

**Improving Students' Business Letter Writing through a Genre-Based Approach****Atalisi Zalukhu¹, Jubil Ezer Sihite², Uswatun Hasanah³, Aliya Noor Cahyani⁴**

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Abstract

Writing business letters is an essential skill for students in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts, as it prepares them to engage in professional communication effectively. However, many students encounter difficulties in producing business letters that are structurally accurate, contextually appropriate, and linguistically formal. This study aims to improve students' business letter writing through the implementation of a Genre-Based Approach (GBA). The research employed a classroom action research design conducted in two cycles, involving third-semester students of the accounting department of Institut Bisnis dan Komputer Indonesia. Data were collected through pre-tests, post-tests, observations, and students' written works, which were assessed using a rubric covering content, organization, language use, and format. The findings revealed that students showed significant improvement in their ability to construct business letters, particularly in terms of understanding the communicative purpose, using appropriate formal expressions, and applying correct letter structure. The results indicate that the stages of GBA building knowledge of the field, modeling, joint construction, and independent construction were effective because they explicitly introduced students to the social purposes and generic structure of business letters, enabling them to internalize both the functional and linguistic features of the genre. This explicit scaffolding not only facilitated students' understanding of how language operates within professional contexts but also enhanced their confidence and autonomy in producing formal written communication. In conclusion, the Genre-Based Approach proves to be an effective and pedagogically grounded strategy for improving students' business letter writing skills in ESP classrooms.

Keywords: Business Letter Writing, Genre-based Approach, Writing Skill, ESP, EFL Learners**Citation:**

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INTRODUCTION

(Writing is one of the most challenging skills to master for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Among the various types of writing, business letter writing is particularly demanding since it requires not only linguistic accuracy but also an understanding of specific conventions and communicative purposes. Business letters play a crucial role in professional communication as they reflect the credibility and professionalism of the writer (Bhatia, 2017). In an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) context, mastering business letter writing equips students with the practical skills that they will need in the workplace.

However, many students still face difficulties in producing effective business letters. Previous studies indicate that learners often struggle with content organization, choice of formal expressions, and appropriate formatting when writing business correspondence (Tuan, 2010; Swales, 2016). These difficulties often result in letters that are unclear, structurally incorrect, or contextually inappropriate, limiting the students' ability to communicate professionally in English. A similar condition is also found among students at the Indonesian Business and Computer Institute, where English is taught as part of the English for Business and Professional Communication course. Observations during classroom activities showed that many students were unable to organize ideas logically, often used informal language, and had limited knowledge of standard business letter formats. As a result, their business letters did not meet the expected professional standards. This condition highlights the need for a more effective instructional approach that not only develops students' linguistic competence but also familiarizes them with the communicative purposes and conventions of business correspondence. Business letters are one of the most common genres used in professional communication. They serve various functions such as requesting information, making complaints, offering products or services, and building professional relationships. According to Bhatia (2017), business letters are not only about conveying messages but also about projecting professionalism and maintaining organizational image. In the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), students are required to master business letter writing since it provides them with practical communication skills for future workplace demands.

Nevertheless, writing business letters poses significant challenges for EFL learners. As Swales (2016) notes, students often lack awareness of the rhetorical structure and communicative purposes of such texts. They tend to produce letters with poor organization, informal tone, and inappropriate vocabulary, which weakens the effectiveness of the communication. Tuan (2010) further emphasizes that without explicit instruction in genre conventions, students may fail to meet professional writing standards. To address these challenges, the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) has been widely recognized as an effective pedagogical framework in teaching writing. GBA emphasizes the understanding of text structure, purpose, and linguistic features by guiding learners through different stages of learning: building knowledge of the field, modeling, joint construction, and independent construction (Feez & Joyce, 1998). This approach not only familiarizes students with the genre but also provides scaffolding that gradually increases their independence in writing. Hyland (2007) argues that GBA helps students recognize the social purposes of texts and equips them with the strategies to produce writing that meets professional and academic standards.

A number of studies have reported the effectiveness of GBA in improving students' writing performance. Emilia (2011) found that GBA enhanced Indonesian students' ability to write argumentative essays by helping them understand text structures and linguistic choices. Similarly, Kurniawan (2015) showed that GBA significantly improved students' report writing in an ESP context. More specifically, in the domain of business letter writing, Nugraha (2019) reported that GBA helped students improve their use of formal expressions, letter organization, and professional tone. These findings suggest that GBA provides both linguistic and rhetorical awareness, enabling learners to produce texts that are contextually appropriate and communicatively effective. Given these advantages, applying GBA to teaching business letter writing for students at the Institut Bisnis dan Komputer Indonesia is expected to be a promising strategy to address their difficulties and enhance their writing competence. Considering the significance of business letter writing in ESP and the potential benefits of GBA, this study investigates how the implementation of a Genre-Based Approach can improve students' business letter writing skills, particularly among students at the Indonesian Institute of Business and Computers. Specifically, it seeks to explore whether the stages of GBA can help students overcome difficulties in letter organization, language use, and format, ultimately leading to more effective and professional written communication.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to investigate how the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) could improve students' business letter writing skills. Classroom Action Research was chosen because it enables the teacher–researcher to identify students' learning problems, implement instructional interventions, and evaluate the outcomes in a cyclical and reflective manner (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The research was conducted in two cycles, each consisting of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection.

Participants and Setting

The participants of this study were 28 third-semester students enrolled in the English for Business course at the Institut Bisnis dan Komputer Indonesia during the academic year 2025/2026. These students were selected because they were required to develop business correspondence skills as part of their ESP curriculum. Most students had limited prior experience in writing formal business letters, which made them suitable subjects for this study.

Procedures

The research followed the four pedagogical stages of the Genre-Based Approach (Feez & Joyce, 1998):

1. **Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF):** Students were introduced to the concept and importance of business letters. Vocabulary and expressions related to business communication were taught through discussions, reading activities, and vocabulary-building tasks.
2. **Modeling of the Text:** The teacher presented several authentic samples of business letters, emphasizing their structure, communicative purposes, and linguistic features. Students analyzed the samples and identified their generic structures, including heading, salutation, body, closing, and signature.
3. **Joint Construction of the Text:** The teacher and students collaboratively composed business letters. The teacher provided scaffolding related to organization, formal expressions, and formatting.
4. **Independent Construction of the Text:** Students individually wrote business letters based on given scenarios. These works were evaluated to measure progress across cycles.

Reflection and Criteria for Success

The continuation from Cycle I to Cycle II was based on the reflection results derived from both quantitative and qualitative data. After Cycle I, students' mean score had improved to 74.8, yet several aspects particularly organization and language use had not reached the predetermined success criterion of a minimum mean score of 80 (equivalent to "Good" category on the writing rubric). Classroom observations also revealed that some students still relied heavily on teacher guidance when organizing letter structure and selecting appropriate formal expressions. Therefore, Cycle II was conducted with refined instructional strategies, such as providing additional modeling sessions and peer-review activities to promote learner autonomy. The objective of Cycle II was to help students achieve the success indicator and demonstrate more consistent mastery across all assessment components.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through four instruments: pre- and post-writing tests in each cycle to measure progress in business-letter writing; an observation checklist to record students' participation, engagement, and difficulties during lessons (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988); field notes capturing the researcher's reflective observations and student responses; and students' written products collected at every stage of the GBA cycle to trace improvements in content, organization, language use, and format.

Data Analysis

Students' letters were scored with a rubric adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981), covering content (clarity and relevance), organization (coherence and logical flow), language use (grammar, vocabulary, formal expressions), and format (business-letter conventions). To enhance reliability, two independent raters evaluated the scripts; Cohen's Kappa was 0.82, indicating high agreement. Quantitative scores

from the pre-test, Cycle I, and Cycle II post-tests were compared to identify improvement trends, while qualitative data from observations and field notes were thematically analyzed to illuminate learners' behaviors, engagement, and challenges throughout GBA implementation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Improvement in Writing Scores

The implementation of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) led to a significant improvement in students' business letter writing performance. The results of the writing tests revealed that the students' mean score increased from 63.2 in the pre-test to 74.8 in Cycle I, and further improved to 82.6 in Cycle II. This steady increase demonstrates that GBA was effective in enhancing students' writing competence across multiple aspects.

Table 1. Comparison of Students' Writing Scores

Aspect	Pre-test	Cycle I	Cycle II	Improvement Trend
Content	64.5	72.3	80.1	Improved
Organization	61.2	73.0	83.4	Significantly improved
Language Use	62.7	74.1	81.8	Improved
Format	64.3	79.7	85.2	Significantly improved
Mean Score	63.2	74.8	82.6	Consistently improved

As presented in Table 1, the most significant improvements were observed in organization and format, which had been the students' weakest aspects in the pre-test. The Genre-Based Approach provided scaffolding that gradually strengthened their awareness of text structure and business letter conventions.

The Improvement Trend Can Be Better Visualized In The Following Figure

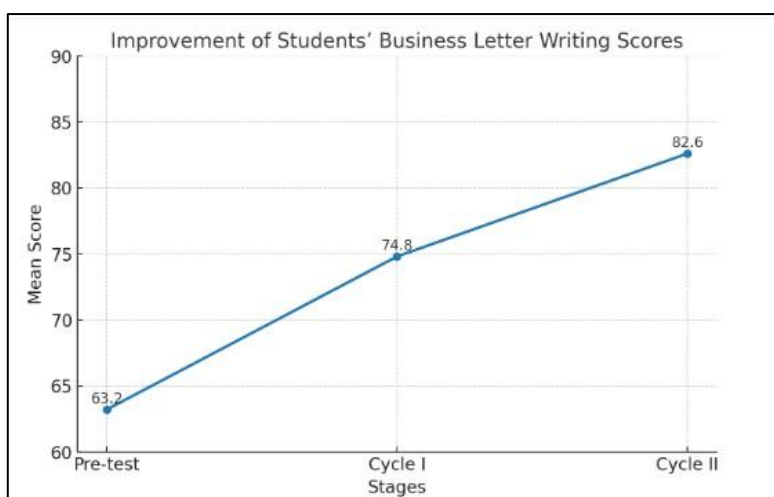


Figure 1. Improvement of Students' Business Letter Writing Scores

The figure illustrates a consistent upward trend in students' writing performance from the pre-test to the final cycle. The sharp increase between Cycle I and Cycle II suggests that repeated exposure to the GBA stages, especially modeling and joint construction, significantly contributed to students' mastery of business letter writing.

Qualitative Findings from Classroom Observations and Field Notes

The qualitative data supported the quantitative results, showing gradual behavioral and attitudinal improvements across both cycles. Observation notes and student reflections were analyzed thematically, resulting in three main themes: (1) challenges in initial stages, (2) increased participation through modeling and collaboration, and (3) enhanced autonomy and confidence in Cycle II.

Table 2. Summary of Qualitative Findings from Observations and Field Notes

Theme	Description	Illustrative Evidence (translated excerpts)
Initial Challenges and Limited Awareness (Pre-test & Early Cycle I)	Students struggled to identify the structure and tone of business letters. Many relied on informal language and were unsure about format conventions.	“Students appeared uncertain about what parts should be included in a business letter.” (Field Notes, Cycle I, Week 1). “ <i>Saya tidak tahu bagaimana membuka surat bisnis dengan formal.</i> ” (Student A) “I didn’t know how to open a business letter formally.”
Active Engagement through Modeling and Joint Construction (Cycle I)	As the teacher modeled authentic texts and guided joint writing, students became more participative and reflective. Group discussions stimulated awareness of formal expressions and communicative purpose.	“Students began asking questions about expression choices, such as ‘Should I use <i>Could you please...</i> instead of <i>Can you...?</i> ’ indicating awareness of formality.” (Observation Notes, Cycle I, Week 3). “ <i>Kerjasama kelompok membantu saya melihat struktur surat dengan jelas.</i> ” (Student C) “Group collaboration helped me see the structure more clearly.”
Improved Autonomy and Confidence in Independent Writing (Cycle II)	During the second cycle, students demonstrated greater confidence and independence. They could organize ideas logically and apply appropriate business tone with minimal assistance.	“By Cycle II, most students completed their drafts independently with correct structure and formal tone.” (Researcher Reflection, Cycle II). “ <i>Sekarang saya tahu bagaimana menulis surat bisnis yang sopan dan profesional.</i> ” (Student F) “Now I know how to write a polite and professional business letter.”

Summary of Reflection between Cycles

Based on Cycle I reflections, the mean score (74.8) fell short of the success criterion (≥ 80), and students still relied on teacher guidance and hesitated to use formal expressions; therefore, Cycle II was implemented with revised teaching strategies, resulting in a higher mean score (82.6) and greater student independence and confidence, confirming the intervention’s success.

Classroom Observations

Observation data indicated that students became more engaged and active during the modeling and joint construction stages. Initially, students were hesitant to contribute ideas, but gradually they participated more confidently in analyzing sample texts and co-constructing business letters with their peers.

Students’ Perceptions

Field notes and informal interviews further revealed that students perceived the GBA as helpful because it provided explicit guidance on how to write. One student expressed: “Before, I didn’t know what parts should be in a business letter, but now I understand the structure and expressions to use.” This indicates that GBA not only improved writing performance but also increased students’ confidence and motivation in writing tasks.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) effectively improved students’ business letter writing skills in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The consistent increase in mean scores from the pre-test (63.2) to Cycle II (82.6) indicates that the structured, stage-based pedagogy of GBA provided both linguistic input and rhetorical awareness essential for producing professional business correspondence. The analysis of results and observations suggests that each stage of GBA functioned as a distinct causal mechanism addressing specific learner difficulties identified in the preliminary phase.

At the initial stage, *Building Knowledge of the Field* helped students connect prior experiences with the communicative context of business correspondence. Before the intervention, many students demonstrated limited understanding of why certain forms, tones, and structures are used in business writing. Through explicit discussion of the communicative purpose and pragmatic norms of business letters, students began to develop what Hyland (2007) calls genre awareness the understanding of how language functions within social contexts. This theoretical grounding enabled them to conceptualize

business letters not merely as linguistic tasks but as purposeful, professional interactions. Consequently, students' content and lexical choices in Cycle I became more relevant and contextually appropriate, reflected in an increase in the *content* score from 64.5 to 72.3.

The most substantial improvement, particularly in *organization* (from 61.2 to 83.4) and *format* (from 64.3 to 85.2), can be directly attributed to the *Modeling of the Text* stage. In this phase, the teacher provided authentic examples of business letters and guided students in analyzing their generic structure including heading, salutation, body, closing, and signature. This explicit demonstration filled a critical gap in students' procedural knowledge, enabling them to visualize and internalize the expected text organization. As Swales (2016) emphasizes, understanding the rhetorical moves and structural conventions of a genre is central to achieving communicative clarity and professionalism. By observing and deconstructing models, students were able to reconstruct these features in their own writing, leading to more cohesive and properly formatted letters by Cycle II.

Furthermore, the modeling stage reinforced linguistic formality. Students began substituting informal expressions such as “*Can you send...*” with more polite and business-like phrases such as “*Could you kindly provide...*”, reflecting a deeper awareness of register. This transformation aligns with Nugraha (2019), who noted that explicit modeling in GBA enhances pragmatic competence by showing how formality operates in professional discourse.

The *Joint Construction* stage represented the most tangible form of scaffolding within students' *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* (Vygotsky, 1978). Initially, students struggled to independently organize their ideas or apply the appropriate tone. During this collaborative phase, the teacher functioned as a mediator—guiding idea sequencing, reformulating informal language, and prompting learners to justify their linguistic choices. This interactive process allowed students to perform at a higher level than they could achieve alone, illustrating the practical embodiment of Vygotskian scaffolding. As a result, students' writing in Cycle II demonstrated more logical organization, coherent transitions, and reduced dependency on teacher input. This confirms Feez and Joyce's (1998) assertion that the cyclical nature of GBA supports a gradual shift from guided practice to independent control of genre-specific writing.

By the *Independent Construction* stage, most students were able to produce complete business letters with minimal guidance. This phase consolidated their learning outcomes, as evidenced by the overall mean score of 82.6 in Cycle II. Observation notes and student feedback further revealed an increase in self-efficacy and motivation, with students expressing greater confidence in structuring and wording formal correspondence. This affective gain underscores that GBA's explicit and scaffolded process not only develops linguistic competence but also empowers learners to approach writing tasks with higher autonomy and self-assurance, an essential attribute in ESP education.

The triangulation of data confirmed that improvement was both cognitive and behavioral. Quantitatively, students showed measurable progress across all writing aspects; qualitatively, classroom observations revealed heightened engagement, active collaboration, and reflective learning behaviors. These converging lines of evidence support Hyland's (2007) claim that genre-based instruction bridges linguistic input, social context, and learner agency, creating a comprehensive environment for writing development.

In the specific context of the *Institut Bisnis dan Komputer Indonesia*, these findings affirm the pedagogical value of GBA in ESP courses. Students preparing for business-related careers require not only grammatical accuracy but also an understanding of professional discourse conventions. By explicitly teaching the social purposes, structural organization, and linguistic realization of business letters, GBA equips learners with practical writing competence and the rhetorical flexibility needed in professional communication.

The Genre-Based Approach was effective because it operationalized the principles of explicit instruction, scaffolding, and gradual release of responsibility through its four structured stages. Each stage directly addressed specific writing challenges ranging from lack of contextual awareness (BKOF) and structural confusion (Modeling) to limited autonomy (Joint and Independent Construction). Consequently, the GBA not only improved measurable writing performance but also fostered the metacognitive and affective dimensions of learning essential for sustained writing development in ESP contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the implementation of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) effectively enhanced students' ability to write business letters in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Institut Bisnis dan Komputer Indonesia. The findings revealed consistent improvement in students' writing performance across the pre-test, Cycle I, and Cycle II, with the most notable progress observed in organization and format areas that had initially posed the greatest challenges. Furthermore, students exhibited an increased ability to use formal expressions appropriately and a clearer understanding of the structural conventions of business correspondence. The four pedagogical stages of GBA Building Knowledge of the Field, Modeling, Joint Construction, and Independent Construction served as a structured scaffolding mechanism that enabled students to move from teacher-supported learning to independent, confident writing. The gradual release of responsibility inherent in GBA not only fostered students' linguistic and rhetorical competence but also encouraged higher levels of engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy in writing tasks.

Beyond improving individual writing outcomes, these results carry important pedagogical implications for ESP instruction. The study suggests that GBA should be adopted as a core instructional framework in ESP courses, particularly those focusing on business communication. By explicitly teaching the social purposes, generic structures, and linguistic features of professional genres, GBA equips students with the practical communicative competence required in real-world business contexts. Integrating GBA principles into the ESP curriculum could therefore strengthen the alignment between language learning and workplace communication needs. In conclusion, the Genre-Based Approach has proven to be a pedagogically sound and contextually relevant strategy for enhancing ESP learners' writing proficiency. Its systematic, scaffolded design not only bridges the gap between language form and professional function but also provides a sustainable model for writing instruction in higher education settings where communicative competence is a key outcome.

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