

## **Move and Politeness Strategies in Job Application Letters in ASEAN Contexts**

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### **Abstract**

Many scholars agree that cultural differences affect text organization and pragmatic realization of the communicative goal of a genre, and that certain moves within a genre can be accomplished by different strategies. However, there is a dearth of research on job application letters in the context of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and knowledge about cultural differences in terms of politeness strategies in this region is limited. This study investigated move and politeness strategies used in job application letters written by ASEAN applicants. Data were collected from 30 job application letters written by applicants from six different nationalities. Two coding schemes were employed, and the results showed that ASEAN applicants employed slightly different strategies in their moves, including promoting candidature and enclosing documents. The findings also suggested that ASEAN applicants mostly use positive politeness strategies to self-promote and negative politeness strategies to encourage further contact. Interestingly, three positive strategies which were previously found only in spoken communication (i.e., conventional indirectness, impersonal tone, and nominalization) were employed by ASEAN applicants in this study. In sum, ASEAN writers as a whole represent a region that shares a great deal of communicative norms in the genre of job application letters.

**Keywords:** move strategies, politeness strategies, job application letters, ASEAN countries

### **Introduction**

In traditional employee recruitment processes, two commonly required documents are a résumé and a job application letter (i.e., cover letter). These documents are intended to create a positive first impression of the applicant for the prospective employer and may determine whether the applicant receives an interview request or even an employment offer, both of which are indicators of success (Knouse, 1994; Soroko, 2012). Although social networking has made these documents seem outdated, a recent study indicated that they remain important to recruitment procedures (Schullery, Ickes, & Schullery, 2009).

In some practices, a letter of application functions as a transmittal document for a résumé. According to Nahar (2013), an application letter serves as a correspondence that is intended to encourage a potential employer to read the attached résumé. Bhatia (1993) pointed out that the letter allows the applicant not only to clarify the information in the enclosed résumé but also to connect that information to the required qualifications listed in the job advertisement. This purpose could not be achieved by a résumé alone. Moreover, Dulek and Suchan (1988) stated that even highly experienced applicants are unlikely to succeed if their application letters fail to validate their qualifications and competencies. Thus,

to take full advantage of an application letter, the applicant must be able to engage in impression management (Bright & Hutton, 2000). In other words, the applicant should employ linguistic or pragmatic tactics to persuade the potential employer of the suitability of the applicant's qualifications to the requirements of the position (Gilsdorf, 1986).

By considering the persuasive characteristics mentioned above in a business setting, Bhatia (1993) categorized writing a job application letter as part of the promotional genre, which also includes sales promotions. He listed five reasons job application and sales promotions are close cousins: they both (a) are persuasive, (b) detail the qualifications of the applicant or product, (c) offer pertinent descriptions, (d) draw attention to the most significant features of the applicant or product, and (e) initiate a potential business relationship. In addition, the two communications share similar generic move structures: (a) establishing credentials, (b) introducing the offer or candidature, (c) providing incentives, (d) enclosing documents, (e) soliciting a response, (f) using pressure tactics, and (g) ending politely.

Bhatia's (1993) work inspired a substantial number of subsequent analyses of the application letter genre. As with other types of genre analysis, the ubiquitous focus of research on application letters is the examination of move structure (i.e., schematic structure) (Ding, 2007; 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 the boundaries of certain linguistic units and organize these boundaries to create an overall schematic structure (Swales, 1990; Vergaro, 2004). Thus, move analysis is considered to occur at a macroanalytical level, which Bhatia (1993) termed "structural interpretation" (p. 52). Based on the belief that each move can be achieved by different strategies, an increasing number of researchers have investigated discourse strategies (e.g., strategies of politeness and self-presentation), which are considered to be analyses at the microanalytical level or "textualization" (Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Hou & Li, 2011; Hua, 2007; Mboudje, 2010; Sokoro, 2012).

## Literature Review

Previous research on the promotional genre has mostly taken place within a single context. Soroko (2012), for instance, collected job application letters in Poland to examine moves (the structural categories in this study) as well as self-presentation strategies. Additionally, Henry and Roseberry (2001) gathered application letters written by native English speakers to analyze (1) moves, (2) strategies adopted in each move, and (3) the key syntactic patterns and word collocations in each strategy. Within the context of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Rahim and Arifin (2014) investigated moves in job application letters written by Malaysians. Like Henry and Roseberry (2001), Rahim and Arifin (2014) employed Bhatia's (1993) move structure as a research framework. Remarkably, the findings of both studies differed from the originally proposed structure. Henry and Roseberry (2001) found four additional moves absent from Bhatia's (1993) example (e.g., referring to a job advertisement, stating reasons for applying, naming referees, and stipulating terms and conditions). Rahim and Arifin (2014), in comparison, found that pressure tactics were not commonly used in their study. They also noted that Malaysians place great emphasis on being polite and respecting others, especially those who have a higher degree of power, and thus are unlikely to use pressure tactics in application letters (Zawawi, 2008, cited in Rahim & Arifin, 2014).

The findings from the above studies supported Swales's (1990) argument that a genre is dependent on the socio-cultural environment in which it is used and that different cultures use genres dissimilarly. According to Hall (1981) in his communicative theory, the term "culture" encompasses race and language. Bhatia (1993) also elaborated that speakers of

different languages create ideas dissimilarly when writing texts, and when it comes to writing in a new language, authors' texts tend to follow the organizational patterns of their first language. To clarify, differences in writing in a specific genre can range from the microlevel (e.g., lexico-grammatical features) to the macrolevel (e.g., structural patterns of discourse) (Bhatia, 2002). In sum, it seems that culture and language both include contextual features that affect the way individuals communicate in specific situations.

Among linguistic researchers, these notions have caused concern that distinct phrasing produced by a non-native speaker can lead to communicative misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Consequently, such apprehension has encouraged academics to take a wider and somewhat closer look at cross-cultural concepts of promotional genre analysis. For example, Vergaro (2004) investigated sales promotion letters written in Italian and English and found that letters from these two cultures differed in several aspects, such as modality and politeness strategies. Also, Ghezaljah and Moini (2013) examined promotional letters written in Persian and English and discovered that English letters were longer, contained more flexible formulaic structures, showed less use of formal language, and provided more attractive information about offers. In the context of application letters, Hou (2013) scrutinized English cover letters written by Taiwanese and Canadian college students and found that the former utilized positive politeness twice as frequently as the latter, whereas negative politeness was preferred by Canadian writers. The results of these studies illustrated the points made by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993).

Although cross-cultural research on application letters has gained popularity across the world, very few of the previous studies were conducted in the ASEAN context and none investigated the promotional genre at a regional level. Among a few of them, our study, Thumnong and Tongpoon-Patanasorn (2017) explored structural moves employed by applicants from six ASEAN nationalities—namely Indonesian, Malaysian, Filipino, Thai, Singaporean, and Vietnamese—and found eight moves were commonly used in application letters. The analysis, which applied a coding scheme developed from a synthesis of related studies, found the eight moves include (1) opening, (2) referring to the source of job information, (3) offering candidature, (4) promoting candidature, (5) enclosing documents, (6) encouraging further contact, (7) ending politely, and (8) closing. This study began to shed light on how ASEAN applicants organized their application letters. However, features such as move strategies and politeness strategies, which are commonly analyzed in research on application letters, were not under review. The current project extends this approach to examine socio-cultural variations and linguistic relations within the ASEAN region in application letter writing practices.

Because considerable cultural and traditional variations exist within the ASEAN region (Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014), studying English language use among member states can illuminate how individuals in each country convey their native language structure through the discourse of writing an application letter. Such information can substantially benefit job applicants who wish to apply to companies in other member states in the region. Indeed, the results of this study may raise job applicants' awareness of language use and common discourse strategies in a prospective employer's country. In particular, this research may help applicants avoid unintended interpretations of their writing and ensure that the presentation of their skills and credentials and the pragmatic purposes in their application letters are perceived correctly by potential employers. The objectives of the study, therefore, are (1) to analyze move and politeness strategies used in application letters written by ASEAN job seekers and (2) to compare the findings concerning move and politeness strategies used by applicants from different ASEAN countries.

## Methodology

The sample texts of the present study comprised 30 English job application letters. They were collected in 2016 from job applicants of the following nationalities (five each): Indonesian, Malaysian, Filipino, Thai, Singaporean, and Vietnamese. All applicants completed at least a Bachelor's degree, which was meant to ensure that they had certain qualifications to promote themselves, experience in applying for a job, and especially had previously written an application letter. All the job application letters were solicited and sent as an email body with CVs as attachments. These nationalities were selected because the six associated countries are considered the major economic drivers and suppliers of skilled labor in the ASEAN region (Serrano, Marasigan, & Palafox, 2004). An analysis of English job application letters written by individuals from these countries provided a comprehensive overview of commonly preferred linguistic approaches to achieving the communicative purpose of the professional genre in the region (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990). Secondly, each of the six countries from which the participants hailed has a different official language. Specifically, English is used in Singapore, and both English and Filipino are recognized in the Philippines. Indonesian is used in Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia in Malaysia, Thai in Thailand, and Vietnamese in Vietnam. As has been argued elsewhere, an examination of genre texts written by individuals from various language backgrounds can provide insight into the extent to which cultural differences play a role in writing within the same genre (Al-Ali, 2004, 2006; Hou, 2013; Upton & Connor, 2001).

## Research Instruments

Two coding schemes and a computer-assisted data analysis program (Atlast.ti) were used in this study. The coding schemes were developed to analyze move strategies, associated linguistic features, and politeness strategies, based on the review of previous studies of both written and spoken communication (Al-Ali, 2004, 2006; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Bhatia, 1993; Dressen-Hammouda, 2013; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Hou, 2013; Hua, 2007; Rahim & Arifin, 2014; Upton & Connor, 2001; Wang, 2005).

The coding scheme for the analysis of the move strategies and associated features consisted of strategies for each of eight moves (Thumpong & Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2017) as well as common associated linguistic features that were synthesized from the related studies (Al-Ali, 2004, 2006; Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Hou, 2013; Hua, 2007; Rahim & Arifin, 2014; Upton & Connor, 2001; Wang, 2005). In addition, examples derived from the previous studies were provided in order to illustrate how the linguistic features were used in real utterances. See Figure 1 for samples of move strategies, associated linguistic features, and codes.

Move Code	Strategy code	Move strategy	Common associated linguistic features	Examples
M1	O	Opening salutation	Dear + (Noun phrase) NP	"Dear sir," "Dear sir or madam," "Dear Mr. X,"
M2	D	Direct strategy	I + verb + NP (job ads) + PP (source) + PP (position)	"I saw the housekeeping position which was posted by X."

Move Code	Strategy code	Move strategy	Common associated linguistic features	Examples
	I	Indirect strategy	With reference to your advertisement + (for the position of NP) + PP (source) + PP (time), (Move 3) (Move 3) as advertised + PP (source) + PP (time)	<i>"With reference to your advertisement in X on X, (Move 3)."</i> <i>"(Move 3) as advertised in X of (time)."</i>
M3	D	Direct strategy	I + verb + NP (job position) I would like to + verb + NP (job position) I would like to + verb + as a candidate for + NP (job position)	<i>"I am writing to apply for the position of manager at X."</i> <i>"I would like to apply for the teaching position."</i> <i>"I would like to offer myself as a candidate for your consideration."</i>
	I	Indirect strategy	I + am + interested + in + NP (job position)	<i>"I am very interested in the vacancy of X."</i>

**Figure 1. Samples of move strategies (Moves 1–3), associated linguistic features, and codes**

The second coding scheme for the analysis of politeness strategies was synthesized from previous studies (Al-Ali, 2006; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Upton & Connor, 2001). The coding scheme presents positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies together with codes and linguistic clues and/or examples (See Figure 2 for samples of politeness strategies, associated linguistic features, and codes.)

Code	Positive politeness strategies	Linguistic clues and/or examples
+A	A. Pay attention to the addressee's interest, wants, needs or goods.	<i>'You must be looking for an employee with potential.'</i>
+B	B. Exaggerate interest in, approval of or sympathy with an addressee.	<i>'...and I would very much welcome the opportunity to work at your institution.'</i>
Code	Negative Politeness Strategies	Examples
-A	A. Be conventionally indirect	<i>'If you are interested in allowing me an opportunity to interview for the studentship, you can...'</i>
-B	B. Impersonalize	<i>'The experience and skills (that I have) will bring benefits to the company.'</i>

**Figure 2. Samples of politeness strategies, associated linguistic features, and codes**

To examine inter-coder reliability, nine letters (30% of the sample) were randomly selected and analyzed in two phases according to the two different coding schemes: move strategies and politeness strategies (Mackey & Gass, 2016). The raters were the second author of this paper and a native English speaker who has a degree in linguistics. Prior to coding, the raters were trained to use the coding schemes, and both coded the letters

separately. The agreement rates of identification for move strategies and politeness strategies were 86.51%, and 92.45%, respectively.

The final research instrument used in this study was ATLAS.ti (version 7.5.7). It was used to code and calculate occurrences of move strategies and politeness strategies found in each of the job application letters.

### Procedures

Thirty files of application letters were imported into ATLAS.ti. The letters then were coded for move and politeness strategies using the developed coding schemes. After the strategies that occurred in each of the moves were coded, the occurrences of move strategies were calculated and presented as frequencies and percentages to discover the most used strategies of each move. Thereafter, politeness strategies were identified, coded, and categorized into two groups: positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies. The occurrences of both groups were calculated and presented as frequencies and percentages.

## Results and Discussion

### Characteristics of Job Application Letters Written by ASEAN Applicants

On average, ASEAN applicants wrote about 224.67 words ( $SD = 77.93$ ). Vietnamese applicants wrote the longest letters (Mean = 265.00,  $SD = 71.37$ ); Indonesians on average wrote the shortest letters (Mean = 177.60,  $SD = 35.34$ ) (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Number of words in the job application letters written by ASEAN applicants**

	PH	ID	MY	SG	TH	VN	All
Letter 1	206	232	317	165	197	202	1,319
Letter 2	94	138	219	378	245	206	1,280
Letter 3	320	186	243	74	293	254	1,370
Letter 4	142	174	248	355	270	376	1,565
Letter 5	266	158	163	195	137	287	1,206
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,028</b>	<b>888</b>	<b>1,190</b>	<b>1,167</b>	<b>1,142</b>	<b>1,325</b>	<b>6,740</b>
<i>Mean</i>	<b>205.60</b>	<b>177.60</b>	<b>238.00</b>	<b>233.40</b>	<b>228.40</b>	<b>265.00</b>	<b>224.67</b>
<i>SD</i>	<b>91.15</b>	<b>35.34</b>	<b>55.57</b>	<b>129.67</b>	<b>62.29</b>	<b>71.37</b>	<b>77.93</b>

*Note:* PH, ID, MY, SG, TH and VN refer to Filipinos, Indonesians, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Thais, and Vietnamese, respectively.

### Move Strategies

The findings from the analysis of move strategies used to achieve each of the eight moves were reported both as a whole and by nationality in order to determine the similarity and differences in job application letters written by ASEAN applicants.

**Move 1.** It was found that most of the ASEAN applicants (89.66%) who employed Move 1 (opening) greeted the addressee with the following construction: *Dear* + *Noun phrase* (NP). The noun phrases used after *Dear* included “Sir,” “Sir or Madam,” a title (e.g., “Mr. X”), a title with the addressee’s name, a professional title with the addressee’s name (e.g., “Dr. X”), and the addressee’s position (e.g., “Hiring Manager”). Among the remaining

three applicants, one Thai and one Vietnamese applicant wrote “To Whom It May Concern,” and one Indonesian applicant began with “Attention to:” followed by the addressee’s position and company.

In previous studies (Al-Ali, 2004, 2006; Thaweewong, 2006), the only linguistic feature identified as an opening salutation in formal business letters was *Dear + Noun phrase*, and the noun phrases after *Dear* were restricted to “Sir or Madam” or the forename and/or surname of the addressee preceded by a title or professional title. The results of the present study supported these findings in part; however, some of the ASEAN applicants mentioned the addressee’s position instead of his or her name, and not all of the applicants used the construction *Dear + Noun phrase* to realize Move 1. These phenomena were not identified in previous genre-based studies on job application letters.

According to Loughheed (2003), when a sender does not know the name of the addressee, he or she is not limited to the phrase *Dear Sir or Madam* but may write either *Dear + Addressee’s position* or the formulaic phrase *To Whom It May Concern*. Opening salutations in formal letters thus are not restricted to *Dear Sir or Madam* or *Dear + Addressee’s name*. As a consequence, the results of the present study indicate that ASEAN applicants as a whole use a variety of greetings in their job application letters.

In considering the results by country, the applicants from each country included at least three sets of linguistic features in writing opening salutations. The results of the present study suggest that the variety of opening salutations written by ASEAN applicants seems to depend on individualistic styles rather than cultural influence (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Variety of Move 1**

Linguistic features	PH (5) 100%	ID (5) 100%	MY (5) 100%	SG (5) 100%	TH (4) 100%	VN (5) 100%	All (29) 100%
<i>Dear + NP</i>	(5) 100.00 %	(4) 80.00%	(5) 100.00 %	(5) 100.00 %	(3) 75.00%	(4) 80.00%	(26) 89.65%
<i>To Whom It May Concern,</i>					(1) 25.00%	(1) 20.00%	(2) 6.90%
<i>Attention to: Position + Company</i>		(1) 20.00%					(1) 3.45%

**Move 2.** The second move refers to the source of information, and it can be achieved by two different strategies: direct (i.e., using a first-person point of view) or indirect (i.e., referring to the source). It was found that the majority of ASEAN applicants (83.33%) referred indirectly to the job advertisement. The reason for this phenomenon could be implied from the results on move arrangement. In other words, most of the ASEAN applicants engaged Move 3 (offering candidature) before applying Move 2 (Thumnong & Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2017). This sequence mostly occurred in syntactic structures in which Move 2 was written as a relative clause or a participle clause in the same sentence after Move 3. These findings might indicate that ASEAN applicants consider the act of referring to the source of the job information to be a reference to their candidature (Hou, 2013) (see Table 3).

As for the linguistic features of the indirect strategy, the most common syntactic structures used by the ASEAN applicants were *Move 3 as advertised + prepositional phrase (source)* (see example 1) or *Move 3, which was advertised + prepositional phrase (source)* (see example 2). In lieu of the word “advertised,” a few of the applicants used the verbs “listed” and “posted.” Moreover, applicants occasionally wrote prepositional phrases to denote time at the end of Moves 2 or 3 (e.g., referring to the date on which the job advertisement was published). Another set of linguistic features realizing the indirect strategy was as follows: *Regarding to + noun phrase (position) + prepositional phrase (source), Move 3* (see example 3). This phrase was employed by 2 of the 15 applicants who employed an indirect strategy. It is remarkable that all of the lexico-grammatical sets employing an indirect strategy for Move 2 were relevant to the characteristics of *move embedding* (i.e., when two moves were blended in one sentence). This finding agreed with the results of previous studies (Al-Ali, 2004, 2006; Bhatia, 1993).

- (1) *(Move 3) as advertised on (website).* (VN-2)  
 (2) *(Move 3) which was advertised on (website).* (VN-1)  
 (3) *Regarding to the job vacancy posted on (website), (Move 3)* (TH-1)

Only three of the applicants used the direct strategy, and all used the following lexico-grammatical set: *I + verb + noun phrase + prepositional phrase (source)* (see example 4). The verbs used in this structure were either “got” or “saw,” and all were verbs of perception written in past simple tense. These phenomena supported the findings of Hou (2013) and Upton and Connor (2001).

- (4) *I got information from (human resource consulting organization) (ID-4)  
 that your company is hiring for Management Trainee.*

**Table 3. Occurrences of move strategies in Move 2**

Move strategy	PH (2) 100%	ID (2) 100%	MY (3) 100%	SG (1) 100%	TH (5) 100%	VN (5) 100%	All (18) 100%
Direct		(1) 50.00%	(1) 33.33%		(1) 20.00%		(3) 16.67%
Indirect	(2) 100.00%	(1) 50.00%	(2) 66.67%	(1) 100.00%	(4) 80.00%	(5) 100.00%	(15) 83.33%

**Move 3.** Like Move 2, Move 3 (offering candidature) can be achieved by direct and indirect strategies. Most of the ASEAN applicants (79.31%) preferred a direct strategy (see Table 4).

The most common lexical feature of the direct strategy among ASEAN applicants was the use of the verb “apply,” which appeared in every occurrence of this approach. This verb was used regularly in the clause *I am writing to apply for + noun phrase (position)* (see example 5). A few other structures included the following: *I would apply for + noun phrase (position)* (see example 6) and *I am (adjective) to apply for + noun phrase (position)* (see example 7). The linguistic features used by most of the six ASEAN applicants who employed the indirect strategy was the verb phrase “express my interest.” Two applicants wrote “intention” instead of “interest” (see example 8).



- (5) *I am writing to apply for the position Assistant Manager (SG-2) (Programmes and Partnerships) at (potential employer).*
- (6) *I would like to apply for a position as Assistant Professor in (PH-2) (potential employer).*
- (7) *I am excited to apply for the position of HR Business Partner. (SG-5)*
- (8) *I am writing this letter to express my interest to join as Management Trainee.*

**Table 4. Occurrences of move strategies in Move 3**

Move strategy	PH (5) 100%	ID (4) 100%	MY (5) 100%	SG (5) 100%	TH (5) 100%	VN (5) 100%	All (29) 100%
Direct	(3) 60.00%	(3) 75.00%	(5) 100.00%	(5) 100.00%	(2) 40.00%	(5) 100.00%	(23) 79.31%
Indirect	(2) 40.00%	(1) 25.00%			(3) 60.00%		(6) 20.69%

**Move 4.** The results concerning strategies for Move 4 (promoting the candidature) were remarkable in many ways (see Table 5). First, it was found that ASEAN applicants employed 16 strategies to promote their candidature. The most common strategies included (1) listing relevant skills and abilities (66.67%), (2) listing qualifications (66.67%), (3) stating how skills and abilities were obtained (56.67%), and (4) predicting the employer's success (56.67%). The strategies least employed by ASEAN applicants were (1) stating personal hobbies (3.33%) and (2) stating reasons for applying (3.33%). It is noteworthy that the majority of the four most common strategies in the present study were self-appraisals, which can be defined as "an adequately relevant, positive and credible description" of the applicant's self (Bhatia, 1989, as cited in Bhatia, 1993, p. 66). These strategies are based on providing factual information that the potential employer can probe for reliability and evidence.

Second, three strategies that did not appear in previous studies were identified in this study (Al-Ali, 2004; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Hua, 2007). These new strategies included (1) stating personal interest and objective, (2) stating personal information, and (3) expressing a positive attitude toward the job opportunity. Each strategy needs detailed discussion. Stating personal interest and objective involves the applicant's mentioning his or her objective, interest, or determination related to the prospective position. Stating personal information, or self-introduction (Hua, 2007), means the applicant refers to his or her age, marital status, appearance, health condition, place of origin, and/or place of residence. Finally, expressing a positive attitude toward the job opportunity involves the applicant's directly stating his or her desire or hope for the opportunity to work for the potential employer. It is likely that this strategy can help the applicant transition to Move 6 (encouraging further contact, i.e., opportunity for an interview). The discovery of the three strategies in Move 4 reflected Bhatia's statement that cultural difference is likely to have a significant effect on "the realization of certain moves" (1993, p. 38), and thus it can be inferred from the findings of the present study that writers from different cultures have diverse approaches to accomplish specific intentions.

Interestingly, the six strategies identified in previous studies (Al-Ali, 2004; Henry & Roseberry, 2001) were otherwise neglected by ASEAN applicants. These neglected strategies included listing publications, self-degradation, using pressure tactics, stating reasons for leaving one's present job, stipulating terms and conditions of employment, and naming references. The ASEAN applicants may have been oblivious to these strategies because they were unfamiliar with or unaware of the functions of these strategies and because some strategies (e.g., pressure tactics) are not popular in job application letters (Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Rahim & Arifin, 2014).

The following lists the commonly associated lexico-grammatical features employed in the four regularly used strategies to determine how the applicants attempted to accomplish Move 4. For the strategy of listing relevant skills and abilities, most applicants included the following sets of linguistic features: *I have (adjective) experience/skills + prepositional phrase (PP)* (see example 9) or *I am (adjective) + PP* (see example 10). Modal verbs of ability (e.g., "can") were also found in this strategy (see example 11). Furthermore, the connector "and" was written in every occurrence of this strategy. This phenomenon confirmed Henry and Roseberry's (2001) argument that the connector "and" can provide an additional promotional opportunity.

- (9) *I have good skills at communication, management, and organization.* (ID-4)
- (10) *I am self-motivated and have the ability to organize work on long-term projects.* (TH-3)
- (11) *I can perform well in an international and teamwork environment.* (TH-5)

In relation to the strategy of listing qualifications, ASEAN applicants commonly used three syntactic structures, including *I graduated (noun phrase or NP) + PP (educational institution)*, *I have/hold + NP (qualification)* (see example 12), and *I am a (adjective) graduate of + NP (educational institution or program)* (see example 13). There were a few instances in which the applicants wrote adverbials of time after the first structure to mention the date when their qualifications were obtained (Henry & Roseberry, 2001).

- (12) *I graduated from (educational institution) majoring in English in 2012....I hold OHSAS 18001 and ISO 14001 certificate.* (ID-1)
- (13) *I am a graduate of (educational institution) as well as (training program) for hospital dentistry and oral surgery.* (PH-2)

To state how skills and abilities were obtained, applicants commonly used action verbs in past simple or present perfect tenses. Action verbs—namely "acquire" and "learn"—featured predominantly in this strategy. Moreover, prepositional phrases of time were placed either in front of or at the end of the phrase to complete the information provided in their narratives (see examples 14 and 15) (Henry & Roseberry, 2001). As in the previous strategy, the connector "and" was used frequently.

- (14) *I acquired valuable experience of independent living and cultural immersion through global interaction during my 6-month Student Exchange Program in the United Kingdom and 3-month Work and Travel stint in the United States.* (SG-4)
- (15) *During my tenure, I have also learned how to maintain a professional behavior and put maximum efforts for every task at work.* (PH-1)

In terms of the strategy of predicting the applicant's success, example 16 illustrates the set of linguistic features: *I believe that + NP + modal + verb + NP*, which was also found in Hua's (2007) study. This phrase, preceded by different adjectives, was commonly used to refer to the idea that "growth" would be the applicant's benefit from the job.

- (16) *I also believe that pursuing for a faculty position in the University will give great contribution to my personal and professional growth.* (PH-5)

**Table 5. Occurrences of move strategies in Move 4**

Move strategy	PH (5) 100%	ID (5) 100%	MY (5) 100%	SG (5) 100%	TH (5) 100%	VN (5) 100%	All (30) 100%
Listing relevant skills and abilities	(3) 60.00%	(5) 100.0%	(3) 60.00%	(3) 60.00%	(4) 80.00%	(3) 60.00%	(21) 70.00%
Listing qualifications	(3) 60.00%	(5) 100.0%	(4) 80.00%	(2) 40.00%	(3) 60.00%	(3) 60.00%	(20) 66.67%
Stating how skills and abilities were obtained	(2) 40.00%	(1) 20.00%	(4) 80.00%	(4) 80.00%	(3) 60.00%	(3) 60.00%	(17) 56.67%
Predicting the employer's success	(1) 20.00%	(2) 40.00%	(4) 80.00%	(4) 80.00%	(3) 60.00%	(3) 60.00%	(17) 56.67%
Listing personality and attitude	(1) 20.00%	(2) 40.00%	(3) 60.00%	(1) 20.00%	(3) 60.00%	(2) 40.00%	(12) 40.00%
Naming achievements	(1) 20.00%	(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%	(1) 20.00%	(1) 20.00%	(1) 20.00%	(8) 26.67%
Naming past work experience	(2) 40.00%	(1) 20.00%		(1) 20.00%	(1) 20.00%	(2) 40.00%	(7) 23.33%
Expressing positive attitude towards job opportunity	(1) 20.00%	(3) 60.00%			(2) 40.00%	(1) 20.00%	(7) 23.33%
Naming present work experience	(1) 20.00%	(1) 20.00%	(2) 40.00%	(1) 20.00%	(1) 20.00%		(6) 20.00%
Adversary-glorification	(1) 20.00%		(1) 20.00%	(1) 20.00%		(2) 40.00%	(5) 16.67%
Stating professional affiliation		(1) 20.00%	(1) 20.00%	(2) 40.00%			(4) 13.33%
Predicting the applicant's success	(1) 20.00%		(1) 20.00%		(1) 20.00%		(3) 10.00%
Stating personal interest and objective	(1) 20.00%				(2) 40.00%		(3) 10.00%

Move strategy	PH (5) 100%	ID (5) 100%	MY (5) 100%	SG (5) 100%	TH (5) 100%	VN (5) 100%	All (30) 100%
Stating personal information		(2) 40.00%	(1) 20.00%				(3) 10.00%
Stating personal hobbies				(1) 20.00%			(1) 3.33%
Stating reasons for applying						(1) 20.00%	(1) 3.33%

**Move 5.** To refer to enclosed documents (Move 5), applicants briefly mentioned them (simple enclosing) or described them in detail (elaborate enclosing). The majority of ASEAN applicants (78.62%) preferred the simple approach (see Table 6). However, a significant difference appeared among the Malaysian participants, most of whom employed the elaborate enclosing. This may indicate that Malaysian applicants acknowledge the importance of pointing the potential employer toward further details not presented in the job application letter (Rahim & Arifin, 2014).

Considering the linguistic units used in the strategy of the simple closing, it was found that most of the ASEAN applicants (60%) who employed this strategy used passive voice (see examples 17–19). This is relevant to the findings of the previous studies because, on the one hand, a simple enclosing mainly involves the use of passive voice, nouns indicating the enclosed documents (e.g., “résumé,” “curriculum vitae,” or “CV”), and the verbs “attach” or “enclose” (Al-Ali, 2006; Upton & Connor, 2001). On the other hand, six instances of this strategy included the following set of linguistic units: *I + enclose/attach (present perfect or present continuous) + NP (documents) for your perusal/reference/review* (see example 48).

- (17) *My resume is attached.* (MY-1)  
 (18) *Please find attached my curriculum vitae for your perusal.* (PH-4)  
 (19) *I have enclosed my CV for your perusal.* (SG-4)

As for the strategy of the elaborate enclosing, the ASEAN applicants frequently used the following set of linguistic units: *NP (document) + verb (give, include, provide) + NP (and NP)*. This construction resembled those found in previous studies (Al-Ali, 2004; Upton & Connor, 2001). It is interesting to note that the noun phrases (e.g., “detail” and “information”) in this structure were mostly associated with the adjective “further” (see examples 20 and 21). Moreover, some applicants included Move 4—promoting the candidature—immediately after mentioning the enclosed document. From this finding, it might be inferred that the applicants wanted to more persuasively push the potential employer to read the enclosed résumé.

- (20) *My attached resume gives further detail on my knowledge, experience, and training.* (PH-1)  
 (21) *The enclosed resume includes further information of my working experience and education that I believe will meet with your requirement.* (MY-4)

**Table 6. Occurrences of move strategies in Move 5**

Move strategy	PH (2) 100%	ID (5) 100%	MY (4) 100%	SG (3) 100%	TH (5) 100%	VN (4) 100%	All (23) 100%
Simple enclosing	(1) 50.00%	(5) 100.00%	(1) 25.00%	(3) 100.00%	(4) 80.00%	(4) 100.00%	(18) 78.26%
Elaborate enclosing	(1) 50.00%		(3) 75.00%		(1) 20.00%	(1) 25.00%	(6) 25.09%

**Move 6.** The most frequent strategy for Move 6 (encouraging further contact) was stating a desire for an interview, indicating that ASEAN applicants place great importance on further oral negotiations with the potential employer (see Table 7). According to Bhatia (1993), an interview is the key indicator of the communicative success of the application letter. Thus, most applicants prefer this approach to other strategies, as one can see from the findings of the present study as well as previous ones (Al-Ali, 2004; Hou, 2013; Rahim & Arifin, 2014).

Furthermore, it was found that many ASEAN applicants employed more than one strategy to encourage further contact in their letters, and this phenomenon mostly occurred through a simultaneous statement of a desire for an interview and specification of means for further contact (see example 22). This approach seems to be responsible for the nearly identical frequencies of the two strategies. As for the associated linguistic features of each strategy in Move 6, it was found that in all three instances in which applicants welcomed the employer's response, the wording contained identical syntactic structures (see example 23). To specify further contact, ASEAN applicants used two main sets of linguistic units: *I (modal) be reached/contacted + PP (means of contact)* (see example 24); and *If/Should you + (would like to) verb + NP, please + verb (contact, call) + me + PP (means of contact)* (see example 25). Lastly, the applicants used two main lexical items to state a desire for an interview—verbs expressing an optimistic attitude (e.g., “look forward to,” “hope,” and “appreciate”) and the verbs indicating oral negotiation (e.g., “talk” and “discuss”)—which are relevant to the previous findings (Hou, 2013). Examples 26–28 below demonstrate the use of the two associated lexical items in slightly different syntactic structures.

- (22) *An opportunity to be interviewed in the future would be my appreciation. I can be reached by telephone at (number) or by email at (email address).* (TH-2)
- (23) *I am looking forward to hearing from you.* (ID-1)
- (24) *I may be reached through (email address) and (phone number).* (PH-4)
- (25) *If you would like to schedule an interview or otherwise discuss my interest in this position, please call me at (phone number) or Email: (email address).* (VN-1)
- (26) *I look forward to meet you and talking about how I can contribute to your company.* (ID-4)
- (27) *I hope that we will be able to meet to talk further about this opportunity to work together in this school.* (MY-1)
- (28) *I would appreciate an opportunity to discuss about the opening position with you.* (TH-1)

**Table 7. Occurrences of move strategies in Move 6**

Move strategy	PH (2) 100%	ID (5) 100%	MY (5) 100%	SG (4) 100%	TH (4) 100%	VN (5) 100%	All (25) 100%
Stating desire for an interview	(1) 50.00%	(5) 100.0%	(4) 80.00%	(3) 75.00%	(4) 100.0%	(2) 40.00%	(15) 60.00%
Specifying means of further contact	(1) 50.00%	(1) 20.00%	(3) 60.00%	(3) 75.00%	(2) 50.00%	(3) 60.00%	(13) 52.00%
Welcoming the employer's response		(1) 20.00%	(2) 40.00%				(3) 12.00%

**Move 7.** It was found that formulaic phrases of appreciation (75.86%) were by far the most frequently used among ASEAN applicants when compared to positive attitude (41.38%) and sentences expressing gratitude (6.90%) in Move 7 (ending politely) (see Table 8.). According to Loughheed (2003), expressing appreciation toward the addressee in a short formulaic phrase is a conventional approach as well as an indicator that the applicant is closing the body of the letter. The high frequency of the use of this strategy found in the present study thus indicated that ASEAN applicants were aware of this approach; however, they did not expend much effort in Move 7. Nevertheless, among the participants, 41.38% employed a positive attitude. As Wang (2005) stated, an optimistic attitude about the application can establish goodwill in the potential employer's mind. Hence, it can be inferred that apart from their use of formulaic phrases of appreciation, some ASEAN applicants still believed that the effort to end their letters politely could create a positive atmosphere between the applicant and the potential employer.

Regarding the associated linguistic features of the associated strategies, the only fixed set of lexical items was *Thank you for (+ NP/Gerund)*, which expressed formulaic phrases of appreciation (see example 29). Minor variations in this structure included the use of lexical items at the end, such as "time," "attention," and "consideration." Based on the mere two occurrences of sentences expressing gratitude, it was found that this strategy can be achieved by the following syntactic structure: *I appreciate + NP* (see example 30). The nouns found in this structure also included "time" and "consideration."

(29) *Thank you for your time and consideration.* (MY-5)

(30) *I appreciate your taking the time to review my credentials and experience.* (PH-1)

Finally, the most common set of linguistic units implying positive attitude was *I look forward to + NP/Gerund*, which appeared in almost every instance of this strategy (see example 31). In addition, the structure *I hope that + Subject + V + NP* was found in two letters (see example 32).

(31) *I look forward to a favorable reply.* (ID-2)

(32) *I hope that I will be given an opportunity to work and be part of your team.* (PH-3)

**Table 8. Occurrences of move strategies in Move 7**

Move strategy	PH (5) 100%	ID (5) 100%	MY (4) 100%	SG (5) 100%	TH (5) 100%	VN (5) 100%	All (29) 100%
Formulaic phrases of appreciation	(4) 80.00%	(4) 80.00%	(4) 100.0%	(5) 100.0%	(3) 60.00%	(2) 40.00%	(22) 75.86%
Positive attitude	(2) 40.00%	(3) 60.00%		(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%	(3) 60.00%	(12) 41.38%
Sentences expressing gratitude	(1) 20.00%				(1) 20.00%		(2) 6.90%

**Move 8.** Finally, the only strategy used for Move 8 was the closing salutation, also known as the complimentary close (Gilling, 2013; Loughed, 2003). The majority of ASEAN applicants wrote “Sincerely” (36.67%) or “Yours sincerely” (36.67%), followed by “Sincerely yours” (10%), “Yours faithfully” (6.67%), and “Yours truly” (6.67%) (see Table 9). According to Loughed, phrases such as *Sincerely*, *Sincerely yours*, *Yours sincerely*, and *Yours faithfully* are appropriate for formal letters, whereas the phrases *Yours truly* and *Best regards* are common in informal ones (2003, p. 132). Taking this together with the aforementioned findings, it can be concluded that ASEAN applicants realize that job application letters are formal; thus, informal phrases occurred only infrequently at the individual level. Hence, socio-cultural differences are unlikely to have an effect on this move.

**Table 9. Variety of Move 8**

Closing salutation	PH (5) 100%	ID (5) 100%	MY (5) 100%	SG (5) 100%	TH (5) 100%	VN (5) 100%	All (30) 100%
<i>Sincerely</i> ,	(3) 60.00%	(3) 60.00%	(1) 20.00%		(3) 60.00%	(1) 20.00%	(11) 36.67%
<i>Yours sincerely</i> ,	(1) 20.00%		(1) 20.00%	(5) 100.00%	(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%	(11) 36.67%
<i>Sincerely yours</i> ,		(2) 40.00%				(1) 20.00%	(3) 10.00%
<i>Yours faithfully</i> ,			(2) 40.00%				(2) 6.67%
<i>Yours truly</i> ,			(1) 20.00%			(1) 20.00%	(2) 6.67%
<i>Best regards</i> ,	(1) 20.00%						(1) 3.33%

### Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies, both positive and negative, are communicative efforts by the writer to lessen the strength of face-threatening acts toward the reader (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In the present study, politeness strategies were analyzed via the examination of linguistic choices and pragmatic interpretations (Al-Ali, 2006; Thaweewong, 2006; Upton & Connor, 2001). It was found that the 30 ASEAN applicants employed nine positive and six negative politeness strategies. They tended to employ more positive than negative strategies (with total numbers of occurrences being 71 and 60, respectively).

According to O’Keeffe, Clancy, and Adolphs (2011), positive politeness strategies involve lessening the social distance between the interlocutors, which can be accomplished by establishing a sense of intimacy or a common goal. In this study, the positive strategies used most by ASEAN applicants included *Be optimistic* (60%), *Provide an offer and/or promise* (50%), and *Find common ground* (30%); the strategies least employed were *Use inclusive “we” forms* (3.33%), *Assume or assert reciprocity* (3.33%), and *Exaggerate interest in an addressee* (10%). The first two strategies were used quite often because they minimized the distance between the interlocutors and satisfied the potential employer’s needs for self-promotion (Al-Ali, 2006; Upton & Connor, 2001). In regard to country differences, the strategies of being optimistic and making offers or promises were used by participants from every nationality. Another preferred strategy was finding common ground, which was used by almost every nationality except for Singaporeans. Out of the nine strategies, using inclusive “we” forms, assuming or asserting reciprocity, finding common ground, and asserting concern for the addressee’s wants were not found in previous research on politeness strategies in job application letters. Considering the findings by country, it can be noted that the Vietnamese and Malaysians seemed to utilize the most diverse positive politeness strategies, whereas Singaporeans used only three.

**Table 10. Numbers of application letters with positive politeness strategies**

<b>Positive politeness strategies</b>	<b>PH (5) 100%</b>	<b>ID (5) 100%</b>	<b>MY (5) 100%</b>	<b>SG (5) 100%</b>	<b>TH (5) 100%</b>	<b>VN (5) 100%</b>	<b>All (30) 100%</b>
Be optimistic	(5) 100.0%	(3) 60.00%	(1) 20.00%	(3) 60.00%	(3) 60.00%	(3) 60.00%	(18) 60.00%
Offer and/or promise	(2) 40.00%	(3) 60.00%	(3) 60.00%	(2) 40.00%	(3) 60.00%	(2) 40.00%	(15) 50.00%
Find common ground	(2) 40.00%	(3) 60.00%	(1) 20.00%		(1) 20.00%	(2) 40.00%	(9) 30.00%
Be direct			(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%	(8) 26.67%
Assert concern for the addressee’s wants	(1) 20.00%		(1) 20.00%			(2) 40.00%	(4) 13.33%
Glorify the addressee	(1) 20.00%		(1) 20.00%			(2) 40.00%	(4) 13.33%
Exaggerate interest in an	(1)	(1)			(1)		(3)



<b>Positive politeness strategies</b>	<b>PH (5) 100%</b>	<b>ID (5) 100%</b>	<b>MY (5) 100%</b>	<b>SG (5) 100%</b>	<b>TH (5) 100%</b>	<b>VN (5) 100%</b>	<b>All (30) 100%</b>
addressee	20.00%	20.00%			20.00%		<b>10.00%</b>
Assume or assert reciprocity						(1) 20.00%	<b>(1) 3.33%</b>
Use inclusive 'we' forms			(1) 20.00%				<b>(1) 3.33%</b>

According to O’Keeffe, Clancy, and Adolphs (2011), negative politeness strategies focus on acknowledging the distance between the interlocutors, which is mostly represented through respectful behaviors. The strategies most frequently used by ASEAN writers were formulaic expressions (63.33%) and expressions of appreciation (56.67%), and the least used strategies were nominalization (3.33%) and conventional indirectness (6.67%). As noted by Upton and Connor (2001), participants in a particular genre have different roles to play, and each role has specific communicative expectations. In the genre of application letters, the applicant is expected to utter predictable formulaic expressions (i.e., “I would/will appreciate...,” “I am available for...,” “at your convenience,” and “thank you for [time and] consideration”). Upton and Connor (2001) further suggested that the use of these formulaic expressions indicates that the applicants have accepted their role. Expressing appreciation or gratitude softens the overall aspect of the job application letters. In other words, it is likely that applicants accidentally or purposefully perform face-threatening acts throughout the letter. Therefore, before closing, they are supposed to establish goodwill with potential employers to encourage further contact (Wang, 2005). As a result, the high frequency of this strategy suggested that ASEAN applicants from every country acknowledge their position in the genre of application letters.

The two strategies—using formulaic expressions and expressing appreciation—were employed by applicants from all six nationalities. In addition, the strategy of using modals was demonstrated occasionally by ASEAN applicants (excluding the Filipinos). It is significant to note that three strategies (i.e., conventional indirectness, impersonal tone, and nominalization) employed by ASEAN applicants in this study were initially found only in spoken communication and had been neither found nor discussed in previous studies on job application letters (Al-Ali, 2006; Upton & Connor, 2001). Reviewing the findings by country, it can be determined that Singaporeans employed the most negative politeness strategies (five in total). The Filipino, Thai, and Vietnamese applicants employed four, and those from Indonesia and Malaysia used three.

**Table 11. Numbers of application letters with of negative politeness strategies**

<b>Negative politeness strategies</b>	<b>PH (5) 100%</b>	<b>ID (5) 100%</b>	<b>MY (5) 100%</b>	<b>SG (5) 100%</b>	<b>TH (5) 100%</b>	<b>VN (5) 100%</b>	<b>All (30) 100%</b>
Use formulaic expressions	(3) 60.00%	(2) 40.00%	(3) 60.00%	(3) 60.00%	(5) 100.00%	(3) 60.00%	<b>(19) 63.33%</b>
Expressing	(3)	(4)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)	<b>(17)</b>

<b>Negative politeness strategies</b>	<b>PH (5) 100%</b>	<b>ID (5) 100%</b>	<b>MY (5) 100%</b>	<b>SG (5) 100%</b>	<b>TH (5) 100%</b>	<b>VN (5) 100%</b>	<b>All (30) 100%</b>
appreciation	60.00%	80.00%	40.00%	60.00%	80.00%	20.00%	<b>56.67%</b>
Use modals		(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%	(1) 20.00%	<b>(9) 30.00%</b>
Impersonalize	(1) 20.00%			(2) 40.00%	(2) 40.00%		<b>(5) 16.67%</b>
Be conventionally indirect				(1) 20.00%		(1) 20.00%	<b>(2) 6.67%</b>
Nominalize	(1) 20.00%						<b>(1) 3.33%</b>

All in all, when comparing the findings regarding the occurrences of positive and negative politeness strategies to those of previous studies (Al-Ali, 2006; Hou & Li, 2011; Upton & Connor, 2001), it can be concluded that ASEAN applicants frequently employ various strategies of both positive and negative politeness. This phenomenon might be due to the fact that the previous studies examined politeness strategies in limited areas of their data. For example, Hou and Li (2011) focused only on two moves: stating desire for further contact and expressing politeness. Moreover, some of the previous studies were restricted to the analytical model of written texts. The present study, in contrast, employed a coding scheme that encompassed politeness strategies in both written and spoken communications, and our analysis was conducted for every move in the letters. This approach led to the discovery of politeness strategies in several moves, and some of the strategies that at first were believed to occur only in spoken communication were found in ASEAN applicants' letters.

## Conclusions

The present study investigated and compared move and politeness strategies used in job application letters written by ASEAN applicants. The analysis of move strategies demonstrated how each move can be realized through different approaches, and the scrutiny of the associated linguistic features illustrated how particular lexico-grammatical items can be used at a microlevel in specific move strategies. All of these investigations yielded integrated phenomena related to linguistic features, textualization, and structural interpretation that reoccurred in the genre of job application letters within the ASEAN region. As a genre analysis within the tradition of English for specific purposes, this study provided a comprehensive addition to a body of knowledge that can enable inexperienced writers, non-native speakers, and underprivileged members of society who have fewer opportunities to receive proper writing training, of the genre to gain access to and communicate effectively in this professional community.

Apart from the aforementioned linguistic aspects, the examination of positive and negative politeness strategies developed the pragmatic aspect of the genre of job application letters. This analytical approach shed light on how ASEAN applicants, who play a less powerful role in the community, position themselves when performing self-promotion and other persuasive endeavors to support their claims to potential employers, who have more power in the community.

The marginal differences in results between the linguistic and pragmatic analyses revealed that ASEAN applicants participate in this genre in mostly similar ways. However, the diversity of move strategies suggests that a certain degree of freedom and creative space still appears in the genre of job application letters. In addition, although the majority of the present findings were consistent with those of previous researchers working in different contexts, the existing differences suggest that ASEAN applicants are not homogenous in light of their different cultures and customs. All in all, it can be concluded that the promotional genre of job application letters is a well-constructed class of communication that is somehow bound by the socio-cultural setting in which it is used. The results of this study can be useful to help job applicants, especially fresh graduates, prepare job applications that are well-organized and all-inclusive. This study also may help human resources staff to understand the diverse strategic approaches to self-presentation and gain cross-cultural awareness, which might encourage employers to develop more receptive attitudes toward this kind of letter. Furthermore, this research may enable English language teachers to provide materials, curricula, and instruction to better prepare their students for the real world.

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