes. A revised four-move model was proposed, expanding upon frameworks by Santos (2002) and Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013). Move 1 (Establishing the negotiation chain) was enhanced to include "Setting the scene," encompassing the sender, recipient, date, subject, and CC lines. Moves 2 and 3 focused on providing information and requesting actions/favors, respectively, while Move 4 addressed endings with pre-signing strategies like soliciting responses or promising further contact. Lexico-grammatical features included neutral greetings ("Good Day"), declarative sentences often using passive voice or third-person subjects, imperative structures mitigated by politeness markers ("please" or "kindly"), and extensive use of abbreviations (e.g., "ASAP," "FYI"). These findings contribute to genre analysis and ESP pedagogy by offering insights into formal and content schemata.

Despite the growing body of research on business emails, key questions remain unresolved, such as the correlation between move sequences and lexical/syntactic features and

the pragmatic strategies essential in modern workplace communication. This study addressed a gap by analyzing authentic emails from an Iranian shipping company, highlighting both universal trends and context-specific variations. For instance, group-oriented language emphasizing company-wide actions over individual responsibility reflects Iranian cultural values, consistent with findings by Jalilifar and Beitsayyah (2011) and Mehrpour and Mehrzad (2013). However, the frequent use of imperative structures for requests (90% of cases) may indicate a preference for clarity and brevity or limited English proficiency among writers—a hypothesis requiring further investigation. Comparisons with previous studies reveal similarities at the macro-level but differences at the micro-level, influenced by sociocultural factors and power dynamics. Recent studies, such as those by Ho (2018), Millot (2017), and Park et al. (2021), emphasize the importance of metadiscourse, positioning, and intercultural communication in business emails. By integrating these insights, this study enriches our understanding of how language operates in specialized professional contexts, offering practical implications for teaching and training in ESP programs. Future research could expand the dataset to include diverse organizations and explore deeper pragmatic functions or sociocultural dimensions.

This study advances research on business communication within specialized domains by analyzing authentic emails from the Iranian shipping industry, revealing how structural conventions, cultural norms, and technological affordances collectively shape professional discourse. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that ESP curricula —particularly in maritime contexts —should prioritize teaching clarity, politeness, and adaptability in email communication, while also familiarizing learners with industry-specific abbreviations and acronyms. Culturally, the prevalence of group-oriented language in the data reflects broader Iranian societal values, highlighting the need for ESP programs to address such nuances to equip learners for effective cross-cultural interactions, especially where norms may diverge from Western conventions. Furthermore, the frequent use of informal language and abbreviations underscores the evolving nature of digital communication, urging researchers and practitioners to integrate these technological influences into training frameworks and assessments of communicative competence. Together, these insights emphasize the dynamic

interplay between language, culture, and technology in professional settings, offering actionable guidance for both educators and industry stakeholders.

The findings of this study have important pedagogical implications, particularly for ESP programs. By providing detailed descriptions of the generic structures and linguistic features of business emails, this research offers a practical framework for teaching business communication. ESP instructors can use these findings to develop targeted training materials that address the specific needs of learners, such as mastering the use of moves and steps, employing culturally appropriate politeness strategies, and understanding the functional use of acronyms and abbreviations. In professional practice, the study highlights the need for greater awareness of intercultural communication strategies. Business professionals who use English as a lingua franca should be mindful of the cultural and contextual factors influencing their communication. For instance, adopting a polite tone and acknowledging receipt of emails can significantly enhance interpersonal relationships and foster trust in international business contexts.

While this study provides valuable insights, certain limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the dataset is drawn exclusively from one Iranian shipping company, potentially limiting generalizability. Future studies could expand the scope to include other organizations or industries. Second, the analysis focuses primarily on surface-level features; deeper investigations into pragmatic functions or sociocultural dimensions would enrich our understanding of business communication.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) certify/certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in the present research paper.

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Appendix

1) The generic structure of non-native Iranian business e-mails

MOVE 1: Establishing the negotiation chain

(i) Defining participants

- (a) Sender- line
- (b) Recipient- line
- (c) Subject- line
- (d) Date- line
- (e) Attention to the message- line

(ii) Opening

- (a) Addressing and greeting the addressee
- (b) Thanking the addressee
- (c) Apologizing

(iii) Reference to previous contact

MOVE 2: Providing (Information/Answers)

(i) Information

- (a) Introducing and providing information
- (b) Continuing/adding/updating
- (c) Agreeing/confirming information
- (d) Showing opposition (unexpected results)/disagreeing
- (i) Offering something in return

(ii) Advising about the message

- (a) Along with e-mail (attachment)
- (b) Via link/website
- (c) Within the e-mail

MOVE 3: Requesting (Information/Action/Favor)

(i) Information

- (a) Explaining/clarifying/requesting information
- (b) Exchanging/asking for ideas/opinions
- (c) Confirming information

(ii) Actions/favors of:

- (a) Material/document mailing
- (b) Service/action

ESTPS COMMON TO BOTH MOVES 2 &3

(iii) Evaluating

- (a) Giving personal opinions
- (b) Making comments
- (iv) Drawing attention to something
- (v) Indicating wishes/plans/intentions
- (vi) Applying pressure tactics

MOVE 4: Ending

(i) Prompting further contact

- (a) Soliciting response*
- (b) Indicating availability

- (ii) Signing-off
- (iii) Signature-line
- (iv) Job status in the company
- (v) Company name
- (vi) Contact information
- (vii) Note & PS-line*

2) The generic structure of native business e-mails

MOVE 1: Establishing the negotiation chain

- (i) Defining participants
 - (a) Sender- line
 - (b) Recipient- line
 - (c) Subject- line
 - (d) Date- line
- (ii) Opening
 - (a) Addressing and greeting the addressee
 - (b) Thanking the addressee
- (iii) Reference to previous contact

MOVE 2: Providing (Information/Answers)

- (i) Information
 - (a) Introducing and providing information
 - (b) Continuing/adding/up-dating
 - (c) Agreeing/confirming information

(d) Showing opposition (unexpected results)/disagreeing

(i) Offering something in return #

(ii) Advising about the message

(a) Along with e-mail (attachment)

(b) Via link/website

(c) Within the e-mail

MOVE 3: Requesting (Information/Action/Favor)

(i) Information

(a) Explaining/clarifying/requesting information

(b) Exchanging/asking for ideas/opinions

(c) Confirming information

(ii) Actions/favors of:

(a) Material/document mailing

(b) Service/action

STEPS COMMON TO BOTH MOVES 2 & 3

(iii) Evaluating

(a) Giving personal opinions

(b) Making comments

(iv) Drawing attention to something

(v) Indicating wishes/plans/intentions

(vi) Applying pressure tactics

MOVE 4: Ending

- (i) Prompting further contact: indicating availability
- (ii) Signing-off
- (iii) Signature-line
- (iv) Job status in the company
- (v) Company name
- (vi) Contact information