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GENRE ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' WRITING E-MAIL: A CASE STUDY AT A STATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract
This study examined the rhetorical structure of students' academic email writing within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Academic email is an important form of communication in higher education; however, students often face challenges in organizing academic emails appropriately according to academic conventions. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the rhetorical structure and consistency of rhetorical moves in students' academic emails. Using a qualitative case study approach, six authentic academic emails written by university students were analyzed through genre analysis to identify the presence and organization of five rhetorical components: opening salutations, self-introductions, purpose statements, politeness expressions, and formal closings. The findings revealed that opening salutations, self-introductions, purpose statements, and formal closings were consistently present in all emails analyzed, indicating that students generally understood the basic structure of academic email writing. However, variations were still found in the clarity, completeness, and organization of these rhetorical elements. In addition, politeness expressions appeared in only five of the six emails, suggesting that interpersonal aspects were less consistently realized than structural components. In conclusion, the study shows that students have developed a basic awareness of academic email structure, although their ability to apply rhetorical elements consistently and effectively remains uneven. The findings highlight the importance of genre awareness in academic writing and the need for instruction that helps students organize academic emails more appropriately in higher education contexts. Therefore, the study recommends integrating explicit genre-based instruction into academic writing courses to support students' understanding of rhetorical structure and academic communication conventions.

Keywords: *Academic Communication, Genre Analysis, Linguistics, Politeness, Systemic functional linguistics*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of digital communication technologies has significantly transformed the way academic interactions are conducted in higher education. Among various communication platforms, email remains one of the most frequently used tools for interaction between students and lecturers. It is commonly used for a wide range of academic purposes, including requesting information, submitting assignments, asking for clarification, and maintaining professional relationships. Despite its routine use, academic email is not merely a functional tool for exchanging information, but also a form of academic writing that reflects students' ability to communicate appropriately within a formal discourse community.

Writing an effective academic email requires more than basic language proficiency. Students are expected to organize their messages clearly, use appropriate tone and level of formality, and follow recognizable conventions that align with academic expectations. These conventions typically include the use of proper greetings, clear identification of purpose, logical organization of ideas, and appropriate closings.

However, in practice, many students still experience difficulties in composing emails that meet these expectations. Their messages often lack structural clarity, display inconsistent levels of formality, or fail to demonstrate appropriate interpersonal awareness. This indicates that academic email writing remains a challenging skill, particularly in terms of integrating structural and interpersonal aspects of communication.

Previous studies have explored academic email communication from different perspectives. Some studies focus on students' email literacy and communication patterns, showing that students are generally able to convey their intentions but often struggle with completeness and formal conventions (Algryani & Jardani, 2023; Ghimire, 2023). Other research highlights the importance of interpersonal aspects, suggesting that effective email communication depends on the balance between clarity and relational appropriateness (Russell et al., 2023). In addition, studies on politeness indicate that students frequently encounter difficulties in maintaining appropriate tone and may unintentionally produce expressions that are perceived as impolite (Abu-Rumman et al., 2024; Ghafar, 2024).

From a genre perspective, academic email can be analyzed as a structured communicative practice consisting of a sequence of rhetorical moves that serve specific functions. These moves, such as greeting, self-identification, purpose statement, and closing, form a recognizable pattern that enables writers to achieve their communicative goals effectively. Research on genre-based writing suggests that understanding these rhetorical structures is essential for producing coherent and contextually appropriate texts. However, students often experience difficulties in fully realizing these moves, particularly in organizing their messages and maintaining consistency across different components of the email.

In response to these challenges, several studies have examined the role of genre-based instruction in improving students' writing. Aleshinskaya and Vasilieva (2025) demonstrate that explicit instruction in genre conventions helps students develop a better understanding of email structure. Similarly, Sujinpram and Wannaruk (2024) report that integrating genre-based approaches with data-driven learning enhances students' ability to produce well-structured and contextually appropriate emails. Keller et al. (2025) further show that students can gradually develop genre awareness through guided practice in digital learning environments. While these studies provide valuable insights into how students learn to write academic emails, they mainly focus on instructional contexts rather than examining how students actually construct emails in real academic situations.

Despite the growing body of research, several gaps remain. First, many studies tend to focus on specific aspects of academic email, such as politeness, email etiquette, or instructional strategies, rather than examining email as a complete genre that integrates both structural and interpersonal elements. Second, although rhetorical move analysis has been widely applied to other academic genres, such as research articles and proposals, its application to student academic emails is still relatively limited. Third, studies that analyze authentic student emails using a comprehensive genre-based framework are still scarce, particularly in real academic contexts.

This study offers a novel contribution by analyzing authentic student academic emails through a genre analysis framework, integrating both rhetorical structure and interpersonal features, which have rarely been examined simultaneously in previous research. Based on these considerations, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How do students structure their academic emails, and what writing styles emerge when analyzed using genre analysis? and (2) What trends and variations occur in their application of academic email conventions?

In line with these questions, this study aims to analyze students' academic email writing using a genre analysis approach. The first objective is to identify the rhetorical

structure of students' emails by examining the presence and organization of key moves. The second objective is to investigate patterns and variations in the application of academic email conventions, including how consistently these elements are used across different texts. To achieve these objectives, this study applies genre analysis as a systematic analytical framework, enabling a detailed examination of both structural and interpersonal aspects of students' writing.

Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how students construct academic emails as a genre in real contexts. In addition, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of more effective academic writing instruction, particularly in helping students improve both the structural organization and interpersonal appropriateness of their email communication.

2. Literature Review

Academic email can be understood as a genre that reflects socially constructed communicative practices within academic discourse. Genre theory views texts as shaped by the expectations of a particular discourse community, where recurring patterns and rhetorical structures are used to achieve specific communicative purposes. In the context of academic email writing, these patterns are typically realized through identifiable rhetorical moves such as greeting, self-identification, purpose statement, and closing. These elements function together to create a coherent and recognizable structure that supports effective communication. Examining these rhetorical moves allows researchers to evaluate how writers conform to genre conventions and how effectively they organize their messages.

Empirical studies indicate that students generally possess basic awareness of email conventions, although their application is often inconsistent. Algryani and Jardani (2023) found that students demonstrate email literacy but frequently fail to apply formal conventions consistently. Similarly, Ghimire (2023) reported that students are able to communicate their intentions but often produce emails that lack completeness and professionalism. These findings suggest that while students understand the functional purpose of academic email, their ability to construct well-structured messages based on genre conventions remains limited.

In addition to structural organization, academic email also involves interpersonal meaning, particularly in maintaining appropriate relationships between writers and recipients. Email communication in academic contexts is not purely transactional but also relational, requiring the use of politeness strategies to convey respect and professionalism. Russell et al. (2023) emphasize that effective email communication involves balancing informational clarity with relational appropriateness, while Ghafar (2024) highlights that students often face challenges in applying proper email etiquette. These studies indicate that successful academic email writing depends not only on structural competence but also on the ability to manage interpersonal meaning.

The importance of politeness is further supported by studies focusing on pragmatic aspects of email communication. Abu-Rumman et al. (2024) reveal that students may unintentionally produce impolite expressions, which can negatively affect communication effectiveness. In line with this, Ghimire (2023) also notes that although students can convey their intentions, they often struggle to maintain an appropriate tone throughout their messages. These findings reinforce the idea that students' pragmatic competence, particularly in managing politeness, is still developing and may not always align with expected academic norms.

From a pedagogical perspective, genre-based approaches have been widely applied to improve students' email writing skills. Aleshinskaya and Vasilieva (2025) demonstrate that explicit genre instruction helps students understand the structural organization of academic emails more effectively. Similarly, Sujinpram and Wannaruk (2024) show that integrating genre-

based approaches with data-driven learning enhances students' ability to construct well-structured and contextually appropriate emails. Keller et al. (2025) further report that learners can gradually develop genre awareness through guided practice in digital learning environments. These studies highlight the effectiveness of genre-based instruction in supporting students' writing development, particularly in understanding rhetorical structure.

However, most of these studies are conducted in instructional or controlled learning contexts, focusing on how students learn to write emails rather than how they actually construct emails in authentic academic situations. In addition, some studies emphasize specific aspects such as politeness or email etiquette rather than analyzing email as a complete genre that integrates both structural and interpersonal elements. Research on broader communication issues, such as workplace email or AI-generated writing, also tends to focus on different contexts that may not fully represent student academic writing (Russell et al., 2023; Hosni, 2024). Furthermore, studies on multimodal communication highlight the need for broader communicative competence (Abdullah et al., 2022), but they do not specifically address the structural characteristics of academic email as a genre.

Based on the discussion above, it can be seen that although previous research has examined academic email from various perspectives, there is still limited attention given to analyzing students' emails as naturally occurring texts using a genre analysis framework. In particular, few studies systematically examine the presence and consistency of rhetorical moves while also considering interpersonal elements such as politeness within the same analysis.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze students' academic emails using a genre analysis approach, focusing on the identification of rhetorical moves and the consistency of their use. In addition, this study also examines how interpersonal elements, such as politeness, are realized within the structure of the emails. Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' email writing as a genre in an academic context.

3. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a case study approach to examine students' academic email writing as naturally occurring texts. A qualitative descriptive method was selected because it allows for a detailed and context-sensitive exploration of linguistic patterns without excessive abstraction. As emphasized by Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research is particularly suitable for analyzing textual data in order to understand how meaning is constructed within specific social contexts. In this study, the approach enabled close examination of how students construct their emails and how their writing reflects both structural organization and communicative intent.

The study was grounded in the theoretical framework of Systemic functional linguistics (SFL), which views language as a resource for making meaning rather than merely a system of rules. According to Halliday (2004), language simultaneously performs three metafunction: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The interpersonal metafunction is especially relevant in this study, as it concerns how language is used to establish relationships, express attitudes, and negotiate social roles between participants. In academic email communication, interpersonal meaning is realized through linguistic choices that signal politeness, formality, and writer–reader relationships. Eggins (2004) further explains that these meanings are constructed through features such as mood, modality, and evaluative language, which shape how messages are interpreted within a social context.

In addition to SFL, this study employed genre analysis as the primary analytical approach to examine the structural organization of students' emails. Genre analysis focuses on identifying rhetorical

moves functional units within a text that serve specific communicative purposes. In academic email writing, these moves typically include opening greetings, self-identification, purpose statements, and formal closings, forming a recognizable structure aligned with academic conventions. By combining genre analysis with SFL, the analysis integrates both structural and interpersonal dimensions of students' writing.

The data sources consisted of six naturally occurring academic emails written by undergraduate students enrolled in a fifth-semester English course at a state university. The participants represented diverse academic disciplines and varied in their prior experience with formal English writing. The selected emails served academic purposes such as submitting assignments, making requests, and expressing gratitude. Each email represented a complete communication instance between student and lecturer, ensuring contextual completeness.

Data collection was conducted after obtaining informed consent from all participants. The emails were collected directly from the students, and all personal or identifying information was anonymized to ensure confidentiality. To be included in the dataset, the emails had to meet three criteria: (1) be authentic rather than drafts or artificially constructed samples, (2) be addressed to academic staff, and (3) be composed in English. These criteria ensured that the data reflected genuine communicative practices in academic settings.

For data analysis, each email was manually examined to identify the presence and arrangement of five key rhetorical moves: opening greetings, self-introductions, purpose statements, politeness expressions, and formal closings. The coding process was informed by move-based analytical approaches in genre studies (Aleshinskaya & Vasilieva, 2025; Sujinpram & Wannaruk, 2024; Keller et al., 2025), which emphasize the identification of functional components within texts.

Through the SFL lens, the analysis interpreted linguistic choices as meaning-making resources for enacting interpersonal relationships and achieving communicative goals (Eggins, 2004). The frequency of each move was recorded, and cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify patterns, consistencies, and deviations from academic email conventions. This process allowed for a systematic evaluation of students' genre awareness and pragmatic competence in academic correspondence.

4. Result and Discussion

In this section, there are two main aspects presented, namely the identification of rhetorical structures in students' academic emails and the discussion of how these structures are realized across the data. This section presents the results of the genre analysis of students' academic emails, focusing on five rhetorical components: opening greetings, self-introductions, purpose statements, politeness expressions, and formal closings.


23 Aug 2020

to [redacted]

Dear, [redacted]

On behalf of everyone —participants and committee— thank you for speaking to us about the insightful topic. The participants who attended are really enjoyed your presentation. Thank you for making the seminar successful.

We appreciate your making time in your busy schedule to speak to us. Thank you again for your time. Please stay safe and stay healthy.

Here, with all due respect, we have a little appreciation for you.

Sincerely, [redacted]

Figure 1. 1st student's email


12/1/2024

to [redacted]

Dear Mrs. [redacted]

I hope this message finds you well. My name is [redacted] and I am a student in class 5C. My student ID is [redacted]. I am writing to submit my final-test results as required. Thank you for your attention.

Best regards,
Muhammad [redacted]

Figure 2. 2nd student's email

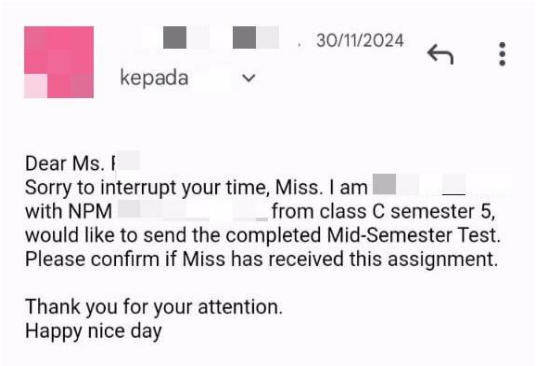


Figure 3. 3rd student's email

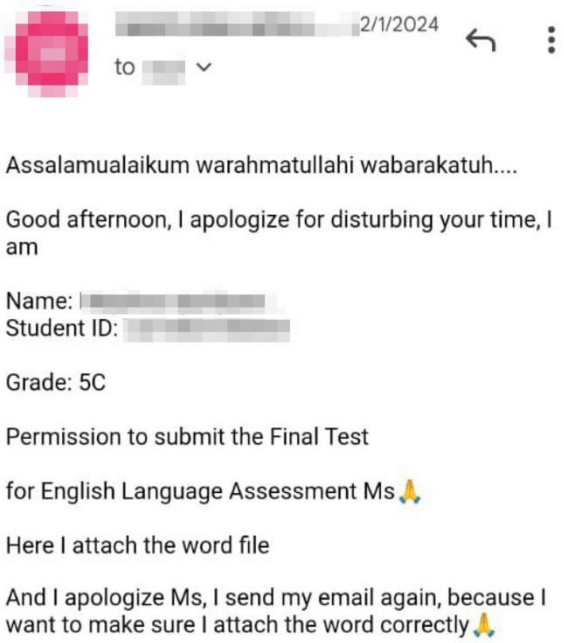


Figure 4. 4th student's email

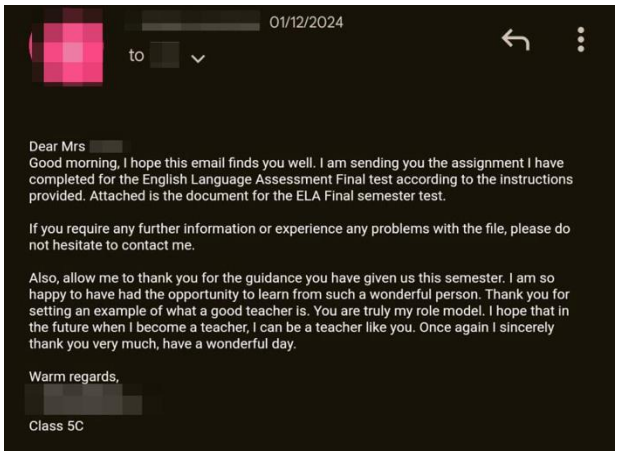


Figure 5. 5th student's email

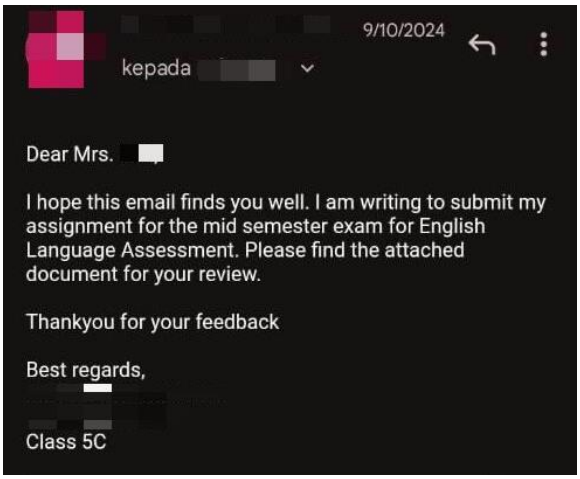


Figure 6. 6th student's email

4.1 Results

Rhetorical Structure of Students' Emails

a. Opening salutations

All emails began with a salutation, either formal ("Dear Mrs. …") or culturally specific ("Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh"). This indicates students' awareness of relational positioning at the start of communication, a feature consistent with professional email discourse norms (Russell et al., 2023). However, variations in formality levels suggest differing interpretations of appropriate register, possibly shaped by personal and cultural factors.

First, from a genre perspective, the salutation functions as a socially recognized move to initiate professional contact. It is both a textual boundary marker and a relational signal, setting the tone for the remainder of the email.

Second, from an SFL perspective (Eggins, 2004), this move reflects tenor choices, specifically, the negotiation of formality and social distance. The coexistence of formal and culturally specific greetings suggests that students operate within overlapping discourse communities.

b. Self-introductions

Self-identification was present in every email, with most students including full name, student ID, and class

information. This aligns with the *"context-setting"* move described by Russell et al. (2023) as crucial for establishing the sender's legitimacy and helping the recipient place the message in the correct academic frame. Such detail also reflects the ideational metafunction in SFL, where specific participant information is foregrounded to facilitate accurate interaction.

From an SFL ideational metafunction perspective, the inclusion of specific identifying details ensures clarity, helping the recipient quickly process the request. Students' consistent use of self-identification reflects awareness of institutional protocols and supports Russell et al. (2023) observation that effective email communication often includes clear contextual markers for efficiency.

However, some introductions were minimal, omitting details such as the course code or lecturer's subject area. While this did not obscure meaning entirely, it could reduce the email's administrative efficiency.

c. Purpose statements

The purpose of communication was clearly stated in all cases, often using direct formulations *("I am submitting my midterm assignment"* or *"I request permission to ...").* This mirrors findings in previous genre studies where clarity in purpose is critical for efficiency in academic and workplace emails (Aleshinskaya & Vasilieva, 2025). The consistency here suggests that students are capable of effectively conveying transactional meaning, a key communicative competence in academic settings.

From a genre perspective, this move aligns with the central communicative purpose of academic email, to request, inform, or respond (Aleshinskaya & Vasilieva, 2025). From an SFL interpersonal perspective, students generally employed unhedged statements, which can communicate confidence but may also appear abrupt if not balanced with softening strategies (Eggins, 2004).

Bhatti et al. (2019) note that clarity in stating purpose is essential in academic genres, but without adequate politeness strategies, such directness may undermine the relational tone of the message

d. Expressions of politeness

Politeness markers, such as *"Thank you for your attention"* or *"I appreciate your time"*, appeared in five out of six emails. Their absence in one case signals potential gaps in pragmatic competence. In SFL terms, politeness choices operate at the interpersonal metafunction level, shaping the tenor of the interaction. The variation observed may be linked to either lack of explicit instruction in politeness strategies or perceived urgency overriding formal courtesy.

From an SFL interpersonal metafunction viewpoint, politeness signals respect and acknowledgment of the recipient's authority (Eggins, 2004). The absence of such expressions in one email suggests either unawareness of the importance of politeness in academic discourse or overreliance on relational familiarity with the recipient.

This inconsistency mirrors the findings of Aleshinskaya and Vasilieva (2025), who reported that students often underuse politeness strategies unless explicitly taught, and supports Bhatti et al. (2019) conclusion that relational elements in academic writing require deliberate attention

e. Formal closings

Every email concluded with a closing phrase *("Best regards," "Sincerely")* followed by the sender's name. These elements serve to mark the completion of the communicative exchange while reinforcing professionalism. This is consistent with the genre conventions identified in academic email discourse studies (Bhatti et al., 2019).

In SFL terms, this move contributes to the textual metafunction by marking the end of the message in an orderly and

cohesive way (Eggins, 2004). Russell, Jackson, Fullman, and Petros Chamakiotis (2023) emphasize that such markers contribute to professionalism and are associated with higher recipient satisfaction in workplace email contexts.

Variation in Academic Email Conventions

The analysis revealed notable variations in how students applied academic email conventions across the dataset. While all emails contained the core structural components, differences emerged in terms of completeness, consistency, level of formality, and the realization of interpersonal features. These variations indicate that students' understanding of academic email conventions is not uniform and reflects differing levels of genre awareness. One prominent variation was observed in the level of completeness of rhetorical moves. Although most students included all five moves, the quality and depth of each component varied. Some emails presented fully developed messages with clear sequencing and well-elaborated content, while others included only minimal or formulaic expressions. This finding supports previous research indicating that students often demonstrate structural awareness but vary in how effectively they realize each component in practice (Aleshinskaya & Vasilieva, 2025; Bhatti et al. 2019).

Another variation appeared in the degree of formality and register used in the emails. While some students consistently employed formal language appropriate for academic contexts, others used semi-formal or informal expressions. This inconsistency suggests that students interpret academic norms differently. Similar patterns have been identified in studies of student email communication in higher education (Algryani & Jardani, 2023).

Variation was also evident in the clarity and directness of purpose statements. Although all students stated their purpose, the level of explicitness differed. Some emails used direct and concise formulations, while others expressed their intentions less clearly.

A particularly significant variation was found in the use of politeness expressions. While most students included markers such as *please* and *thank you*, one email lacked any explicit politeness strategy. This pattern aligns with findings that students often struggle to apply politeness strategies consistently in academic email communication (Abu-Rumman et al., 2024).

In addition, variation was observed in closing strategies. Although all emails ended with a closing, the level of formality and completeness differed. Some students used standard formal closings, while others used shorter forms. Overall, these variations demonstrate that while students share a basic understanding of academic email structure, their ability to apply conventions consistently and appropriately differs.

Frequency Summary

Move	Frequency
Opening salutation	6
Self-introduction	6
Purpose statement	6
Expressions of politeness	5
Closing	6

Table 1. Analysis results

The frequency count highlights high conformity to structural norms in four of the five rhetorical components, with politeness being the least consistently applied.

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that students have developed a general understanding of the rhetorical structure of academic email writing. Most of the emails analyzed contained the main structural components commonly found in academic

email communication, namely opening greetings, self-introductions, purpose statements, and formal closings. This shows that students are already familiar with the basic organizational pattern of academic emails and are able to recognize the essential elements needed to construct formal communication with lecturers.

The consistent appearance of these rhetorical moves suggests that students have begun to understand academic email as a structured genre with specific communicative purposes. The use of greetings and self-introductions at the beginning of the emails reflects students' awareness of how academic interaction is typically initiated. Likewise, the inclusion of purpose statements indicates that students understand the importance of clearly expressing the reason for writing the email. Formal closings were also present in all emails, showing that students recognize the need to end academic communication appropriately.

However, although these structural elements were generally present, variation was still found in how effectively and consistently they were organized within the emails. Some students produced emails with a clear and logical sequence of ideas, while others showed less organized structures, such as incomplete self-introductions, unclear purpose statements, or abrupt transitions between sections. These differences indicate that students may already recognize the required components of academic email but still experience difficulty in organizing them cohesively and effectively.

This finding is consistent with Aleshinskaya and Vasilieva (2025), who found that students are generally capable of reproducing the structural conventions of academic email after being exposed to genre patterns. Similarly, Bhatti et al. (2019) emphasize that genre competence involves not only understanding rhetorical structures but also applying them appropriately according to communicative purposes and academic contexts. In line with these studies, the findings of the present research show that students demonstrate structural familiarity, yet the consistency and quality of their implementation still vary across the emails analyzed.

In addition, interpersonal features such as politeness expressions were less consistently applied compared to structural elements. Although most students included polite expressions, several emails showed limited attention to tone and formality. This supports Abu-Rumman et al. (2024), who reported that students often face challenges in maintaining appropriate interpersonal communication in academic emails. Likewise, Algryani and Jardani (2023) explain that students frequently struggle to maintain formal register because their writing is influenced by informal digital communication practices. Nevertheless, in the present study, structural organization remained more dominant and consistently realized than interpersonal features.

Overall, the findings show that students have developed an emerging understanding of academic email structure as a genre. Their emails already reflect the presence of key rhetorical moves, although variations in organization and consistency indicate that their genre competence is still developing.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the rhetorical structure of academic emails written by university students. The findings revealed that students generally understand the basic structure of academic email writing, particularly in the use of opening greetings, self-introductions, purpose statements, and formal closings. These components appeared consistently across most of the emails analyzed, indicating that students are familiar with the general organizational pattern of academic communication. However, variations were still found in the clarity, completeness, and organization of these rhetorical elements, showing that students' ability to apply the structure effectively remains uneven.

The findings are consistent with previous studies by Aleshinskaya and Vasilieva (2025), Bhatti et al. (2019), Algryani and Jardani

(2023), and Abu-Rumman et al. (2024), which highlight that students often demonstrate awareness of academic email conventions but still experience difficulties in applying them appropriately and consistently in authentic communication contexts. In this study, structural elements were more consistently realized than interpersonal features such as politeness and formality, suggesting that students are generally more familiar with organizational patterns than with the pragmatic aspects of academic writing.

The findings of this study provide implications for academic writing instruction, particularly in helping students develop a clearer understanding of rhetorical organization in academic email communication. Understanding how rhetorical moves function within academic emails can support students in producing more effective and appropriate communication in higher education contexts.

One limitation of this study is the small number of email samples analyzed, which may limit the broader representation of students' academic email practices. Therefore, future studies are suggested to involve larger datasets or explore academic email writing across different academic disciplines or cultural contexts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' genre competence.

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