A Genre Analysis of Job Application Letters Written by ASEAN Applicants

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Abstract
Recent genre-based studies on job application letters have increasingly focused on cross-cultural awareness. However, very few have been conducted in the ASEAN context and none have investigated at a regional level as of yet. Hence, this study aimed to analyze the generic structure (a.k.a. moves) used in job application letters written by ASEAN applicants. The data was collected from 30 job application letters written by 5 participants from each of 6 different nationalities including Indonesian, Malaysian, Filipino, Thai, Singaporean, and Vietnamese. A coding scheme synthesized from previous studies (Al-Ali, 2004; Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Upton & Connor, 2001) was employed to analyze moves in each letter. The findings were presented both as a whole to demonstrate the universal generic structure for the ASEAN region and separately to compare and contrast moves commonly used by each country. This study could provide ESP educators with teaching aids to increasing learner's awareness of the generic structure of a job application letter as well as the cross-cultural effect on writing in a genre.

Keywords: genre analysis, job application letters, move analysis, ASEAN

1. Introduction

It is generally known that a résumé and a job application letter (a.k.a. a cover letter) are two essential documents in the employee recruitment process. In some practice, a job application letter functions as a transmittal document for the enclosed résumé. Bhatia (1993), however, pointed out that the letter offers an applicant with an opportunity not only to clarify the information in his/her enclosed résumé but also to exhibit an association between such information and the required qualifications in the job advertisement. By considering these characteristics, Bhatia (1993) categorized a job application letter as part of the promotional genre in business settings.

Bhatia's introduction has brought about a substantial number of analyses of the genre 'a letter of application'. Like other traditions of genre analysis, the ubiquitous focus of research on application letters is examination of move structure (a.k.a. schematic structure) (Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Hou, 2013; Nahar, 2013; Rahim & Arifin, 2014). The analysis of move structure allows researchers to gain insight into how writers in a particular genre achieve a specific communicative purpose within a certain boundary of linguistic units. Moreover, it also sheds light on how genre members organize each of the linguistic boundaries to make up the overall schematic structure to achieve one main communicative purpose of the genre (Vergaro, 2004; Swales, 1990).

One might believe that the move structure of a specific genre is so strictly constructed that no factors have an effect on it. Swales (1990), however, stated that a genre is dependent on the socio-cultural environment in which it is used, and different cultures use a genre dissimilarly. Bhatia (1993) also elaborated that different language users arrange their ideas contrarily when writing texts, and when it comes to writing in a new language, their texts appear to be in the same organization as their first language. These notions have encouraged genre-based researchers to take the cross-cultural awareness into account. Vergaro (2004), for example, investigated sales promotion letters written in Italian and English and found that letters from these two cultures differed in several aspects such as use of modality and politeness strategies.

Although cross-cultural research on the promotional genre has increasingly gained global popularity, very few of the previous studies have been conducted in the ASEAN context, and none have investigated this particular promotional genre at a regional level as of yet. Following this, socio-cultural variations or linguistic relation within the ASEAN region on writing an application letter has never been discovered. As the ASEAN region has considerable cultural and traditional variations (Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014), a study of the use of English language among the member states can therefore shed light on how individuals in each country convey their language through the discourse of writing an application letter. Thus, the present study aims to analyze moves used in job application letters written by ASEAN applicants.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Bhatia (1993), the schematic structure of a job application letter consists of seven moves: 1) Establishing credentials, 2) Introducing candidate, 3) Offering incentives, 4) Enclosing documents, 5) Soliciting response, 6) Using pressure tactics, and 7) Ending politely. This structure provides a rhetorical organization that writers of

a job application letter can follow. Bhatia (1993) added that a writer neither necessarily write all of the seven moves nor arrange the moves in the exact order. In other words, the writer has a certain degree of freedom to select moves and sort them in an organization that best suits their communicative effort. However, some specific moves cannot be omitted from the letter, for they play a crucial role in achieving the communicative purpose. Specifically, the moves including Introducing the offer, Soliciting response and Ending politely are all necessary due to the fact that they are present in almost every sales promotion letter. These moves thus are considered to be 'obligatory' while the others are seen as 'optional' moves (Bhatia, 1993).

Bhatia's (1993) move structure has been employed as a framework for various studies (Al-Ali, 2004; Al-Ali, 2006; Maasum at al., 2007; Rahim & Arifin, 2014). Nonetheless, Henry and Roseberry (2001, p.155) argued that Bhatia (1993) neglected the notion of analysis in native speaker letters. They therefore conducted a move analysis of 40 application letters written by native speakers of English. The results of their study came up with eleven moves: 1) Opening, 2) Referring to a job Advertisement, 3) Offering candidature, 4) Stating reasons for applying, 5) Stating availability, 6) Promoting the candidate, 7) Stipulating terms and conditions of employment, 8) Naming referees, 9) Enclosing documents, 10) Polite ending, and 11) Signing off. This move structure differs from Bhatia's (1993) in certain ways. Firstly, two of Bhatia's – namely Establishing credentials and Offering incentives – were merged into the new move 'Promoting candidature' since they seem to hold the same communicative purpose: offering selected information signifying qualities relevant to the anticipated job position (Henry & Roseberry, 2001, p.159). Moreover, four moves which were not present in Bhatia's (1993) description were found; they include Referring to the Job Advertisement, Stating Reasons for Applying, Stipulating Terms of Employment and Naming Referee. Another difference is that Bhatia (1993) mentioned that job applicants can perform pressure tactics on the prospective employer by stating availability and/or writing sentences like "I look forward to hearing from you", yet Henry and Roseberry (2001) found no evidence of such purpose in any move in their letters. They also argued that the phrase "I look forward to …" is usually written to indicate the end of the letter rather than reinforce the reader to reply. Thus, Bhatia's move Using pressure tactics was excluded from Henry and Roseberry's (2001) move structure.

Henry and Roseberry's (2001) move structure of a job application letter provided insight into the context of native speakers. Upton and Connor (2001), however, believed that taking the cross-cultural concept into account might cast some fresh light on move analysis. They thus conducted a comparative move analysis of job application letters written by Americans, Belgians and Finns. It was revealed that most of the moves they found were fairly similar to Henry and Roseberry's (2001), yet there was a major difference in move interpretation. To clarify, Henry and Roseberry (p.160) considered expressions of welcoming response and offering to provide further information to be a polite ending; in contrast, Upton and Connor (p.18-19) considered these expressions to make up a move of their own and named it 'Indicating desire for interview or further contact, or signifying means for further communication/how to be contacted". Bhatia (1993) also suggested that when applicants express a desire for further negotiations, it can be inferred that they considered an interview to be a key indicator of success in the communicative effort of the application. Thus, the expressions of welcoming response and/or offering to

provide further information are not supposed to be interpreted as a signal of the end of the letter. The difference concerning move interpretation suggests that in order to realize moves appropriately one needs to concentrate on pragmatic functions that certain linguistic units are aiming for.

Furthermore, Al-Ali (2004) realized that there had not been a contrastive move analysis in the context of different languages. He thus investigated the move structure in Arabic and English job application letters and found ten moves: 1) Opening, 2) Referring to the source of information, 3) Applying for the job, 4) Glorifying the institution, 5) Promoting candidature, 6) Enclosing documents, 7) Invoking compassion, 8) Soliciting response, 9) Indicating willingness for personal interview, and 10) Ending politely. However, when each of the corpora was reviewed separately, it was found that Move 9 was only used by Americans whereas Move 4 and Move 7 were only employed by Jordanians. As a consequence, Al-Ali (2004, p.13) removed these three moves and proposed a seven-move structure. His contrastive move analysis shows that different languages use the same genre in different ways.

The move analyses of Bhatia (1993), Henry and Roseberry (2001), Upton and Connor (2001), and Al-Ali (2004) show that job applicants use and arrange rhetorical moves of a job application letter similarly in general but differently in specific. All in all, writing a job application letter deals with various kinds of communicative effort: describing one's qualities, persuading the target reader, stating desire, validating information stated in the resume and even expressing politeness. These communicative purposes together serve the main communicative purpose of this genre: 'to elicit a specific response from its reader' (Bhatia, 1993), or 'to create a desire on the part of the employer to hire the job applicants' (Brusaw et al., 1987 cited in Al-Ali, 2004).

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

The sample were 30 English job application letters written by 5 participants from each of six different nationalities including Indonesian, Malaysian, Filipino, Thai, Singaporean, and Vietnamese, with a total number of 30 letters. The reasons for selecting these nationalities are the following. Primarily, the six countries are altogether considered to be major states driving the economy and especially supplying skilled labor force of ASEAN (Serrano, Marasigan & Palafox, 2004). Moreover, each of the six nationalities has different official languages (e.g. English in Singapore and the Philippines, Indonesian in Indonesia, Filipino in the Philippines, Bahasa Malaysia in Malaysia, Thai in Thailand, and Vietnamese in Vietnam). According to Thaweewong (2006), research on genre texts in professional settings is challenging due to the issue concerning confidentiality. In other words, most companies do not usually make their documents available for outsiders, making it difficult for researchers to acquire authentic genre texts. Taking this, the samples of the present study were collected from ASEAN participants who were invited to take part in the study. Once all the 30 letters were collected, names and any information that might identify the participants and particular institutions were removed. This practice is common in research on authentic genre texts as it protects confidential information of the sources (Al-Ali, 2004; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Hou, 2013). From this point on,

the abbreviations: PH, ID, MY, SG, TH, and VN are used to refer to the nationalities: Filipino, Indonesian, Malaysian, Singaporean, Thai, and Vietnamese, respectively.

3.2 Coding scheme

In order to identify moves in each letter, a coding scheme was developed based on a synthesis of the four previous studies of job application letters (Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Upton & Connor, 2001; Al-Ali, 2004). However, the four move structures varied in the numbers of moves and interpretation, making it difficult to propose an anticipated move structure for the present study. Therefore, a pilot study was conducted by using the four structures to analyze 9 randomly selected letters in order to ensure moves of relevance to job application letters written by ASEAN applicants. It was found that job application letters written by ASEAN applicants seemed to contain eight moves, as shown in Table 1.

Code	Move Description	Example
M1	1. Opening: to identify and salute the target reader	*'Dear sir',* *'Dear sir or madam'*
M2	2. Referring to the source of information: to indicate how and/or when the applicant learned about the job position opening	*'I saw the housekeeping position which was posted by X.'*
M3	3. Offering candidature: to indicate a desire to be an applicant for the desired position	*'I would like to apply for X.'* or *'I am very interested in the vacancy of X.'*
M4	4. Promoting the candidature: to enhance the application by indicating selected information or other expressions persuading the reader to consider the application	*'I have five years' experience as X.'* or *'I have a Bachelor of Science degree in X.'*
M5	5. Enclosing documents: to refer to the resume enclosed together with the application letter	*'A resume is enclosed.'*
M6	6. Encouraging further contact: to keep the opportunity for further contact open	*'I look forward to speaking with you about this employment opportunity.'*
M7	7. Ending politely: to close the application letter with a polite conventional ending	*'Thank you for your time and consideration.'*
M8	8. Closing: to close the application letter in a conventional, respectful manner	*'Yours sincerely,'*

Table 1 Description of the Move Structure and Codes for the Present Study

3.3 Data Analysis

The identification of moves was primarily based on semantic and pragmatic criteria rather than on linguistic clues. This is because moves vary in size, and they can be realized by one sentence or more or even a short phrase or a clause (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Al-Ali, 2004). Once a certain boundary of texts in each letter was realized as a move, it was annotated with a code as shown in Table 1. Once all moves had been identified, the outcomes were analyzed and presented in two different aspects: 1) the occurrences of moves and the move arrangements. Firstly, the numbers of occurrences of each move were counted and

presented as frequencies both in the overall ASEAN region and by country. In addition, the overall frequency of each move was recalculated as a percentage in order to provide results concerning obligatory and optional moves for the job application letters. Next, the move arrangements in every letter were compared and later separately analyzed by country in order to yield the results concerning common move structures for each of the six nationalities.

3.4 Reliability and validity of measurement

The present study employed inter-rater reliability to establish reliability of measurement. Nine letters (30%) were randomly selected and analyzed by two trained raters. As the results turned out, the agreement rate of identification of moves was 94.74%. In addition, the coding scheme was proved valid by two experts: one native speaker of English and one academic conversant with genre analysis. Hence, the reliability and validity of data measurement in all of the three coding schemes of the present study were ensured.

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Occurrences of moves

As can be seen from Figure 1, all of the eight moves were employed by applicants from every country. Furthermore, every move shows high frequencies in over half of the total 30 job application letters, with Move 4 (Promoting the candidature) and Move 8 (Closing) being used in all the letters. Despite not occurring in every letter, Move 1 (Opening), Move 7 (Ending politely) and Move 3 (Offering candidature) were also prevalently written with 29 occurrences (96.67%). Move 6 (Encouraging further contact) can as well seem to be common in ASEAN job application letters with the number of incidences at 25 (83.33%). Nevertheless, Move 5 (Enclosing documents) and Move 2 (Referring to the source of information) show less than 80 per cent of occurrences: 75.67 and 60.00, respectively.
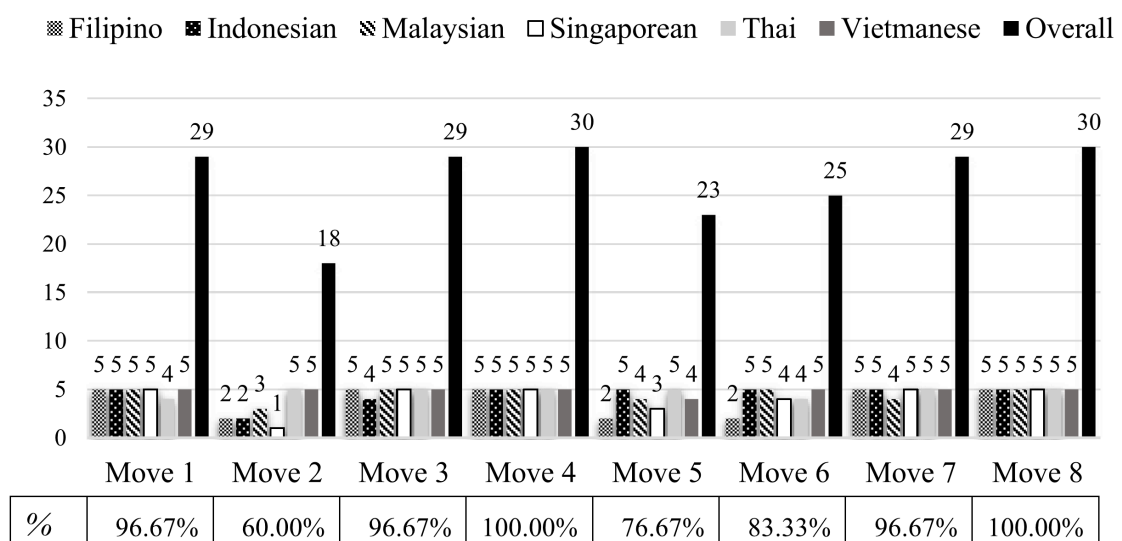

Figure 1 The number of occurrences of moves

The closer examination of move occurrences by country reveals that almost all of the job application letters written by Thais and the Vietnamese employed every move, including even Move 2 which was the least popular in the overall perspective. As for the letters from Malaysian, Indonesian and Singaporean applicants, they also seemed to contain every move in spite of the lowest frequencies of Move 2. The difference in using moves by country becomes apparent in a case of job application letters written by Filipinos. To clarify, although all of them employed Move 1, Move 3, Move 4, Move 7 and Move 8, which are altogether common in the letters from the other countries, the numbers of occurrences of the other moves were lower.

The findings of the present study might indicate that Thai and Vietnamese applicants believe that their application letters would be considered effective with all of the eight moves; in contrast, those from the other countries do not find it essential to refer to the source of the job advertisement since they barely employed Move 2. The low frequency of Move 2 was also discovered in the related previous studies conducted in the Asian context. Hou (2013), for example, found that 57.5 per cent of her Taiwanese applicants identified the source of the job advertisement in their cover letters. Hou (2013, p.55) thus implied that the Taiwanese applicants might be unaccustomed to the purposes of this move.

In relation to obligatory and optional moves for job application letters written by ASEAN applicants, Move 1, Move 3, Move 4, Move 7 and Move 8 are obligatory while Move 2, Move 5, and Move 6 are optional. The determination of these results abided by Al-Ali's (2004) and Henry and Roseberry's (2001) studies in which moves with higher than 85 per cent of occurrences were considered to be obligatory. The results concerning obligatory and optional moves of the present study concur with those of Henry and Roseberry's (2001). They found that an effective job application letter written by a native speaker of English is commonly comprised of Opening (Move 1), Offering candidature (Move 3), Promoting the candidature (Move 4), Polite ending (Move 7), and Signing off (Move 8). This similarity indicates that ASEAN applicants, as a whole, realize all specific communicative purposes required in the genre of a job application letter.

4.2 Organization of moves

No.	Move arrangement	Freq.	Letters
1	M1 + M3 + M2 + M4 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8	6	PH-1, PH-4, ID-1, MY-5, TH-3, VN-3
2	M1 + M3 + M4 + M7 + M8	3	PH-3, PH-5, SG-5
3	M1 + M3 + M2 + M4 + M6 + M7 + M8	2	MY-2, VN-1
4	M1 + M3 + M4 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8	2	ID-5, SG-4
5	M1 + M2 + M3 + M4 + M5 + M4 + M7 + M6 + M8	1	ID-4
6	M1 + M2 + M3 + M4 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8	1	TH-1
7	M1 + M2 + M3 + M5 + M4 + M6 + M7 + M8	1	TH-4
8	M1 + M3 + M2 + M4 + M5 + M4 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8	1	VN-4
9	M1 + M3 + M2 + M4 + M5 + M6 + M4 + M7 + M8	1	MY-4
10	M1 + M3 + M2 + M4 + M5 + M7 + M8	1	TH-5
11	M1 + M3 + M2 + M4 + M7 + M5 + M6 + M8	1	VN-2
12	M1 + M3 + M2 + M5 + M4 + M6 + M7 + M8	1	VN-5

13	M1 + M3 + M4 + M5 + M6 + M8	1	MY-3
14	M1 + M3 + M4 + M6 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8	1	MY-1
15	M1 + M3 + M5 + M4 + M6 + M7 + M8	1	SG-3
16	M1 + M4 + M2 + M3 + M4 + M7 + M6 + M8	1	SG-1
17	M1 + M4 + M3 + M4 + M7 + M6 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8	1	SG-2
18	M1 + M4 + M3 + M4 + M7 + M8	1	PH-2
19	M1 + M4 + M3 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8	1	ID-2
20	M1 + M4 + M5 + M7 + M6 + M8	1	ID-3
21	M4 + M2 + M3 + M4 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8	1	TH-2

Table 2   Move arrangements in job application letters written by ASEAN applicants

As one can see from Table 2, 21 patterns of move arrangements were written by ASEAN applicants. Twenty patterns (95.24%) began with Move 1. Among these patterns, there are twelve (60%) in which Move 1 was followed by Move 3, whereas it was followed by either Move 2 or Move 4 in the rest (40%). Considering the arrangements in which both Move 2 and Move 3 were employed, it can be noticed that Move 3 predominantly preceded Move 2 (72.22%). This agrees with Bhatia's (1993) statement that the ordering of Move 2 before Move 3 is more commonly used than the opposite sequence. It should be noted that Bhatia's study was conducted in the context of South Asia. Taking this, it might be implied that Asian applicants consider it more important to direct their application to the potential employer's hand at the first place.

As for particular move arrangements in the body, the majority of the patterns show that Move 4 preceded Move 5. This sorting is a common phenomenon in job application letters written by English speakers (Henry & Roseberry, 2001), Asian writers (Al-Ali, 2004; Bhatia, 1993) as well as writers from European countries (Upton & Connor, 2001). This suggests that job applicants, in the ordinary way, promote their candidature before leading the addressee to the enclosed documents. Furthermore, there are 6 cases (ID-4, VN-4, SG-1, SG-2 and PH-2) in which Move 4 was employed twice, which was a characteristic of 'move recursive' (Santos, 1996). Two of these cases (ID-4 and VN-4) display the pattern of M4 + M5 + M4, but these occurrences exhibit different use of Move 5. To illustrate, it can be interpreted from example 1 that the applicant took a pause from promoting his/her skill to mention the curriculum vitae as a reference to the aforementioned skill and then went on to promote his/her candidature with other different information. On the other hand, Move 5 in example 2 did not seem to show such intention. In fact, it was written in the middle of move 4 to simply enclose the document, without a potential hidden agenda.

(1) *I have skill in Statistical Process Control Method that will be* ➔ Move 4
     useful for process control analysis. Additional information ➔ Move 5
     may be required, please kindly find in my Curriculum Vitae. I
     am willing to become part of your teams. I am excited to get ➔ Move 4
     new experience and knowledge as Management Trainee. (ID-4)

(2) *I note with great interest that you require a Project* ➔ Move 4
     Coordinator who holds skills and competences that I believe I

possess. I have attached my resume for your review. I believe ➔ Move 5
that I can make a valuable contribution to your organisation's ➔ Move 4
development. (VN-4)

Other three cases in which Move 4 were employed twice (PH-2, SG-1 and SG2) display the pattern of M4 + M3 + M4 (see example 3). In all of these cases, the first occurrence of Move 4 mainly included the applicant' name, educational qualifications and educational institutions. Afterwards, s/he continued to offer the candidature and then promote it with different information. This can be implied that the applicant considered it more appropriate to introduce himself/herself before offering the application.

(3) *I have just recently graduated from (educational institution)* ➔ Move 4
     with a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Southeast Asian Studies
     with a minor in Religious Studies. I am writing to apply for
     the position Assistant Manager at (potential employer). ➔ Move 3
     (potential employer) is a key component in the nation's efforts ➔ Move 4
     to maintain a cohesive and inclusive society for all
     Singaporeans. (SG-2)

In relation to Move 6 and Move 7, there were 17 patterns in which both were employed. Move 6 mostly preceded Move 7 with 76.47 per cent of frequency, and this arrangement coincides with the results from the studies of Al-Ali (2004) and Bhatia (1993). Thus, it can be inferred that applicants customarily express their appreciation as an indicator of the end of the content and what occurs afterwards should not be any further information but signing off. Finally, it is evident that Move 8 was placed at the end of all the patterns.

As for common move arrangements by country, the move patterns from Table 2 were analyzed separately according to the six different nationalities. Afterwards, all the move structures as well as obligatory and optional moves in each structure for the six ASEAN countries were presented in Table 3.

Nationality	Allowable Move Order
Filipino	M1 + M3 + (M2) + M4 + (M5 + M6) + M7 + M8
Indonesian	M1 + (M2) × M3 + M4 + M5 + M6 × M7 + M8
Malaysian	M1 + M3 + (M2) + M4 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8
Singaporean	M1 + M3 + M4 + (M5) + M6 + M7 + M8
Thai	M1 + M2 × M3 + M4 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8
The Vietnamese	M1 + M3 + M2 + M4 + M5 + M6 + M7 + M8
Note: + indicates 'followed by', × indicates 'reversing' and parentheses indicates 'optional moves'	

Table 3 The allowable move order of job application letters for each ASEAN country

It can be clearly seen that Move 1, Move 3, Move 4, Move 7 and Move 8 are obligatory in every structure. Move 6 seems to be likewise except for Filipinos. As for the move order, it is evident that every structure begins with Move 1, and it is followed mostly by Move 3 or occasionally by Move 2. However, it is noticeable that Move 2 can follow Move 1 only in the case of reversing Move 3. After the first three

moves, all of the structures show the same organization as follows: Move 4, Move 5, Move 6, Move 7 and Move 8, respectively.

5. Conclusion

The present study aims to investigate, compare and contrast moves used in job application letters written by ASEAN applicants. The move analysis serves as an analytical approach to comprehend the genre at a macro level, which enables genre members (i.e. job applicants in the present study) to recognize moves as the minor communicative events that altogether accomplish the overall communicative goal. The marginally different results reveal that ASEAN applicants participate in this genre in mostly similar ways. However, the existence of move recursive or move reversal suggests that there still appears a certain degree of freedom in the genre of a job application letter. Also, although the majority of the present findings are consistent with those from the previous research conducted in different contexts, the certain amount of difference, especially in the move structure, suggests that ASEAN applicants do not entirely follow in the footsteps of members in the genre community from other cultures. All in all, it can be concluded that the promotional genre of job application letters is a well-constructed class of communicative event that is somehow bound by the socio-cultural setting within which it is used (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990).

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