



Challenges Faced by Administrative Personnel in Drafting Formal English Letters

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the linguistic, technical, and organizational challenges encountered by administrative personnel in drafting formal English letters within higher education settings. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis involving twelve administrative staff from three institutions. The findings reveal three major categories of challenges. Linguistically, participants demonstrated limited mastery of formal vocabulary, frequent grammatical errors, and a strong tendency toward literal translation. Technically, the letters showed inconsistent formatting, non-standardized templates, and irregular application of international writing conventions. Organizationally, the lack of training opportunities, demanding workloads, and absence of proofreading mechanisms significantly contributed to recurring errors. These findings highlight that administrative writing difficulties are not solely linguistic but are shaped by systemic institutional conditions. The study contributes to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) research by offering an integrated view of administrative writing demands and underscores the need for targeted training, standardized templates, and structured support systems. Recommendations for institutional improvement and directions for future research are also presented.

Keywords: administrative communication; formal letter writing; linguistic challenges; qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

English has increasingly become the dominant medium for international communication, particularly in academic and administrative contexts across the globe. As higher education institutions expand their international engagement, the demand for effective English communication has grown significantly in administrative functions (Jenkins, 2019). Formal correspondence, such as official letters, memoranda, and institutional documentation, must reflect professionalism, accuracy, and clarity to support international collaboration. Ideally, administrative communication should follow standardized linguistic conventions that align with global expectations and established norms of professional writing. However, the reality shows that many administrative workers struggle to meet these standards, especially when English is not their first language. This gap between ideal expectations and actual performance raises important concerns for institutional quality and credibility. Consequently, improving administrative English communication has become a crucial priority within the global landscape of higher education.

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of English as a *lingua franca*, disparities in proficiency levels among institutional personnel remain a persistent issue. Research has shown that administrative staff often receive less formal language training than academic faculty, resulting in uneven linguistic competencies across institutional roles (Westbrook, 2021). Ideally, all employees involved in external communication should possess strong English writing skills to ensure consistency and accuracy. In practice, administrative personnel frequently lack structured opportunities to develop these competencies, leading to challenges in producing high-quality formal documents. This discrepancy highlights a misalignment between institutional demands and the professional development available to administrative workers. Such misalignment can create systemic weaknesses in academic communication, especially in regions where English is used primarily as a foreign language. Therefore, understanding these disparities is vital to strengthening institutional capacity and professionalism.

Moreover, the expectations placed on administrative communication have evolved as higher education institutions pursue international accreditation, mobility programs, and global

partnerships. Administrative personnel must navigate increasing complexity in communication requirements, which now involve intercultural sensitivity, standardized formatting, and adherence to international writing conventions (Hunter, 2018). Ideally, these personnel should be equipped with both linguistic and technical competencies to manage such demands effectively. However, existing training frameworks often do not match the evolving needs, leaving employees to rely on informal learning or self-study. This disconnect contributes to persistent errors in grammar, vocabulary, and structure within formal English letters. The absence of comprehensive institutional support further widens the gap between the expected and actual quality of administrative correspondence. This situation underscores the importance of examining the root causes of communication challenges faced by administrative personnel.

In addition to linguistic challenges, administrative communication is influenced by institutional policies, organizational culture, and available resources. Research suggests that organizational support plays a central role in shaping employees' communication performance, particularly when tasks involve specialized competencies such as formal writing (Husin & Radzuan, 2021). Ideally, institutions should provide standardized templates, guidelines, and built-in proofreading mechanisms to ensure accuracy and uniformity. However, many administrative units lack these structural supports, leading employees to develop their own ad hoc strategies for letter drafting. Such improvisation increases the likelihood of inconsistency and reduces the overall quality of official documents. This situation reveals a systemic issue rather than an individual problem, indicating that institutional factors contribute significantly to communication challenges. As a result, administrative writing performance cannot be analyzed in isolation from organizational contexts.

The field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provides valuable insights for understanding these challenges by emphasizing the need for domain-specific language instruction. ESP scholars argue that administrative writing represents a distinct genre with unique conventions, structural expectations, and communicative purposes (Hyon, 2017). Ideally, administrative personnel should receive training tailored specifically to the genre of institutional correspondence rather than general English programs. However, such specialized training is rarely implemented in many contexts, leaving personnel inadequately prepared for real-world communication demands. This insufficient alignment between theoretical insights and practical training results in gaps in vocabulary, tone, and formatting required for formal letters. Thus, ESP theory identifies a clear need for targeted instructional interventions. Addressing this gap can contribute to more effective communication practices across administrative settings.

Previous studies have examined English writing challenges in various professional fields, including business, health administration, and public service. These studies consistently highlight recurring issues such as grammatical errors, inappropriate lexical choices, and difficulties adhering to standard written formats (Andre, 2014). Ideally, research in administrative communication within educational institutions should build on these findings to identify contextually relevant challenges. However, there is still limited empirical work focusing specifically on administrative personnel responsible for formal correspondence in academic environments. This lack of focused attention creates a void in the literature, particularly in understanding genre-specific challenges associated with English formal letters. As a result, existing findings cannot fully explain the complexities faced by administrative personnel in higher education. This gap underscores the need for further investigation in this area.

Recent research in applied linguistics also emphasizes the role of cognitive load, workplace pressure, and digital tools in shaping writing performance. Scholars argue that multitasking, time constraints, and technological reliance can influence writing accuracy and coherence (Oh, 2022). Ideally, administrative writing should be conducted under supportive conditions that allow for careful language processing and revision. However, administrative personnel often work under strict deadlines, heavy workloads, and competing priorities, which increase the likelihood of writing errors. This mismatch between cognitive requirements and workplace conditions contributes significantly to communication challenges. Moreover, reliance on automated tools such as online translators may lead to literal translations or stylistic inconsistencies.

Understanding these factors is essential for developing comprehensive support strategies for administrative writing.

Although the importance of professional English communication is widely recognized, the role of administrative personnel in maintaining institutional communication quality has not received sufficient academic attention. Existing research tends to focus on faculty or students, overlooking the administrative workforce despite its essential role in sustaining institutional operations (Husin & Radzuan, 2021). Ideally, administrative communication research should be given equal priority, given its direct impact on institutional representation and external relations. The limited scholarly attention contributes to a persistent knowledge gap regarding administrative writing challenges. This lack of representation hinders the development of targeted training modules and institutional policies tailored to administrative needs. Consequently, there is an urgent need for studies that specifically investigate the communication tasks and competencies required of administrative personnel. Addressing this gap will help strengthen institutional communication quality across different contexts.

In identifying the gaps between theoretical expectations and actual workplace practices, this study seeks to contribute new insights to the field of administrative communication. Previous studies have highlighted general writing difficulties, but none have sufficiently explored the intersection between linguistic limitations, technical formatting issues, and organizational constraints in administrative formal letter writing. Ideally, research should adopt a holistic perspective that integrates these dimensions to provide a clearer understanding of the challenges faced. However, most studies examine only linguistic or technical aspects separately, leaving a fragmented understanding of the problem. This fragmentation highlights a critical research gap that remains unaddressed in contemporary literature. By addressing this gap, the present study provides a more comprehensive view of administrative writing challenges. Such a contribution enhances scholarly understanding and supports evidence-based institutional improvement.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach that combines linguistic, technical, and organizational analyses to explore administrative writing difficulties. While previous research has examined certain isolated aspects, few studies have incorporated these elements into a cohesive analytical framework. Ideally, innovative research should move beyond descriptive findings and propose actionable insights for institutional development. This study offers such an approach by highlighting the interconnected nature of writing challenges and proposing institutional strategies grounded in empirical evidence. The findings are expected to support the development of targeted interventions, such as specialized training modules, standardized templates, and proofreading systems. These contributions provide practical and theoretical value, strengthening both administrative practice and academic discourse. Consequently, the study advances existing knowledge and promotes innovation in the field of administrative communication.

Based on the identified gaps and theoretical foundations, this study aims to examine the challenges faced by administrative personnel in drafting formal English letters, focusing on linguistic, technical, and organizational dimensions. The objective is to generate a comprehensive understanding that can inform institutional policy and professional development programs. Ideally, research objectives should reflect both theoretical significance and practical relevance, ensuring that findings contribute to broader knowledge and real-world application. This study meets those criteria by situating the problem within global communication demands, ESP theory, and institutional practice. By doing so, the research provides strong justification for its academic relevance and practical urgency. Ultimately, the introduction establishes the foundation for a study that responds to pressing institutional needs and advances scholarly understanding of administrative English communication.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate linguistic, technical, and organizational challenges encountered by administrative personnel in drafting formal English letters. A total of twelve participants were selected through purposive sampling from three higher

education institutions in an urban academic area. These institutions were chosen because they actively engage in international programs, frequently use English for administrative communication, and represent diverse administrative environments. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of formal English letters previously produced by the participants. All interviews were conducted privately, recorded digitally, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Additional institutional documents and templates were reviewed to support triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which included coding, categorizing, and refining themes based on recurring patterns in the data. The analysis process involved familiarization with the transcripts, generating initial codes, grouping codes into broader categories, and interpreting themes related to writing challenges. Reliability was enhanced through member checking, peer discussions, and comparison between interview and document data. Ethical procedures were observed by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and securely storing all digital data. This methodological approach provides a clear and replicable framework for understanding the challenges faced by administrative personnel in producing formal English correspondence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

For ease of reading and comprehension, findings are presented first, followed by discussion. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, the interpretation, and the conclusions that can be drawn. The Findings subtitle and Discussion subtitle are presented separately. This section should occupy a minimum of 60% of the whole body of the article.

Findings

Linguistic Challenges

1. Limited Formal Vocabulary

All participants reported difficulty using formal administrative vocabulary commonly required in English institutional correspondence. Terms such as hereby, acknowledge, comply, respective, and enclosed were frequently unfamiliar or misused, causing the letters to appear informal or unprofessional. Document analysis showed that errors often occurred in key sections of the letters, including requests, statements, and closing remarks. A common example was the replacement of “We hereby request your approval” with “We ask your agree,” demonstrating both lexical and structural inaccuracy. Participants noted that these issues stemmed from limited exposure to administrative English and the absence of institutional reference materials. As a result, many relied on online translation tools, which frequently produced inappropriate or contextually inaccurate vocabulary choices.

Table 1. Expanded Vocabulary Errors Identified in Administrative Letters

Intended Formal Term	Incorrect Version Found	Type of Error / Notes
hereby	here by / herewith	Mis-segmentation; confusion with legal-administrative forms
comply	complete / follow	Incorrect semantic substitution changes meaning
acknowledge	know / receive	Literal translation; incorrect collocation
respective	each / their	Loss of formal nuance; unclear referent
enclosed	inside / include	Failure to use document-related terminology
authorize	allow / give permission	Informal phrasing reduces formality
designate	choose / point	Lack of understanding of official assignment context

in accordance with	according to / based on	Missing legal-register accuracy
hereby certify	I certify / I write	Overpersonalization; incorrect register
your favorable response	your good answer	Literal translation; incorrect formal tone

2. Grammatical Errors

Document analysis showed that grammatical errors appeared in nearly all letter samples, with four dominant categories consistently recurring. First, inconsistent verb tenses were frequently observed, particularly when participants shifted between present and past tense within a single sentence, such as “We submit and submitted the request...”. Second, preposition errors were common, including forms like request for to, discuss about, and attached with, all of which deviate from standard English usage and alter the clarity of the intended meaning. Third, misuse of articles occurred in both omission and overuse, particularly with a, an, and the, which affected sentence precision and formality. Fourth, poor sentence structure was the most frequent issue, especially in long, multi-clause sentences that attempted to mimic Indonesian sentence patterns, resulting in unclear or awkward constructions.

These grammatical errors often produced ambiguity and misinterpretation in formal correspondence. Interview data confirmed that participants were unsure about grammar rules and struggled to compose accurate sentences when working under time constraints. Many relied on direct translation or trial-and-error, which further contributed to inconsistent grammar quality.

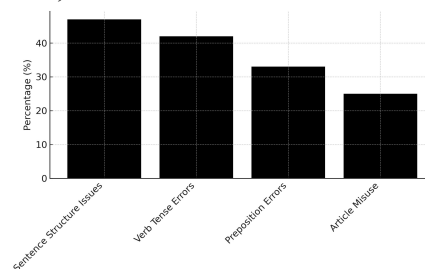


Figure 1. Grammatical Error Distribution

3. Literal Translation (Expanded)

Analysis of interviews and document samples revealed a consistent pattern of literal, word-for-word translation, indicating that participants relied heavily on Indonesian sentence structures when composing English formal letters. Instead of adapting their writing to English conventions of tone, clarity, and formality, participants transferred Indonesian grammar directly into English. This resulted in sentences that were understandable but sounded awkward, overly formal in the wrong places, or unnatural for institutional communication.

Literal translation appeared in three main areas: opening statements, information delivery, and closing remarks. In opening lines, participants commonly used expressions such as “Based on the above matter, we convey to you,” mirroring the Indonesian “Berdasarkan hal tersebut, kami sampaikan kepada Anda.” Although grammatically acceptable at first glance, the structure does not align with standard English administrative phrasing, which would typically be “Regarding the matter above, we would like to inform you...” or “We wish to notify you that...”

Similar issues were found in closing statements. The phrase “For your attention, we thank you,” which directly translates from “Atas perhatiannya, kami ucapkan terima kasih,” was very common across the documents. In English, such a closing is unnatural and lacks the professional tone expected in formal correspondence. A more appropriate version would be “Thank you for your attention to this matter,” which conveys a formal yet natural tone.

Document samples also showed literal translation in procedural or request-related sentences. Examples include:

- 1) “Please give response soon,” from “Mohon segera memberikan tanggapan,” instead of “We kindly request your prompt response.”
- 2) “We need your help for complete the data,” from “Kami membutuhkan bantuan Anda untuk melengkapi data,” instead of “We request your assistance in completing the data.”
- 3) “With this letter, we inform you that...” reflecting “Dengan surat ini kami informasikan bahwa...”, whereas English typically uses shorter, more direct forms such as “We would like to inform you that...”

The analysis also showed that literal translation often resulted in incorrect collocations, such as:

- 1) “Send the confirmation letter back to us” → intended meaning was “Please confirm your attendance.”
- 2) “We follow up your letter,” from “Kami menindaklanjuti surat Anda,” whereas English uses “We are following up on your letter.”

The interviews confirmed that these errors were largely caused by participants’ lack of confidence in generating English sentences independently. Most admitted relying on online translation tools, which often failed to capture the formal-register nuances required in administrative writing. As a result, the letters produced were structurally correct in appearance but stylistically inappropriate for professional communication.

Overall, the findings indicate that literal translation is a major factor contributing to unnatural phrasing, reduced clarity, and diminished professionalism in English administrative correspondence.

Technical and Formatting Challenges

1. Lack of Standard Templates

Analysis revealed that none of the three institutions provided a standardized English template for formal correspondence. Consequently, administrative personnel adapted Indonesian-style letter formats, which resulted in repeated structural inconsistencies. Without a reference guide, staff arranged letter components based on personal assumptions or previous Indonesian letters, producing layouts that did not follow international formatting norms.

Key variations were found in the placement of dates, reference numbers, margins, and spacing. Several letters placed the date on the left side in numerical format (e.g., 15-09-2024), while others used Indonesian spacing conventions with wide left margins. Signature blocks were also inconsistent, with some positioned too close to the body text and others aligned irregularly. Subject lines varied significantly some were fully capitalized, others centered, and some were placed after the salutation, which is incorrect in English formal writing.

Overall, the absence of standardized templates caused inconsistent structure, reduced readability, and varying levels of professionalism. Personnel expressed that they were unsure which format to follow and had no institutional guidance to rely on.

Table 2. Comparison of Template Accuracy

Template Aspect	Ideal Format	Common Errors Found
Date format	“15 September 2024”	Indonesian format “15-09-2024”
Inside address	Full title, institution, city	Missing titles; incorrect address order
Salutation	“Dear Sir/Madam,”	“To Mr/Mrs,” or omitted entirely
Closing	“Sincerely,”	“Best regard,” / “Thank you”

2. Inconsistent International Formatting (Expanded)

Analysis of the documents showed that 10 out of 12 letters contained significant inconsistencies in applying international formatting standards. The most frequent issue was the incorrect use of block-style format, with several letters displaying uneven alignment, improper

spacing between sections, or mixed left and centered alignment. Many letters also placed the sender's and recipient's addresses in the wrong order sometimes placing the recipient's address at the bottom of the letter or aligning both addresses on the right side, which contradicts international norms.

Date formatting errors were also common. Some letters used the Indonesian numeric style (15-09-2024), while others mixed partial formats such as September, 15 2024 or 15st September 2024. These variations reduced consistency and created an unprofessional appearance. Errors in salutation and closing were equally prominent. Instead of standardized forms like Dear Sir/Madam, and Sincerely, the letters included forms such as Dear Mr/Mrs, Dear All, Best regard, and Thank you, which are inappropriate in formal institutional correspondence.

Additional formatting errors identified included:

- 1) Subject lines placed after the salutation.
- 2) Excessive use of bold or ALL CAPS in the subject line.
- 3) Signature blocks placed above the closing phrase.
- 4) Mixed line spacing within the same letter.
- 5) Inconsistent indentation or tab spacing.

Interview data confirmed that staff often relied on random online examples, leading to inconsistent and nonstandard formatting practices. The findings indicate a clear lack of reference templates and training, causing formatting errors to be replicated across documents.

3. Limited Access to Reliable Guidelines

The analysis showed that administrative personnel had very limited access to reliable writing guidelines, which significantly affected the accuracy and consistency of their English formal letters. None of the institutions provided official manuals, style guides, or standardized English templates. As a result, staff relied on three primary sources when drafting letters: unverified internet examples, old institutional letters, and personal assumptions. These sources were inconsistent and often inaccurate, causing errors to be repeated across documents.

A majority of participants explained that they depended on random examples found online, many of which were informal, outdated, or unrelated to academic administrative correspondence. This led to recurring mistakes such as incorrect salutations, inconsistent block formatting, and improper closing statements. Old internal letters, used as secondary references, also contained pre-existing errors meaning that outdated or incorrect formatting was continually reproduced. In cases where no reference was available, staff created their own versions, resulting in improvised spacing, uneven alignment, and misplaced letter components.

The distribution of reference sources used by participants is illustrated below.

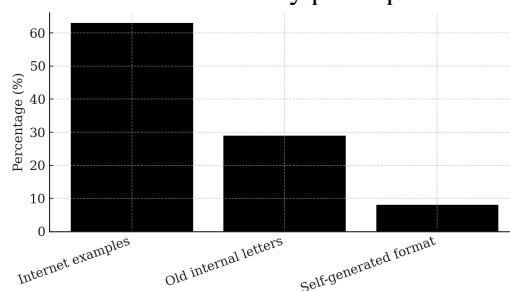


Figure 2. Sources Used by Participants When Drafting Letters

Organizational Challenges

1. Insufficient Training Opportunities

Findings indicate that administrative personnel rarely receive structured training in English formal letter writing. Participants repeatedly stated that institutional training programs are generally prioritized for faculty, leaving administrative staff to develop their skills independently. One participant explained:

“During my time working here, I’ve never joined a training session specifically for English formal letters. Usually, the training is for lecturers, not us.”

This lack of training directly affected writing quality. Staff demonstrated low confidence, relied heavily on online translation tools, and showed limited understanding of formal conventions, such as appropriate tone, formal expressions, and standardized letter structure. Document analysis confirmed these issues: several letters contained phrasing that clearly originated from literal translation, such as “We ask your agree” and “For your attention, we thank you,” both of which are unnatural in English. Participants also reported that the few training sessions they had attended were not relevant. As one interviewee stated:

“There was training before, but it only covered basic grammar. It didn’t show us how to write an actual formal letter.”

As a result, administrative personnel lacked both the technical skills and linguistic awareness needed to produce professional English correspondence.

2. Heavy Workload and Time Constraints

Participants consistently reported that their high workload significantly affected the accuracy and clarity of the letters they produced. Many explained that they often had to prepare English letters quickly, alongside multiple other administrative duties. One participant stated:

“Sometimes I have to make a letter in just a few minutes, so there’s no time to check it again. The priority is just to finish it.”

Time pressure led to more frequent grammatical mistakes, unclear sentences, missing salutations or attachment notes, and inconsistent formatting. Document analysis showed that several letters lacked subject lines or used different formats for letters of the same type. This pattern suggests that staff often reused old templates even flawed ones to meet deadlines.

Overall, the findings confirm that writing challenges arise not only from linguistic limitations but also from demanding work conditions that prevent careful review and refinement.

3. Absence of a Proofreading Mechanism

None of the institutions had a formal proofreading procedure for English letters. As a result, letters were typically sent without any quality review, allowing errors to go unnoticed and repeatedly reproduced. One participant explained:

“Once the letter is printed and signed, no one checks the English. If it looks okay, we just send it.”

Because no feedback was provided, staff had no opportunity to correct or improve their writing practices. Document analysis further validated this: identical errors appeared across multiple letters, such as incorrect prepositions, repetitive sentence structure problems, and nonstandard closings like “Best regard”. Another participant noted:

“Even if something is wrong, no one tells us. So I just keep doing it the same way next time.”

The absence of proofreading and feedback mechanisms contributed directly to the persistence of linguistic and formatting errors, and prevented the institution from improving its international correspondence standards.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that administrative personnel encounter substantial linguistic, technical, and organizational challenges when drafting formal English letters. These results demonstrate that difficulties are not merely individual language issues but systemic institutional ones. They align with the principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which argue that professional communication requires specialized linguistic competence beyond general English proficiency (Hyland, 2022). The vocabulary limitations, grammar inconsistencies, and literal translation patterns observed match those found in studies of formal English writing in non-native contexts (e.g., “Challenges in Writing Formal English Letters among Native Filipino Speakers,” 2021). In this regard, the study confirms that administrative writing differs from general writing and demands targeted instruction.

The technical problems identified in the documents, including inconsistent formatting, misplaced structural elements, and irregular date conventions, correspond to earlier research emphasizing that professional correspondence must follow standardized structural norms to maintain clarity and organizational credibility. Prior genre studies note that professional documents are governed by specific conventions that shape their communicative effectiveness (Bhatia, 2014). Similarly, (Whitemell, 2014) argues that deviations from accepted business-writing formats can reduce the perceived professionalism of an institution. These findings also align with (Al Fadda, 2012), who highlights that structural and formatting inconsistencies negatively affect readability and overall communication quality. Thus, the formatting challenges identified in this study reflect broader issues documented in earlier literature on the importance of adhering to established conventions in professional writing.

Organizational factors also crucially shape writing outcomes. Findings that staff had minimal training, heavy workloads, and no proofreading systems reinforce the idea that professional writing is embedded in workplace culture and resource allocation (Sun, 2019). For example, participants reported that tight deadlines prevented revision and increased error rates. This corresponds with research demonstrating that time pressure and inadequate supervision lead to persistent writing mistakes in workplace communication (Moore & Tenney, 2012). The study extends the literature by situating administrative correspondence within an organizational framework rather than treating it as an isolated language problem.

This study makes a novel contribution by integrating the linguistic, technical, and organizational dimensions into a cohesive framework. While previous research often addressed these elements separately, the present study illustrates how they interact and reinforce one another, resulting in compounding writing challenges. For instance, technical errors (such as wrong format) stem from both vocabulary and organizational constraints (like no training). This comprehensive view not only advances theoretical understanding of workplace writing but also offers practical implications: improving administrative writing requires training, structural reform, templates, and quality control procedures rather than just language instruction.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The sample was limited to a few institutions in one region, which may reduce the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should include a broader range of institutions across different regions or countries and compare administrative writing practices across organizational types. Additional investigation could examine the impact of digital writing tools, supervisory feedback systems, or targeted interventions on administrative writing performance. By doing so, future research can build a stronger evidence base for improving institutional correspondence.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the challenges faced by administrative personnel in drafting formal English letters are shaped by interconnected linguistic, technical, and organizational factors, revealing that administrative writing is a specialized genre requiring targeted instruction and institutional support rather than general language proficiency alone. By synthesizing the study's objectives and findings, it becomes clear that limited vocabulary mastery, recurring grammatical and formatting errors, insufficient training, and the absence of standardized templates or proofreading systems collectively hinder the production of professional correspondence. The research contributes to both theory and practice by highlighting the need for genre-specific training and systematic administrative frameworks, offering insights that extend existing ESP literature and emphasize the institutional dimension of writing competence. Although limited by its regional scope and qualitative design, this study opens opportunities for future research to examine broader contexts, develop intervention models, and explore digital or AI-assisted tools to enhance administrative writing quality.

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