

Journal of **Communication** (JCOMM)

**Professional Self-Representation in English Job Application Letters:
Communication Challenges among EFL Students at the University
of Kisangani**



CARI
Journal

Professional Self-Representation in English Job Application Letters: Communication Challenges among EFL Students at the University of Kisangani



John Mbula Nyangonda^{1*}, Dimanche Lingoso Lifengo², Arthur Cimwanga Bandibanga Shambuwi³

¹ Yahuma Higher Technical Institute Section: Letters and Human Sciences

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2027-7979>

^{2,3}University of Kisangani, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Department of Letters and English Civilizations (Department of English Language and Civilizations)

Accepted: 7th May, 2026, Received in Revised Form: 23rd May, 2026, Published: 5th June, 2026



Abstract

Purpose: This research investigates professional self-representation within English job application letters authored by EFL students at the University of Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo. It identifies critical communication hurdles that impede the construction of credible professional identities and effective formal correspondence in a multilingual academic setting.

Methodology: Utilizing a mixed-methods approach—combining qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative descriptive metrics—the study evaluates a corpus of letters produced by students in the Department of Letters and English Civilizations. The analysis focuses on discourse organization, persuasive strategies, professional tone, and the deployment of politeness conventions.

Findings: Findings indicate that students face persistent challenges in producing persuasive and coherent correspondence. Primary deficiencies include weak argumentative structures, ineffective self-presentation techniques, and a lack of mastery over professional etiquette and formality. Crucially, the data reveals that grammatical proficiency alone does not guarantee professional communicative effectiveness, as deficiencies remained observable even among advanced students.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The study highlights the necessity of shifting pedagogical focus from decontextualized grammar to genre-based professional writing. It advocates for curricula centered on authentic workplace discourse and strategic self-representation to better align student skills with the demands of the global labor market.

Keywords: *Professional Self-Representation, Job Application Letters, EFL Learners, Employability, Professional Communication, Multilingualism*

JEL Codes: *I23, J24, Z13*

1. Introduction

In contemporary professional environments, written communication has become a decisive component of academic and occupational success. Beyond the transmission of information, professional writing serves as a medium through which individuals project competence, credibility, and social identity [1]. Among the various forms of professional correspondence, the job application letter occupies a particularly strategic position because it constitutes one of the earliest opportunities through which applicants introduce themselves to potential employers. Through this document, candidates are expected not only to present their qualifications but also to construct a convincing professional image capable of inspiring confidence and interest [2].

The effectiveness of a job application letter therefore depends on more than grammatical correctness alone. It also involves the ability to organize ideas coherently, adopt an appropriate professional tone, and employ persuasive communication strategies adapted to institutional expectations [3]. In this respect, professional correspondence may be understood as a form of self-representation in which language functions simultaneously as a communicative and symbolic resource. The way applicants describe their abilities, experiences, and motivations contributes directly to the construction of their professional identity [4].

For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the production of effective professional correspondence often represents a complex communicative challenge. In multilingual contexts, writing in English requires learners to negotiate between different linguistic and cultural systems while simultaneously conforming to the rhetorical conventions of professional discourse [5]. Difficulties related to sentence organization, lexical selection, politeness strategies, and discourse coherence frequently affect the quality and persuasive force of students' written productions [6].

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), English is learned within a sociolinguistic environment characterized by the coexistence of French and several national languages, notably Lingala, Swahili, Tshiluba, and Kikongo [7]. This multilingual situation exerts a significant influence on learners' communicative practices and frequently shapes the ways in which professional discourse is produced in English. Students often transfer organizational patterns, expressions, and communicative habits from previously acquired languages into English writing, sometimes resulting in forms of discourse that diverge from internationally accepted professional standards [8].

At the University of Kisangani, students enrolled in the Department of Letters and English Civilizations are expected to develop advanced communicative competence in English, including mastery of professional writing genres. Nevertheless, observations made during writing activities reveal that many students experience difficulties in presenting themselves effectively through job application letters. Their texts frequently display weaknesses related not only to grammatical

accuracy but also to discourse organization, professional tone, coherence, persuasive communication, and self-presentation strategies [9].

In many cases, students struggle to establish an appropriate balance between formality and personal expression. Some letters remain excessively informal, while others reproduce rigid and impersonal formulations that fail to communicate genuine motivation or professional identity. Such limitations may considerably reduce the communicative impact of the application letter and weaken the candidate's professional image before potential employers [10].

Although numerous studies have explored grammatical errors in EFL writing, comparatively fewer investigations have addressed the communicative and discursive dimensions of professional correspondence in African multilingual contexts [11]. Existing research has largely concentrated on linguistic accuracy, often overlooking the ways in which learners construct professional identities and negotiate self-representation through written discourse [12]. Consequently, important questions remain regarding the communicative strategies employed by EFL learners in job application letters and the challenges that affect the effectiveness of their professional self-presentation.

It is within this perspective that the present study examines professional self-representation in English job application letters produced by EFL students at the University of Kisangani. The study seeks to analyze the communication challenges that emerge in students' written discourse and to evaluate how these difficulties influence the construction of professional identity and communicative credibility in formal correspondence.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Professional communication has become an essential requirement in contemporary recruitment processes, where written correspondence frequently serves as the first point of interaction between applicants and employers [1]. In such contexts, job application letters function not only as informational documents but also as instruments through which candidates present their professional identity, interpersonal competence, and communicative abilities [2]. The quality of self-representation conveyed through these letters may therefore influence employability and access to professional opportunities.

Despite several years of English language instruction, many EFL learners continue to encounter serious difficulties when drafting professional correspondence in English [5]. These challenges extend beyond grammatical inaccuracies and often involve problems related to discourse organization, persuasive communication, coherence, tone, and pragmatic appropriateness. As a result, students may struggle to project a convincing professional image capable of meeting institutional and occupational expectations [6].

At the University of Kisangani, recurrent observations indicate that students in the Department of Letters and English Civilizations frequently experience difficulties in constructing effective self-

representation within English job application letters. In many cases, their texts fail to communicate confidence, professionalism, and communicative clarity. Some letters contain inappropriate salutations, weak argumentative organization, limited persuasive strategies, or expressions that appear excessively informal or culturally transferred from French and local linguistic practices [9].

These difficulties are partly linked to the multilingual sociolinguistic environment of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where English is acquired alongside French and several national languages [7]. The coexistence of multiple linguistic systems may influence learners' rhetorical choices and communicative behavior in professional writing contexts. Furthermore, pedagogical approaches centered predominantly on grammatical instruction often provide limited exposure to authentic professional communication practices [8].

Although studies on EFL writing have extensively addressed grammatical and syntactic errors, relatively little research has examined the communicative dimension of professional self-representation in English job application letters within the Congolese university context [11]. Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways learners construct professional identity, negotiate formality, and employ persuasive discourse strategies in formal correspondence.

The present study therefore seeks to investigate the communication challenges affecting professional self-representation in English job application letters written by EFL students at the University of Kisangani. It aims to identify the principal discursive and communicative difficulties that influence the effectiveness of students' professional writing.

1.2. Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine professional self-representation in English job application letters written by EFL students at the University of Kisangani.

More specifically, the study seeks:

1. To identify the principal communication challenges affecting professional self-representation in English job application letters;
2. To analyze the discursive and organizational strategies employed by EFL students in presenting their professional identity;
3. To examine the influence of multilingual and sociocultural factors on students' professional written communication;
4. To evaluate the extent to which students' writing reflects the conventions of effective professional correspondence;
5. To propose pedagogical approaches capable of improving professional communication skills among EFL learners in multilingual academic contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Professional Communication Theory, Self-Representation Theory, and Discourse Analysis.

2.1. Professional Communication Theory

Professional Communication Theory considers communication as a socially situated practice governed by institutional expectations, rhetorical conventions, and interpersonal objectives [13]. In professional settings, written discourse is expected to combine clarity, coherence, persuasion, and appropriateness. Job application letters, in particular, constitute a specialized genre through which candidates seek to establish professional credibility and demonstrate communicative competence [2]. Effective professional communication therefore depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the ability to adapt discourse to organizational norms and audience expectations.

2.2. Self-Representation Theory

Self-representation refers to the process through which individuals construct and project particular images of themselves during social interaction [14]. In written professional discourse, applicants strategically select linguistic and rhetorical resources in order to present themselves as competent, motivated, and trustworthy individuals. According to Goffman [15], social interaction involves forms of “presentation of self” through which individuals attempt to control the impressions formed by others. In the context of job application letters, self-representation becomes a communicative strategy aimed at shaping professional identity and influencing recruitment decisions.

2.3. Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis provides an analytical framework for examining how meaning is constructed through language use in specific social contexts [16]. From this perspective, job application letters may be analyzed as communicative texts shaped by institutional norms, cultural expectations, and persuasive intentions. Discourse analysis makes it possible to examine organizational structure, coherence, lexical choices, politeness strategies, and rhetorical patterns employed by learners in professional writing [17]. It also allows for the identification of communicative difficulties associated with multilingual interference and culturally conditioned discourse practices.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of communication challenges in English job application letters produced by EFL students at the University of Kisangani. The

quantitative dimension focused on the identification and frequency of recurrent communicative deficiencies, while the qualitative approach enabled an interpretative analysis of the ways students construct professional self-representation through written discourse [1,2].

The study was conducted within the Department of Letters and English Civilizations of the University of Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo. The choice of this academic setting was motivated by the fact that students enrolled in this department are expected to develop relatively advanced communicative competence in English, particularly in formal and professional writing contexts.

3.2. Population and Sampling Procedure

The target population consisted of undergraduate students registered in BAC 1, BAC 2, and BAC 3 within the Department of Letters and English Civilizations. From this population, a casual non-probability sample of twenty-two (22) students was selected for the study. The sample included eleven students from BAC 1, five from BAC 2, and six from BAC 3 [3].

The selection of participants was guided by accessibility and availability during the data collection period. Although limited in size, the sample provided sufficient textual data to identify recurrent communicative patterns and discourse-related difficulties in students' professional writing productions.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through an unannounced classroom writing activity designed to simulate an authentic professional communication situation. Participants were asked to write an English job application letter in response to a hypothetical employment opportunity. The use of an unprepared writing task was intended to reduce memorized responses and encourage spontaneous language production reflecting the learners' actual writing competence [4].

The collected letters constituted the primary corpus of the study. Particular attention was given not only to grammatical accuracy but also to communicative and discursive dimensions, including self-presentation strategies, coherence, persuasive organization, politeness conventions, and professional tone.

3.4. Analytical Framework

The analysis of the corpus was grounded in Error Analysis Theory and principles of discourse analysis. Error Analysis made it possible to identify systematic linguistic deviations affecting communicative effectiveness, whereas discourse analysis provided tools for examining how students attempted to construct professional identity and credibility through written interaction [5,6].

The analytical process was conducted in several stages. First, the letters were carefully read and coded according to recurrent communicative and organizational features. Second, identified problems were classified into major categories, including:

- Inappropriate professional self-presentation;
- Weak persuasive strategies;
- Organizational deficiencies;
- Ineffective salutations and closings;
- Incoherent paragraph development;
- Grammatical and syntactic disruptions affecting communication;
- And inappropriate lexical choices.

Frequency counts and percentages were subsequently calculated to determine the relative importance of each category of communicative difficulty across academic levels [7].

3.5. Reliability and Validity of Data

To enhance analytical reliability, the identification and classification of communicative problems followed consistent evaluation criteria derived from professional writing conventions and previous studies on EFL writing competence [8]. Particular care was taken to distinguish between isolated performance mistakes and recurrent communicative deficiencies observable across multiple texts.

The validity of the study was reinforced through the use of authentic student productions generated in a realistic writing context. Furthermore, the combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis allowed for a more balanced interpretation of the data by integrating both statistical tendencies and contextual discourse interpretation [2].

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study respected fundamental ethical principles related to educational research. Participation was voluntary, and students' identities were kept anonymous throughout the analysis and reporting process. The collected texts were used exclusively for academic purposes, and confidentiality was maintained in the presentation of examples extracted from the corpus.

4. Findings

The analysis of the corpus revealed substantial weaknesses in the ways students constructed and projected their professional identity through English job application letters. Although most participants demonstrated awareness of the general purpose of an application letter, many encountered difficulties in presenting themselves in a convincing, coherent, and professionally appropriate manner.

A significant proportion of the letters lacked clear strategies of self-presentation. Several students merely listed personal information and academic qualifications without establishing a persuasive relationship between their competencies and the requirements of the targeted position. In many cases, the candidates failed to communicate their motivation, professional ambitions, or potential contribution to the institution addressed.

The corpus further showed that numerous students experienced difficulties in maintaining an appropriate professional tone. Informal expressions, conversational formulations, and excessively direct statements frequently appeared in the letters. Some participants employed formulations that reduced the persuasive value of their correspondence, while others adopted excessively simplistic language that weakened the professional image they attempted to project.

The organizational structure of many letters also affected communicative effectiveness. Several texts lacked coherence between introductory statements, body paragraphs, and concluding remarks. In some cases, transitions between ideas were abrupt, leading to fragmented discourse organization. The absence of logical sequencing frequently limited the clarity and persuasiveness of the message conveyed.

Another recurrent difficulty concerned the use of politeness and formality markers in professional communication. Many students demonstrated insufficient mastery of conventional expressions commonly used in English professional correspondence. Greetings, requests, and closing formulas were often inadequately formulated, reflecting uncertainty regarding the sociolinguistic norms governing formal communication in English.

Differences were nevertheless observed across academic levels. Students from advanced levels generally produced more organized and linguistically controlled texts than beginners. However, even among BAC 3 students, several letters still revealed weaknesses in professional self-positioning, audience awareness, and argumentative coherence. This indicates that academic progression alone does not necessarily ensure mastery of professional communication strategies.

Overall, the findings suggest that students' difficulties extend beyond grammatical accuracy and involve broader communicative challenges related to professional identity construction, persuasive discourse management, and intercultural communication competence.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that professional writing difficulties among EFL students are not limited to grammatical inaccuracies alone but also involve broader communicative and discursive dimensions. The inability of many students to construct a convincing professional image through application letters highlights important challenges related to self-representation, audience awareness, and communicative appropriateness in formal contexts.

One of the major issues identified concerns the limited capacity of students to establish persuasive professional identities. In many letters, self-presentation remained descriptive rather than strategic, with students merely enumerating personal information without demonstrating how their qualifications and experiences could respond to professional expectations. This observation supports the argument that professional communication requires more than linguistic correctness; it also demands the ability to position oneself discursively within socially recognized professional norms [1].

The weaknesses observed in discourse organization equally reflect insufficient mastery of professional genre conventions. Several participants encountered difficulties in structuring their arguments coherently and maintaining logical progression throughout the letter. Such limitations may reduce the persuasive force of professional correspondence and negatively affect the communicative credibility of applicants. According to genre theory, professional writing genres are governed by specific rhetorical and organizational conventions that learners must progressively internalize through exposure and practice [2].

The recurrent use of inappropriate or overly informal expressions further demonstrates the influence of sociolinguistic and intercultural factors in EFL professional communication. In multilingual contexts such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, learners often transfer communicative habits from French or local languages into English writing. This phenomenon may explain the presence of direct formulations, unconventional politeness strategies, and inappropriate levels of formality in several letters. Similar observations have been reported in studies examining intercultural pragmatics and second-language professional writing [3].

The findings also suggest that students possess limited awareness of the persuasive dimension of job application letters. Many participants focused primarily on providing information while neglecting rhetorical strategies aimed at attracting the employer's attention or establishing professional credibility. Yet, professional correspondence fundamentally functions as a persuasive communicative act through which applicants attempt to construct a favorable image of themselves before potential recruiters [4].

The persistence of these communication difficulties across academic levels raises important pedagogical concerns. Although advanced students generally produced more coherent texts than beginners, several communicative deficiencies remained visible even among final-year learners. This situation may indicate that university instruction continues to emphasize grammatical knowledge at the expense of authentic professional communication practice. Previous research has similarly shown that traditional EFL instruction often provides insufficient preparation for workplace communication and professional discourse production [5].

The study therefore highlights the necessity of integrating professional communication training more explicitly into university EFL curricula. Students need opportunities to engage with authentic

professional genres, analyze effective models of formal correspondence, and develop awareness of audience expectations and persuasive discourse strategies. Such pedagogical orientations would not only improve writing competence but also strengthen students' employability in increasingly competitive labor markets [6].

More broadly, the findings confirm that professional writing competence represents a multidimensional communicative skill involving linguistic accuracy, discourse organization, sociolinguistic appropriateness, and strategic self-representation. In multilingual African contexts where English functions primarily as a foreign language, the acquisition of such competence remains closely connected to broader questions of intercultural communication and professional socialization [7].

6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the communicative challenges shaping professional self-representation in English job application letters produced by EFL students at the University of Kisangani. The analysis indicates that learners face persistent difficulties that extend beyond grammatical accuracy to the broader construction of coherent, persuasive, and professionally appropriate written discourse. In practice, many students struggle to present themselves convincingly, to structure their ideas with clarity, and to deploy the rhetorical strategies expected in formal professional communication.

A key finding concerns the limited ability of students to position themselves effectively as prospective professionals. In a significant number of letters, there is a weak articulation between academic qualifications, personal competencies, and the expectations of potential employers. As a result, the texts tend to remain largely descriptive rather than genuinely persuasive, which reduces their effectiveness in conveying a strong professional identity.

The study further reveals recurrent difficulties related to discourse organization and sociolinguistic adequacy. Issues of coherence, paragraphing, tonal register, and politeness conventions frequently undermine the overall quality of the letters. These challenges suggest an incomplete mastery of the rhetorical norms governing professional written communication in English. In addition, multilingual repertoires and intercultural transfer appear to influence learners' stylistic and pragmatic choices, particularly in the formulation of formal and persuasive expressions.

Although students at higher academic levels generally demonstrate more control over textual organization than their junior counterparts, notable weaknesses persist even at the final stage of university training. This suggests that extended exposure to English instruction, in its current form, does not necessarily translate into full competence in professional writing. The continued emphasis on decontextualized grammatical instruction, often detached from authentic communicative practice, may partly account for these limitations.

These findings have implications that extend beyond academic assessment. In increasingly competitive labour markets, job application letters function as a critical site where professional credibility is constructed and evaluated. Deficiencies in written professional communication may therefore constrain graduates' employability and limit their prospects for socio-professional integration, particularly in contexts where English proficiency carries growing strategic value.

6.2. Recommendations

In light of the findings above, several directions for pedagogical and institutional improvement can be proposed.

First, EFL programs at the university level should reinforce professional communication training through the systematic integration of genre-based approaches to writing instruction. Students should be engaged with authentic models of job application letters and other workplace genres in order to better understand their rhetorical structure, communicative purpose, and expectations.

Second, writing instruction should place stronger emphasis on persuasive competence and professional self-representation. Learners need to be guided in developing the ability to present their academic background, skills, and motivations in a manner that enhances clarity, credibility, and professional impact.

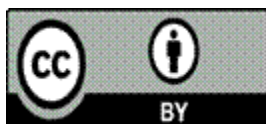
Third, teaching practices should move beyond a predominantly grammatical focus and incorporate more task-based and context-driven writing activities. Simulated recruitment exercises, peer feedback sessions, workshops, and iterative revision tasks can contribute to strengthening students' awareness of audience, purpose, and discourse organization [7].

Fourth, greater attention should be given to the sociolinguistic and intercultural dimensions of professional writing. Explicit teaching of politeness strategies, appropriate formal register, and conventions of professional etiquette in English would help reduce pragmatic transfer and inappropriate stylistic choices.

Finally, future research should extend the investigation of professional writing practices across other institutions and discourse genres. Comparative studies involving larger and more diverse samples would contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language proficiency, professional discourse competence, and employability in multilingual African contexts.

7. References

- [1] Alred, G. J., Brusaw, C. T., & Oliu, W. E. (2009). *The Business Writer's Handbook*. Bedford/St. Martin's.
- [2] Bhatia, V. K. (1993). *Analyzing genre: Language use in professional settings*. Longman.
- [3] Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Free Press.
- [4] Canagarajah, A. S. (2006). The place of World Englishes in composition: Pluralization continued. *College Composition and Communication*, 57(4), 586–619.
- [5] Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 5(4), 161–170.
- [6] Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.
- [7] Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- [8] Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- [9] Ferris, D. R. (2003). *Response to student writing: Implications for second language students*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [10] Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.
- [11] Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Hyland, K. (2005). *Metadiscourse: Exploring interaction in writing*. Continuum.
- [13] James, C. (1998). *Errors in Language Learning and Use: Exploring Error Analysis*. Longman.
- [14] Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.
- [15] Weigle, S. C. (2002). *Assessing writing*. Cambridge University Press.



2026 by the Authors. This Article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)