ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Using Genre-based Approach to Teach Business Email Writing in a Vietnamese University: Making Complaints

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ABSTRACT
To equip students with necessary skills to join the global labor force, various ESP/ EOP courses have been provided in Vietnamese universities aiming at enhancing students' business correspondence writing ability. As part of such an attempt, this action research study employs genre-based approach in teaching EFL business writing and investigates its effectiveness. Particularly, a system of moves and steps was utilised in the modelling stage to reinforce the generic structure of students' complaint emails. Data were collected through pre-test, middle test, post-test and a questionnaire to assess students' writing progress and their attitudes toward the teaching approach. The results show that the genre-based approach fosters students' writing competency, the teaching moves and steps support them to better grasp the target mail's structure. The students also made better choices of linguistic features in writing though they still needed more time to express their ideas really flexibly. The findings also highlight students' positive reactions to the genre-based approach application. This study provides compelling evidence for both the pedagogical value of this approach and areas requiring continued attention in EFL writing instruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2008, Vietnam set the goal to make English a competitive advantage for local students in international academia and the labor force (National Foreign Language Project). Despite great efforts from the government concerning education management, Vietnamese students' English capability remains far behind the NFLP's set target. In particular, most university students and graduates, who should be prepared for the global research community and work force, demonstrate poor English proficiency. Both academic researchers and employers frequently report that university graduates generally have inadequate English language skills (Albright, 2019; Tran, 2013).

Among the four English skills, writing poses the greatest challenge to Vietnamese students in particular and non-native English-speaking students in general (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2016; Pham & Truong, 2021). For example, Vietnamese test-takers got the lowest average score for writing in IELTS academic tests both in 2015 (Nguyen, 2016) and 2019 (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). This situation can be partially attributed to the chosen approach to teaching writing. Pham & Truong (2021) find out that the majority of high school students normally practice writing in tightly controlled ways, resulting in their lack of strategies for composing texts independently. Even at the higher education level, certain writing tasks (e.g. letter writing) are sometimes treated merely as grammar and vocabulary practice exercises (Evans, 2019; Luu, 2011; Mai, 2023) despite their importance in real-life written communication.

To address these challenges, this action research study applied the genre-based approach (GBA) incorporating a moves-and-steps system within its teaching-learning cycle to teach complaint email writing in a university in Hanoi. GBA is considered suitable for ESP/EOP courses (Cheng, 2006; Hyland, 2022) and has been widely employed to help EFL students improve their writing competency in different writing genres, namely argumentative, recount, descriptive reports. However, it is noticeable that there is a lack of studies on complaint email writing using GBA, especially the inclusion of the move-step structure in the teaching process to enhance students' awareness of the email structure. This study was designed to fill both gaps. It aims to demonstrate that GBA and the explicit teaching of moves and steps can improve EFL students' capacity to write complaint emails. Additionally, the research seeks to investigate EFL learners' attitudes towards such intervention. Therefore, this paper addresses two research questions: (1) Has the use of GBA and move-step structure in teaching complaint email writing improved EFL students' writing skills?; (2) What are EFL learners' attitudes towards the intervention?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Genre Based Approach is a framework for language instruction using samples from specific genres (Irawansyah, 2016). This approach stands out from others by focusing not just on subject content, composing processes, and linguistic forms, but on how a text aims to communicate with its readers (Badger & White, 2000; Hyland, 2003; Nordin & Mohammad, 2017). Accordingly, GBA emphasizes teaching learners how to use language patterns to create coherent and purposeful writing. GBA aims to help students develop literacy skills by focusing on the social processes such as explaining, describing, and arguing (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Genres receive significant attention in the teaching/learning process, with findings from genre analysis serving as the foundation for this approach. Learners are expected to understand texts not only as linguistic but also as social, meaningful constructs. They are expected to both master the textual forms and grasp the process by which texts are composed.

To implement this approach effectively, the teaching-learning cycle, a pedagogic framework, was developed to enable learners to access the targeted genres (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). As modeled by many experts, the genre-based teaching-learning process is cyclical with three phases in the order deconstruction, joint construction and independent construction (Ariyanfar & Mitchell, 2020; Dirgeyasa, 2016; Yang, 2016). Generally, in the first stage, sample texts representative of a certain genre are given to students. The teacher and students then analyze and explore the social function, structural elements and language features of these samples to comprehend the cultural and situational context where the genre texts function, the social purpose they serve, the structural pattern reflecting their functions, and the way linguistic features carry out their functions. In the second stage, teachers and students first prepare for joint construction of new text in the same genre by conducting observation, research, discussion, etc. Then, students work in pairs or in groups to develop their texts with teacher guidelines. In the last stage, students individually produce their text in the target genre using their generic awareness, accumulated understanding and knowledge. They may consult with the teacher and their peers for editing and evaluating their product in this stage.

Based on the general approach, different teaching theories and models were proposed, among which Hammond & Macken-Horarik's model is particularly suitable for this study context. Their model consists of four stages with one additional compared to the aforementioned. The first, which is the additional step, is to prepare students with field knowledge. In this step, together, teachers and students build cultural context knowledge, share experience and identify lexical-
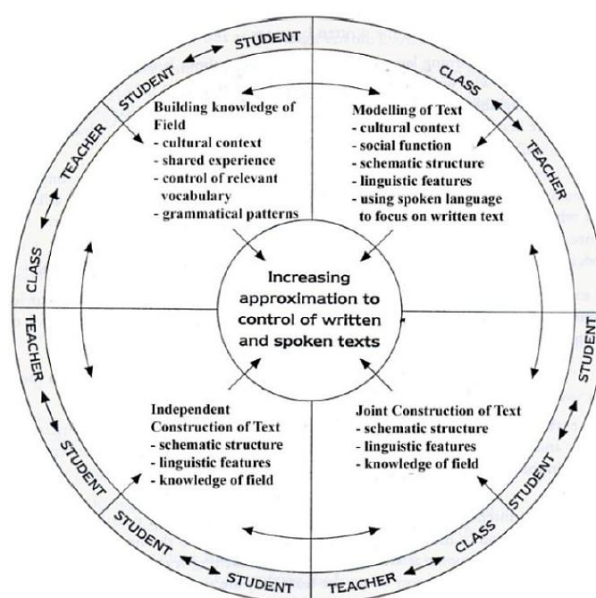

Figure 1. An English writing textbook and syllabus organization model built on genre-based pedagogy (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999, cited in Yang, 2016)

grammatical patterns relevant to the context. As the students participating in this study have a lot of difficulties in identifying cultural context and communicative purpose of the target text and controlling the influence of their own culture on their writing products as well as the linguistic inputs necessary for their successful composition, a further step should be added to prepare students with cultural and language input.

This study also incorporates a move-step system into the second stage of the GBA teaching-learning cycle (deconstruction/modelling of text) to help students understand rhetorical structures of their writing. Understanding rhetorical moves is crucial to help students grasp organizational patterns, both in ESP classrooms and in other types of writing (Bhatia, 1993). Move analysis, which is a type of genre analysis, was originally proposed by Swales (1990) to describe the organizational patterns of research articles. In this framework, Swales defines a move as "a discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse". In other words, a move refers to a text segment that serves a distinct communicative function, contributing to the overall purpose of the genre. Moves are often accompanied by steps which reflect the development of ideas within the move. The move-step framework has since been adapted and employed as a template for writing.

Genre-based instruction has been of great interest to scholars around the world. Its application has been found in teaching linguistic knowledge and skills, especially writing skills. In addition to pure theoretical works, a large number of researchers conducted empirical studies seeking to investigate the effectiveness of the genre-based approach. Their studies employed various research designs (from case study, experimental to action research), focusing not only on different participants' age groups, educational levels but also on different basic educational writing genres. In Vietnam, GBA has attracted academic attention over the past decade. However, the number of studies remained limited, mainly examining the GBA's impact on students' writing performance across different genres (argumentative, expository, recount) and their attitudes towards GBA implementation (Luu, 2011; Nguyen & Tran, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024; Nguyen & Truong, 2024; Pham & Bui, 2021; Trinh & Nguyen, 2014). Most studies reported that GBA implementation led to improved writing performance among Vietnamese EFL learners. Specifically, students can better control genre-specific features and organization of their writing, improve their context awareness, enhance their ability to use appropriate conventions and improve logical argumentation. While organizational and structural improvements are consistent across studies, progress in language resources is sometimes less pronounced (Pham & Bui, 2021; Truong, 2017). The majority of studies find that students develop positive attitudes toward GBA instruction, with increased confidence in writing (Luu, 2011; Nguyen & Truong, 2024; Trinh & Nguyen, 2014); however, some students resist following the instructed genre structures (Pham & Bui, 2021) and a small portion of students disapprove of certain activities in the GBA cycle (Luu, 2011).

Regarding move-step structure, only four studies by Vietnamese scholars have been recorded: Nguyen and Miller (2012) investigated rhetorical differences in business letter writing between Vietnamese students taking ESP courses in Vietnam and business professionals, Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2016) identified the generic structure of English TESOL Master theses, while Pham and Bui (2021) applied the SFL move-step structure to teaching expository essay writing, and Pham and Nguyen (2023) explored the rhetorical structure of discussion section in undergraduate students' theses. None of them examined the employment of moves and steps in teaching business email writing.

Research on the application of GBA and move-step structure to teaching business emails, particularly complaint emails, is even more scarce. Truong (2017) conducted an exploratory study using GBA to teach letter writing to Vietnamese first-year English majors, examining both the approach and students' perceptions. In 2018, Lertchalermtipakoon et al. investigated moves and steps in student writing tasks related to arranging and responding to meeting requests. Kawinvasin et al. (2021) examined whether teaching moves and steps in complaint writing can improve students' business correspondence writing skills. These studies proved the effectiveness of GBA instruction and move-step structure on learners' ability to write business correspondence in each study context. However, only one study focused on complaint emails and none attempted to incorporate moves-and-steps systems into the GBA teaching process. This scarcity in previous research motivated the researcher to conduct this study to make both theoretical and practical contributions to the existing literature of GBA application in teaching business email writing.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was grounded in an action research design. The researcher was also the teacher who directly conducted GBA teaching sessions following the Action research cycle (*Figure 2*) in nine weeks.

The detailed GBA four-stage teaching-learning process with practical steps was followed systematically as follows:

- Preparation (building knowledge of field):

+ The teacher and students worked with the case study (reading, listening, discussing, gathering and taking notes on the background information) to activate students' prior knowledge on their email topic.

+ The teacher guided students in analyzing contextual factors such as the problem or subject matter of the discourse, the relationship (tenor) dynamic between email writers and recipients and the mode of discourse.

- Deconstruction (modeling of text):

+ The teacher provided students with authentic complaint email samples and designed class activities using these samples. These activities enabled students to naturally learn the target knowledge through exploration and self-teaching, with minimal direct instruction (Ariyanfar & Mitchell, 2020). Classroom tasks included reassembling jigsaw texts, completing information gap exercises, and identifying specific grammatical forms (Lin, 2006).

+ Students were guided to analyze the samples in depth to understand the function and common communicative purpose of individual sentences in the email (move-step analysis), as well as the cultural background and setting of the text genre.

Figure 2. Action research cycle

+ Students then studied the schematic structure and linguistic features of the complaint emails.

The generic structure (including moves and steps) of a complaint email, adapted from Kawinvasin et al. (2021), was introduced to students, after their sample analysis, to reinforce their awareness of target mail structure (Cf. Appendix).

- Joint construction:

+ Students first started with some more practical activities such as modifying and manipulating the given emails. Under the teacher's guide, they paraphrased the sample by changing word choice, grammatical patterns and textual devices (Dirgeyasa, 2016).

+ Students then collaboratively constructed their complaint email. The collaboration sessions were implemented in multiple ways: the entire class worked together to create one text on the board, students worked in small groups or pairs with teacher support, or the teacher provided individual guidance to each student (Lin, 2006).

- Independent construction: Using the understanding about the case and the mail features scaffolded in the earlier three stages, students worked individually to produce their own complaint email.

Participants

Twenty-three non-English majored students were chosen through convenience sampling to participate in this study. They were in the researcher's Intermediate-level writing class. The target of the course was to write business emails/letters to respond to given business cases.

Data collection and analysis

To assess the efficiency of GBA on students' business correspondence writing ability, three achievement tests (each required learners to write a complaint email in response to a given case) were given at the beginning of the research, the end of week 4 and the end of week 9 to evaluate students' writing ability. These papers were collected to be marked according to three criteria: task achievement, organization, linguistic resources to produce overall score of each writing. These results were then processed by SPSS 25. The writings were also marked and analyzed against the move-step structure to examine, compare and contrast both task achievement and organization throughout the intervention.
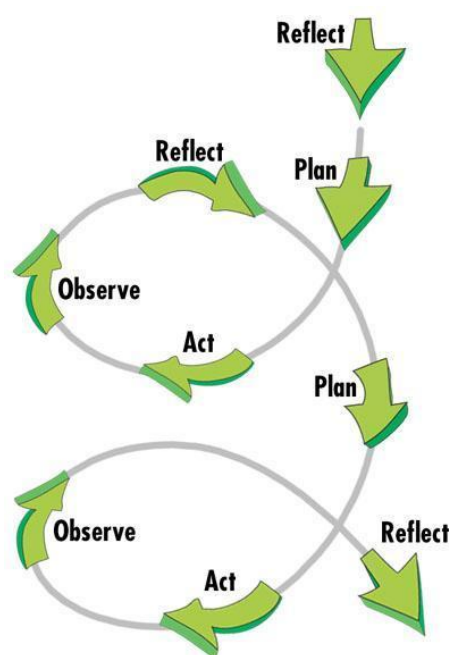
To explore students' attitudes, a questionnaire consisting of 32 items was administered to the target participants. This numerical tool was adapted from Truong's (2017). It covered 4 distinct sections, i.e., students' profile; students' perception of the effect of GBA teaching-learning cycle and move-step system on their writing; and students' attitudes towards the application of GBA and move-step structure. Data collected were then analyzed using SPSS25.

The systematic implementation of this four-stage teaching-learning process allowed for comprehensive data collection to address both research questions. The collected writing samples and questionnaire responses provide evidence of both student performance and attitudes toward the GBA intervention, which will be analyzed in the following section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Question 1: Has the use of GBA and move-step structure in teaching complaint email writing improved EFL students' writing skills?

The interpretations of the overall t-test results and the breakdown score of major steps are discussed to answer the first research question.

First, two paired sample tests (in which mean scores of students' pre-test are compared with their middle-test, and those of middle-test are compared with the post-test) were conducted. The following hypotheses were tested.

H0:

1. The mean score of the pre-tests equals the mean score of the middle-test.

2. The mean score of the middle-test equals the mean score of the post-test.

H1:

1. The mean score of the pre-test is less than the mean score of the middle-test.

2. The mean score of the middle-test is less than the mean score of the post-test.

Table 1. Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					**t**	**df**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
		Mean	**Std. Deviation**	**Std. Error Mean**	**95% Confidence Interval of the Difference**				
					Lower	**Upper**			
Pair 1	Pretestoverall Midtermoverall	-0.734	1.882	0.392	-1.548	0.079	-1.873	22	0.074
Pair 2	Midtermoverall Posttestoverall	-1.056	1.613	0.336	-1.754	-0.359	-3.142	22	0.005

As illustrated in Table 1, for the first pair (pre-test vs. middle-test), the two-tailed significance value is 0.074 with t = -1.873. Since we are conducting a one-tailed test, the p-value is half of the two-tailed significance (0.074/2 = 0.037). This p-value is less than the significance level of 0.05. Similarly, for the second pair (middle-test vs. post-test), the two-tailed significance value is 0.005 with t = -3.142, yielding a one-tailed p-value of 0.0025, which is also less than 0.05. These results allow us to reject both null hypotheses. To evaluate the improvements' magnitude, Cohen's d effect sizes were calculated. For the pre-test to middle-test comparison, Cohen's d = 0.39, indicating a small to moderate effect size. For the middle-test to post-test comparison, Cohen's d = 0.65, representing a moderate to large effect size. These effect sizes suggest that while both stages of the GBA intervention produced meaningful improvements, the later phase yielded more substantial practical gains in students' writing performance. This pattern aligns with Yasuda's (2011) findings that genre-based instruction tends to produce increasingly significant effects as students become more familiar with genre conventions and have more opportunities to practice.

Therefore, we have sufficient statistical evidence to conclude that students' writing scores improved significantly after each stage of the GBA intervention, with the improvement becoming more pronounced in the later phase of instruction. This progressive improvement pattern supports previous findings by Dirgeyasa (2016) and Kawinvasin

et al. (2021), who also documented accelerating gains in writing proficiency as students progressed through genre-based instruction.

A closer look at students' results of major steps can provide more details about their improvement in writing proficiency. Specifically, as shown in Table 3, before the intervention, about half of the students either did not have written or could not write an appropriate opening statement (step 3) to begin their complaint letters. This proportion, generally, reduced over time although students still experienced some fluctuation in their performance (e.g. students number 8, 11, 18, 23). It is clear that in the pre-test, most of the students just stopped at stating the problem (step 4) without providing detailed descriptions (step 5). As the intervention progressed, however, this situation improved significantly, as evidenced by the sharp decrease in step-5 absences in both the middle-test and post-test. No students missed step 7, suggesting a solution, in the two latter tests. It means that students have been more aware of the essential contents to be included in their emails. The findings reveal a substantial improvement in the generic structure of students' writing after learning to write with the move-step structure, demonstrating the effectiveness of this method.

Table 2. Students' results of major steps

Student	Pre-test				Middle-test				Post-test			
	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 7	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 7	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 7
S1	0.2	0.5	X	0.5	1.0	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.5
S2	0.2	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.7	0.7	1.0	0.8	1.0	1.0	0.5
S3	1.0	0.5	X	0.5	0.8	1.0	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.2	0.5
S4	0.6	0.7	0.2	0.8	X	0.5	0.2	0.3	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.5
S5	1.0	0.7	X	0.6	0.8	1.0	0.5	0.3	1.0	0.8	0.7	0.3
S6	0.8	0.2	0.4	0.8	0.6	0.5	1.0	0.5	0.8	0.6	0.2	0.5
S7	X	0.5	X	0.3	0.2	0.5	0.7	0.6	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.7
S8	X	1.0	X	1	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.5	X	1.0	1.0	0.3
S9	X	0.2	0.1	0.3	1.0	0.6	1.0	1.0	0.8	1.0	1.0	1.0
S10	1.0	1.0	X	1	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.3	1.0	0.7	0.7	0.6
S11	0.3	0.3	X	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.5	0.8	X	0.8	1.0	0.4
S12	0.1	0.5	X	0.5	0.7	1.0	1.0	0.3	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.2
S13	X	0.3	X	0.5	X	1.0	X	0.3	0.7	1.0	0.5	0.8
S14	1.0	1.0	X	0.5	1.0	0.9	0.5	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.5
S15	X	0.5	1.0	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.8	0.7	0.5	0.3
S16	0.4	1.0	0.1	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.5	X	0.3
S17	0.7	0.7	X	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.7	1.0	1.0	0.2
S18	0.8	0.7	X	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.3	X	1.0	0.7	0.5
S19	X	0.3	X	X	0.5	X	0.5	0.8	1.0	0.8	1.0	0.7
S20	X	0.4	X	0.8	0.7	X	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.7	1.0	0.7
S21	0.5	0.5	X	0.8	0.7	0.4	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.7
S22	0.7	1.0	X	0.7	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.7	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.7
S23	1.0	1.0	X	1	X	0.7	0.6	0.4	1.0	1.0	0.7	0.5
Mean	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.5

Note: X = absence of the step; 1 = maximum score for each step (score deduction represents students' inappropriate expressions, grammatical and/or lexical mistakes)

However, the inclusion of necessary moves and steps in learners' writing is not enough to guarantee their success. As noted in table 2, the students' score for each step was deduced due to their mistakes in grammar, vocabulary use and/or inappropriate register/tone. Although there is an upward trend in mean scores the students got in most of the major steps, they still committed linguistic mistakes, which resulted in imperfect marks for these steps. They particularly encountered difficulties with step 7, suggesting a solution. They even scored lower marks for this step in the post-test, compared to the pre- and middle ones. Almost all the students proposed solutions in their complaint emails but they either failed to generate proper solutions or could not effectively express their solutions in their own words. These problems are illustrated by the extracts from Student No. 19's three emails below:

I'm David Heller. I bought about model in the shop. The products are very good, I'm satisfied with them the order for 30 MP3 players model K60 but when the products just arrived I found that there were only 20 of them. I want know reason. Please check the list customer and check the order of me.

(S19 - pre-test)

I'm writing in reference to complaint to the owner of the shop. Unfortunately, I bought a pair of shoes from a shop on a website and I'm not happy because the product is late shipment. I bought it when next week, on Monday but today I didn't look you send me product.

I think the best solution would be send me product now.

(S19 - Middle-test)

I am writing to complain about your service. I had dinner at a restaurant at 100 Cau Giay on 10th May. I ordered beefsteak and a glass of red wine. Unfortunately, both were served cold. I informed the staff about this issue, but I did not receive any assistance.

Could you please explain why this happen? I would to suggest a discount for my next visit.

(S19 - Post-test)

There's a clear improvement from pre-test to post-test, demonstrating development in all areas. In the pre-test, the structure was poor with unclear opening or closing, scattered and poorly-organized ideas, missing crucial information, improper paragraphing. The students committed a number of grammar and vocabulary mistakes such as inconsistent tense usage, missing articles and prepositions, incorrect subject-verb agreement, very limited range of vocabulary, no formal business language, lack of transitional words, not to mention spelling mistakes. She also used an informal and unprofessional tone that was abrupt, potentially impolite, and lacked appropriate courtesy markers. However, her post-test writing demonstrated significant improvement. The third email had clear and logical organization with proper opening, specific details included (date, location, items), clear complaint and request for resolution. Grammar was improved with proper tense usage and better sentence construction. The student could also use a wider range of appropriate business vocabulary and appropriate linking words in her post test. The tone was more polite and professional. Yet, specific linguistic issues persisted: (1) subject-verb agreement error: "why this happen" instead of "why this happened"; (2) modal verb usage: "I would to suggest" instead of "I would like to suggest"; (3) missing formal business language: "I would be grateful if you could offer" would be more effective than the simple "I would to suggest".

These persistent errors reflect Yasuda's (2011) observation that genre-based instruction often produces uneven development, with more rapid gains in schematic structure than in linguistic accuracy. This pattern is particularly typical among Vietnamese learners, who according to Nguyen and Miller (2012), often struggle with the complex modality systems in English that are essential for business correspondence.

In general, it is undeniable that GBA and move-step structure helps students improve their writing proficiency, especially in the field of schematic structure, coherence and cohesion, and grammatical accuracy. However, it still takes time for students to develop linguistic resources stably. The findings go in line with those of previous research (Kawinvasin et al., 2021; Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2018; Truong, 2017) that GBA instruction and explicit teaching with the move-step structure have positive influence on students in writing complaint emails while linguistic resources remain problems that require time and efforts to solve.

This aligns with Hyland's (2007) assertion that genre knowledge develops along a continuum, with structural and rhetorical features typically preceding mastery of linguistic resources. However, this study's findings extend the understanding by identifying specific linguistic features (specifically modality and hedging devices) that resist

improvement through GBA alone. This suggests that while GBA provides an excellent foundation for complaint email writing, it needs to be supplemented with targeted linguistic instruction for optimal results, especially for EFL learners from language backgrounds with different politeness conventions.

Question 2: What are EFL learners' attitudes towards such intervention?

To answer this research question, students' perceptions of the effect of the Teaching-Learning Cycle, the move-step structure in learning to write complaint emails and their attitude toward the application of GBA were analyzed.

Table 3. Students' responses to stage 1- Building knowledge of the field (N=23)

Stage 1 helps you	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
raise awareness of the mail type.	11	10	1		1
	47.8%	43.5%	4.3%		4.3%
raise awareness of the purpose of the mail.	10	10	2		1
	43.5%	43.5%	8.7%		4.3%
raise awareness of the context of the mail.	12	6	3	1	1
	52.2%	26.1%	13%	4.3%	4.3%
raise awareness of the culture-specific features of the mail.	10	7	2	3	1
	43.5%	30.4%	8.7%	13%	4.3%

Table 3 presents the responses of the participants toward the first stage of the GBA teaching-learning cycle. It reveals that most of the respondents (73.9 – 91.3%) agreed that this stage helped raise their awareness of the paralinguistic feature (first item), contextual features (item 2 and 3), and the culture-specific feature (last item) of the target mail. It is also noticeable that there still exists a small ratio of negative responses to each item, especially those of raising awareness of context and culture-specific features with 8.6% and 17.3% respectively.

Students' responses to the open-ended section of the survey provide deeper insight into these perceptions. As one student commented: "*Vietnamese culture is different from the Western's. Understanding the cultural differences helped me realize that my previous emails might have been not appropriate or polite enough to foreign recipients*" (All students' responses to the open-ended parts were translated into English by the researcher). Another student noted: "*The comparison and contrast of Western versus Vietnamese complaint styles made me understand why tone is so important - what sounds polite in Vietnamese can sound demanding in English.*" These qualitative responses highlight the importance of explicit cross-cultural awareness in business email instruction. This finding supports Truong's (2017) conclusion that cultural contextualization is a crucial component of effective GBA implementation. Conversely, some students mentioned difficulties with cross-cultural elements. As one student explained: "*Now I can understand the structure but I still can't see the difference between polite and impolite tone in English. It's different from Vietnamese politeness*".

Table 4. Students' responses to stage 2 - Modelling of the text (N=23)

Stage 2 helps you	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
be aware of the writer and the intended audience of the model mail.	9	12		1	1
	39.1%	52.2%		4.3%	4.3%
recognize the structure of the model mail.	11	9	1	1	1
	47.8%	39.1%	4.3%	4.3%	4.3%
recognize how ideas are organized in the model mail.	10	9	2	1	1
	43.5%	39.1%	8.7%	4.3%	4.3%
be able to pick up the language features of the model mail.	10	11	1		1
	43.5%	47.8%	4.3%		4.3%

distinguish the tone of the model mail.	10	8	1	2	2
	43.5%	34.8%	4.3%	8.7%	8.7%

As illustrated in Table 4, a high percentage of participants reach a consensus that in the second stage, they can recognize the intended audience of the model mail (91.3%), the structure of the model mail (86.9%), how ideas are organized in the model mail (82.6%). They can also pick up the language features of the model mail (91.3%) and distinguish the tone of the model mail (78.3%). The finding also shows that tone is the most difficult to recognize when reading sample mails compared to other features as the negative response to this item accounts for the highest ratio of 17.4%.

One student specifically commented on tone recognition challenges: "*I can see sample writers used different words to express the same idea in their writings but I don't know which phrases sound demanding versus which one sound appropriate.*" This difficulty with pragmatic nuance reveals the fact that EFL students often struggle to distinguish between degrees of politeness in business communication. In contrast, the students reported greater confidence with structural elements. As one student explained: "*With the move-step structure, I can now identify which part does what in a complaint email.*" Another noted: "*Breaking down the sample emails into steps helps me see the logical progression of a complaint email*". These comments reflect the effectiveness of explicit move-step instruction.

Table 5. Students' responses to stage 3 - Joint construction of the text (N=23)

Stage 3 allows you to	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
foster understanding of features of the mail type.	12	10			1
	52.2%	43.5%			4.3%
recognize how ideas should be organized in the joint-constructed mail.	11	8	3		1
	47.8%	34.8%	13%		4.3%
practice writing with peer(s).	8	13	1		1
	34.8%	56.5%	4.3%		4.3%
receive useful feedback from the teacher.	11	10	1		1
	47.8%	43.5%	4.3%		4.3%
build up confidence for individual writing in stage 4.	11	8	3		1
	47.8%	34.8%	13%		4.3%

Table 5 reports that the majority of the respondents appreciated the collaborative writing stage. Not only is the total percentage of positive perceptions high (82.6 – 95.7%), but the percentage of "strongly agree" responses also exceeds the "agree" option in most items. No respondents disagreed and only one strongly disagreed with the benefits of practicing writing together.

Students' responses in the open-ended question part reinforce their attitudes toward the joint construction stage. As a student shared: "*Working together, we discuss and justify why an expression is appropriate/polite or not; we can learn from each other*". Another student stated that "*When we work together, we are more motivated to search for the appropriate use of words we haven't known before*". This finding reflects Truong's (2017) conclusion that students are positive and eager to work collaboratively.

Table 6. Students' responses to stage 4 - Independent construction of the text (N=23)

In stage 4, you can	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
understand the requirement of the writing task.	8	12			3
	34.8%	52.2%			13%

be aware of your role as a writer.	8 34.8%	14 60.9%			1 4.3%
be aware of the intended reader.	11 47.8%	9 39.1%			3 13%
use the conventional format of the target mail.	12 52.2%	8 34.8%	1 4.3%		2 8.7%
organize the ideas properly.	10 43.5%	10 43.5%	1 4.3%	1 4.3%	1 4.3%
choose language resources suitable for the context.	8 34.8%	10 43.5%	1 4.3%	1 4.3%	3 13%
choose the right tone for the mail.	10 43.5%	8 34.8%	1 4.3%	2 8.7%	2 8.7%

As shown in Table 6, the students faced difficulties when they had to compose their own mails in the last stage of the GBA teaching-learning cycle. It is evident by the fact that the percentages of disagreement and strong disagreement in this stage are higher than the previous ones. Although 87% of the respondents could understand the requirement of the writing task and be aware of their intended reader, 13% strongly believed that they cannot do this. Regarding the mail structure, 8.7% of the students did not think that they could use the conventional format of the target mail or organize the ideas properly while 87% (more strongly agree) believed in their ability to properly structure their mail. The finding shows that linguistic features are the most challenging to students as 17.4% of the participants claimed that they could choose language resources suitable for the context or choose the right tone for the mail.

Student comments on independent writing revealed specific challenges. As one student explained: "*After the deconstruction phase, I know what a good complaint email looks like, but it's still challenging to come up with the right English phrase on my own*". Another student noted: "*I understand the structure of complaint emails, but it's too difficult to express myself formally*". These comments highlight the gap between genre awareness and linguistic production capacity, a phenomenon also encountered by Japanese EFL students (Yasuda, 2011).

Table 7. Students' responses to the application of move-step structure (N=23)

The move-step structure	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
helps you develop the content of the complaint emails.	15 65.2%	7 30.4%			1 4.3%
helps you ensure the structure of the complaint emails.	16 69.6%	6 26.1%			1 4.3%
allows you to creatively present ideas in the emails.	13 56.5%	7 30.4%	1 4.3%	1 4.3%	1 4.3%
be able to pick up the language features of the model mail.	13 56.5%	6 26.1%	2 8.7%	1 4.3%	1 4.3%
choose the proper tone of the mail.	10 43.5%	8 34.8%	2 8.7%	1 4.3%	2 8.7%

Table 7 displays the students' responses to the use of the move-step structure in modelling-of-text stage. It is clear that the majority of the students believed in the benefits of such a system in helping them develop the content and

ensure the structure of their complaint mails. This attitude is reinforced by the improvement of their writing presented above. In addition, it is noticeable that most students (86.9%) claimed that the move-step structure allows them to creatively present ideas in their mails. This finding contradicts criticisms from some previous opponents (Badger & White, 2000; Rusinovci, 2015) that GBA makes writers become passive, overly reliant on models, merely imitating samples rather than developing necessary skills to express their own ideas. This study's results suggest that, contrary to these concerns, the move-step structure actually provides students with a foundation for more creative expression. They still have room to develop their creativity in writing. Students' response in this table also confirms their writing score and their attitude presented earlier. The students still encountered challenges regarding language use and tone.

In general, the findings demonstrate predominantly positive attitudes toward both GBA and the move-step structure in teaching writing complaint emails. The analysis of the teaching-learning cycle reveals that the students particularly valued: (1) The awareness-building phase for developing understanding of contextual and cultural features; (2) The modeling stage for understanding structural and linguistic components; (3) The collaborative writing opportunities for practicing and receiving feedback.

However, challenges persist in two main areas: (1) Mastery of appropriate linguistic resources; (2) Selection and maintenance of proper business tone.

These findings align with previous research results while addressing earlier criticisms about the potential limitations of the genre-based approach.

5. CONCLUSION

This action research study demonstrated the effectiveness of the Genre-Based Approach and move-step structure in teaching complaint email writing to Vietnamese EFL students. Quantitative analysis revealed significant improvement in students' writing performance, particularly in structural organization, while persistent challenges remained in linguistic accuracy and register control. Students' positive attitudes toward GBA validate its pedagogical value, and contradict existing critiques that structured approach limits creativity.

This study corroborates genre pedagogy theory by demonstrating that mastery of structure typically precedes linguistic competence in EFL contexts, particularly regarding modality expressions, hedging devices, and register-appropriate lexical choices that are essential for effective business communication. The study also provides evidence that genre-based frameworks scaffold rather than constrain creative expression. For teaching practice, the findings support the teaching-learning cycle as an effective framework while identifying specific linguistic challenges requiring targeted instruction. Teachers should consider implementing explicit move-step instruction early in the writing process while allocating additional time and targeted practice for linguistic features that pose particular challenges for EFL learners.

These results can be applied broadly into EFL integrated curriculum designs, specifically in different genre writing classes. Future research should explore cross-cultural variations in genre understanding, particularly how different cultural politeness conventions affect business email writing in English. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the retention of genre knowledge over time would provide valuable insights into the lasting effects of GBA instruction. Finally, research combining GBA with focused linguistic instruction could address the persistent challenges in modality and register control that emerged in this study.

While this study provides valuable insights, it has certain limitations. The sample size was relatively small and the intervention period was limited.

In conclusion, this study affirms the value of GBA and move-step structure in teaching complaint email writing. The findings suggest that this approach, when properly implemented, can effectively support students in developing genre-specific writing skills while maintaining space for creative expression.

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APPENDIX

Moves and Steps of writing a complaint email

Move	Step	Details
Move 1	**Step 1** Email heading	Students are able to fill in email heading (To, From, Subject)
	Step 2 Salutation	Students are able to recognize the way to open with the appropriate salutation relating to the degree of formality. Dear Title and Family name, Dear Sir/ Madam/ Sir or Madam, Dear Company name/ Position,
Move 2	**Step 3** Opening statement: mentioning the topic concerning	Students are able to mention the topic they want to discuss with the addressee by using the appropriate expressions in the first paragraph. ● I am writing in reference to (topic). I am writing in reference to order #2020. ● I am writing about the problem with (topic).

the problem and complaint	I am writing about the problem with the recent shipment. ● I am writing to complain about (topic). I am writing to complain about the delay in your delivery. ● We would like to inform you that … We would like to inform you that you sent us the wrong quantity. ● I am writing to place a complaint against … I am writing to place a complaint against your staff's attitude. Students learn the difference in tones of language in different expression uses. **Note:** Students should - directly address the issue (why do you write, what do you complain about) - be polite because the email recipient may not be the person who caused problems - use objective language ● provide precise and detailed information about the event (e.g. when and where it happened)
Step 4 Stating the problem	Students are able to state their problem with the addressee. ● Unfortunately, (problem) Unfortunately, the goods you sent were damaged. ● I/ We regret to say/ inform/ let you know that (problem) We regret to inform you that you have sent us the wrong order. ● I/ We am/are sorry to say/ inform/ let you know that (problem) We are sorry to let you know that your services were unsatisfactory. Students learn to use past simple or present perfect tenses to address the problem that they have already experienced.
Step 5 Describing the details of the problems	Students are able to describe or explain the details based on their problems. ● Damaged/ Broken goods The goods were scratched in several places. ● Late shipment The promised delivery date was March 15, but it arrived on April 1. ● Wrong/ Incorrect order I/ We ordered model #1024, but I/ we received model #1023. ● Expressing dissatisfaction about services. There are cracks in the wall. Your staff were impolite. The steak was undercooked. Students learn to use past simple or present perfect tenses to explain the details about the problems that they have already experienced.
Step 6 Giving evidence to support details of the problem (optional)	Students are able to give some evidence/ other documents to support details of the problem and pinpoint that the problem happened due to the errors of suppliers or service providers. ● I/ We enclose (evidence/ document)

	Remark: This step was not included in data analysis part since it was optional	I enclose a copy of order #2020 for your reference. ● Please find enclosed (evidence/ document) Please find enclosed photographs. ● I/ We are attaching (evidence/ document) We are attaching a photocopy of the shipping order for your reference.
	Step 7 Suggesting a solution	Students are able to suggest an appropriate solution to the problems. Please …/ Please could you …? Please send us the replacement as soon as possible. Please could you ensure that future shipments arrive on time? I/ We would be grateful if you could/ would (action) I would be grateful if you could send someone to inspect the building immediately. It should put the matter right if ……… It should put the matter right if the broken table is replaced tomorrow. I think the best solution would be ……… I think the best solution would be a discount for the next purchase. I would much appreciate it if you ………. I would much appreciate it if you could change the room for me. I think the best way to solve the problems is to ……… I think the best way to solve the problems is to send a mechanic to check my car.
	Step 8 Providing contact and due time for reply (optional) **Remark:** It's up to specific situation to include this type of information in the email	Students are able to provide personal/ business contact for the recipient to reply. ● Please call me at …… or send me an email via …… Please call me at 0912 438 134 or send me email via tom.windowson@jstor.com ● You can contact me on ….. to discuss this matter further. You can contact me on tom.windowson@jstor.com to discuss this matter further. Students are able to set due time for the recipient to reply. ● Please ensure this sort of problem does not arise again. ● I hope you will look into the matter and give me an immediate reply. ● I expect to hear from your company with a solution by …. [date].
	Step 9 Closing statement: Ending with proper expressions	Students are able to close the message by using the appropriate expressions in the last paragraph. ● Thank you for … Thank you for your assistance in this matter. ● I/ We look forward to … We look forward to hearing from you.
Move 3	**Step 10** Complimentary close and Signature	Students are able to recognize the way to end with the appropriate complimentary close and signature. ● Sincerely, Catherine Jones ● Your sincerely, Catherine Jones ● Best regards, Catherine Jones