

## Lexical Density and Politeness Strategies in EFL Writings

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### Abstract

*This study adopts a corpus-based analytical approach to assess lexical density and politeness strategies performance in the writings of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduate students. The data consists of 30 job application letters produced by university students enrolled in Master One, IT Management. AntConc tool was used to compute the lexical density relying on Ure's (1971) method. Besides, Brown and Levinson's (1987) coding scheme of politeness was employed to trace the pragmatic strategies used by non-native English speakers in the target language. The findings revealed that the participants' letters are commonly categorized as Not Dense, indicating a low language proficiency. As for the performance of politeness strategies, the results suggest that students lacked awareness regarding the use of some necessary positive and negative strategies and insufficient attention has been paid to the pragmatic aspect of their texts. The linguistic and pedagogical implications of this paper will be significantly pertinent to EFL and ESL academic writing instructors, curriculum designers, and language teaching researchers.*

*Keywords: application letters, EFL students, lexical density, politeness strategies*

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### 1. Introduction

For the past three decades, Writing Business letters has been a crucial field of interest in applied linguistics, notably in bilingual education (Bhatia, 1993; Bruthiaux, 1996; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Al-Ali, 2004; Garzone, 2018; Saleem et al., 2019). The purpose of this document is to persuade responsible authorities to accept the writer's application (Callaghan, 2004.). It helps the prospective employer to know more about the candidate's various qualifications and how well they correspond to the professional requirements of the applied position. Besides, it reveals the extent to which the applicants succeeded in promoting themselves through strengthening their positions in the letters (Haji

2023a). The application letter is particularly significant as it expands and highlights the different academic and professional skills mentioned in the candidates' resumes, hence establishing "a stronger ethical appeal than the depersonalized resume achieves" (Devitt et al, 2004, p. 483). Despite the increasing interest in the rhetorical and linguistic investigation of self-promotional genres, there is still limited analytical work on lexical density and politeness strategies in EFL writings, more particularly in the Tunisian context. As such, this study intends to contribute to a better understanding of the linguistic and pragmatic strategies used by graduate Management students in their business letters.

Asher (2000) argued that candidates are supposed to include, in their cover letters, their academic and professional qualifications, highlight their abilities through their relevant experiences, explain the reasons behind their application for the target job, and state their possible contribution to the company. In other words, candidates should be able to engage in impression management (Bright & Hutton, 2000), in the sense that they need to employ variant pragmatic and linguistic tactics to persuade the prospective hirer of the suitability and the significance of the applicants' qualifications and their typical correspondence to the requirements of the applied positions (Gilsdorf, 1986). As such the cover letter has both informative and persuasive functions

With the increasing competition for students to secure jobs, the ability to write a successful application letter that can capture the reader's attention and help them to stand out of the crowd has become a challenging issue for candidates, especially in EFL contexts where applicants are supposed to understand particular functions of specific genres in a foreign language (Taillefer, 2005). Indeed, the candidates' unfamiliarity with the generic conventions and the expectations of the discourse community are key factors in the efficiency of the application letter. Reichelt, Lefkowitz, Rinnert, and Schultz (2012) asserted that EFL students assume that writing in a different language consists merely of the acquisition of the appropriate vocabulary and grammar rules and applying them in the target language. Yet, writing in EFL contexts is more complex than that in the sense that cognitive matters, including culture, the perception of the writing tasks in the foreign language, and the high influence of the First language (L1) all complicate the writing process (Reichelt, 2011). Indeed, non-native writers are expected to master a wide range of competencies that include grammar but also cognitive awareness of the genre's rhetoric, register, and linguistic strategies. As such, the lack of consideration of the genre's socio-pragmatic and linguistic aspects on the one hand and the audience's expectations on the other leads to serious communication issues.

Bhatia's (1993) seminal work on job application letters inspired a substantial number of subsequent studies in this genre. There was a ubiquitous focus on the investigation of the rhetorical structure as well as the linguistic features employed by applicants in different cultural and academic backgrounds (cite authors, Haji, 2023a). The move structure analysis allows researchers to have a wider insight into the way writers attempt to achieve the genre's communicative purpose and meet the audience's expectations in a polite and tactful way. However, no previous attempt has been made to investigate the job application letters in terms of lexical density and politeness strategies in the Tunisian context and relate these aspects with the graduate learners' linguistic proficiency. As such, this paper intends to fill in this gap by providing valuable insights concerning the lexical and pragmatic aspects of a significant academic genre, the genre of application letters, which is rich in interactional features that describe the way students from a specific cultural and academic background position themselves as potential members of a discourse community. In fact, this study examines the lexical density in graduate EFL students' application letters. Additionally, it aims to investigate the main politeness strategies employed by EFL learners in their cover letters.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Lexical Density**

A significant step towards assessing the students' vocabulary and written performance in academic and professional contexts is measuring their lexical richness, that is, lexical diversity, lexical density, and

lexical sophistication. Lexical density was first introduced by Ure (1971) to refer to the ratio of lexical words to the total number of words in both spoken and written language forms. That is, it is the amount of information-carrying words as a part of the total number of words in a given text. This concept has gained considerable attention from various linguists such as Halliday, who defined it as “the density with which the information is presented” (1989, p. 62). Then, Halliday and Marter (1993) offered a more refined conceptualization of this term arguing that it is “the density of information in any passage of text according to how tightly the lexical items (content words) have been packed into the grammatical structure” (p. 76). Within the same line of research, Johansson (2008) considered lexical density as a useful concept in textual analysis where “a notion of information package” can be derived from texts using this measure. That is, the more content words are found in the text, the more information can be derived from that text. More recently, Lee (2019) provided a more comprehensive definition of lexical density, asserting that it is considered a measuring method to assess the learner’s ability to impart meaningful ideas through the practical use of more content words, that is, richer vocabulary.

As can be inferred, all the definitions provided do not radically deviate from that of Ure’s (1971). In fact, lexical density is considered as a statistical measure of used vocabulary and it can simply be defined as the extent to which a given text is lexically rich and “informative” in terms of ideas and meanings. Lexical density is generally affected by various factors, namely writing proficiency, subject familiarity, and the genre’s communicative purpose.

A number of empirical studies have been conducted on lexical density. Indeed, measuring vocabulary performance has been, and still is, a pertinent field of research in the ESL and EFL settings. Kondal (2015), for instance, conducted research on the effects of lexical density on language performance. The findings revealed that proficiency in the written scripts indicates lexical variety and density, which play a considerable role in language performance. Besides, he argued that lexical density improves the learners’ linguistic proficiency levels. These levels may be distinguished based on the lexical density and diversity observed in their writings. This implies that more emphasis should be put on enhancing vocabulary teaching and learning. Similarly, Sayarif and Putri (2018) investigated the students’ writing performance in academic texts through the analysis of lexical density. The data consisted of extracts from the introduction section of thesis proposals produced by English graduate students. The findings revealed that the lexical density of the participants’ writings is categorized as less dense. Additionally, it was found that students still have limited knowledge and awareness of the appropriate language used in writing in academic settings. The study was concluded by recommending inserting the issue of lexical density in the academic curriculum of higher education. As for the genre of job application letters, Dela Rosa, Linato, and Dela Cruz (2015) conducted a comparative analysis of 30 Filipino and American letters in terms of move structure, politeness strategies, and lexical density. The results indicated that regarding the corpora readability, measures of lexical density demonstrated that American cover letters are more intelligible than Filipino ones. Filipino applicants tend to write shorter but more lexically dense sentences compared with the longer but less lexically dense sentences of American candidates. As with previous studies, this research recommends that lexical density and vocabulary learning should be incorporated into technical composition courses to enhance the learners’ writing skills and proficiency.

## **2.2 Politeness Strategies**

The most influential theory of politeness is that of Brown and Levinson (1987) who linked the concept of politeness to the notion of face which they define as the public self-image that a person wants to claim for himself and “something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.61). This model suggests that individuals have two aspects of the face, which may be inevitably threatened when they interact. The positive face reflects the need to be appreciated and approved and it intends to emphasize the common goals and expectations shared in common between the addresser and the addressee. Yet, the negative face is deemed as the basic claim for territories and personal preserves. That is, it highlights the addressee’s freedom of action and freedom of imposition without being

hindered by others. In the course of verbal communications, participants attempt to build and maintain their faces while paying attention not to threaten or damage their partners' faces. What makes this balance specifically challenging for non-native English writers and speakers is the nuances of certain linguistic items that shape 'face', which may vary considerably from one culture to another and from one language to another.

Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, a wide range of (ESP) studies have examined how non-native writers dealt with politeness strategies in various genres, notably Business letters or job application letters. Vergaro (2004), for instance, explored sales promotion letters produced in Italian and English. The findings demonstrated the presence of certain variations especially at the level of modality and politeness strategies' use. These linguistic differences were explained by the cultural factors assuming that a genre is dependent on the socio-cultural environment in which it is used (Swales, 1990). In the same vein, Ghezjeljeh and Moini (2013) conducted research on cover letters written in Persian and English. The study revealed that the English letters appeared longer than the Persian ones, included more flexible formulaic expressions, proved a lesser use of formal language, and offered more contributive information about offers. Further, another empirical study was carried out by Hou (2013) in which he analyzed English application letters collected from Taiwanese and Canadian college hospitality majors and discovered that the former tend to employ positive politeness strategies twice as frequently as the latter. The aforementioned studies offered valuable insights concerning pragmatic tactics and politeness strategies in different contexts and with various participants. Nonetheless, the generalization of the obtained findings is still questionable as they basically relied on a small data size and they also lacked Qualitative interviews with students and professionals which may be helpful for (ESP) curriculum designers and writing practitioners.

### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1 Corpus

Considering the objectives of the present research, a quantitative study was carried out. Apuke (2017) claimed that "a quantitative research method deals with quantifying variables to get results. It involves the utilization and analysis of numerical data using specific statistical techniques" (p. 41). Hence, this approach will facilitate the analysis, description, and interpretation of the results related to the linguistic strategies employed in this research. The following data were collected and linguistically investigated (see table data description).

**Table 1.** Description of the collected corpus.

| <b>Application letters of EFL learners</b> |               |
|--|---------------|
| <b>Discipline</b>                          | IT Management |
| <b>Total n of ALs</b>                      | 30            |
| <b>Total n of words</b>                    | 4.950         |
| <b>Average of length</b>                   | 165           |
| <b>Range</b>                               | 107- 223      |

A set of 30 job application letters written in English and produced by EFL Tunisian graduate students from the Higher Institute of Business Administration of Sfax (a public university) were randomly collected. All the applicants who were included in this study were native speakers of Arabic and were officially enrolled in Master One in the IT Management department. 64% were female students, whereas 36% were males. Their ages ranged from 22 to 29. All the letters were obtained from applicants who successfully got their BA in Management. All the participants have had at least 10 years of formal instruction in the English language in both secondary and tertiary education in Tunisia.

During a writing session, the candidates were asked to write a job application letter applying for a job offer and they were informed as well that their writings will be used for research studies so as to

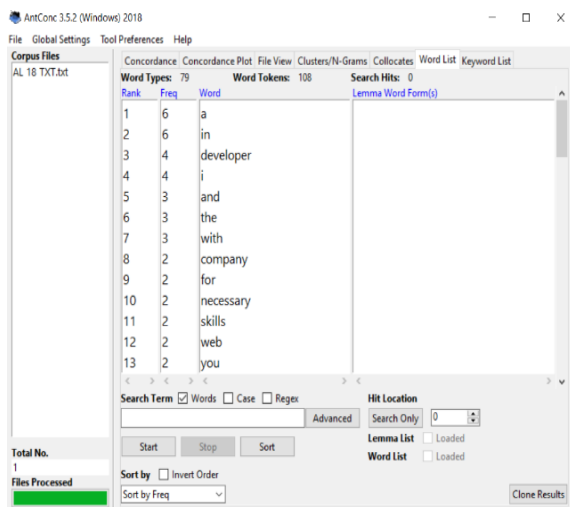
assess their linguistic performance in academic genres and more specifically in the genre of job application letters. The time given to accomplish this task was 60 minutes without offering any guiding instructions regarding the linguistic features or lexical items to be included in this genre.

### 3.2 Analytical Procedure

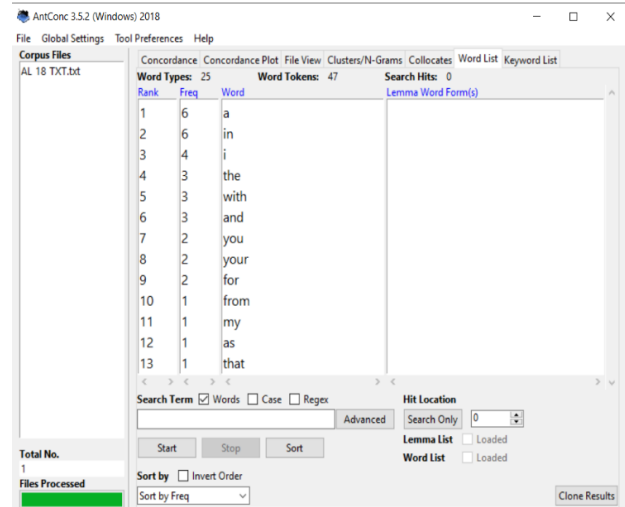
After obtaining the data, all the letters were scanned and converted into PDF files. Then, they were sampled and coded from 1 to 30. Any confidential information revealing the applicant’s name, age, address, or any personal detail about the student’s private life was removed, assuming the “protection of individuals from harm through guarantees of confidentiality, anonymity, and informed written consent” (Walsh& Downe, 2006, p. 116). In the second stage, to facilitate the lexical density analysis and the data processing, all the samples were converted into TXT files so that they could be quantitatively analyzed separately by the AntConc version (3.5.2) program which is considered one of the most reliable and commonly used text analysis tool in corpus-based research studies. Further, this software served to provide reliable statistics regarding the corpus’s total number of words, functional words and lexical words. Finally, all the obtained findings were tabulated into Excel tables in order to calculate the correlations. To ensure the accuracy of the results, all the letters were checked for spelling mistakes, punctuation, etc., for appropriate word counting.

Lexical density consists in calculating the number of lexical items (nouns, verbs, adjectives and some adverbs) in a text (Johansson, 2009). A text is considered as lexically dense if it includes a large number of lexical features (Gregori-Signes & Clavel-Arroitia, 2015) in relation to the total number of tokens. To measure the lexical density of the letters, the software was provided with the collected letters with the list of function words added in the program options. The list of function words employed in the present study is the one proposed by Nation (2002) which is comprised of 320 function words. As such, AntConc will provide the total number of tokens as well as the total number of function words in each application letter. Eventually, the content words will be calculated by subtracting the number of function words from the total number of words in the corpus. The obtained findings are tabulated in an Excel file to finally measure the lexical density of the corpus under investigation according to Ure’s (1971) method. As it was argued by Hussein and Abdulkadhim (2020) “Many corpus-based studies use Ure’s method, for it can be applied to large amounts of corpora” (p. 5).

$$\text{Lexical Density (Ure's Formula)} = \frac{\text{Number of Content Words}}{\text{Total Number of Words}} \times 100$$



**Figure 1:** Counting the numbers of function words



**Figure 2:** Counting the numbers of content words

As for the politeness strategies investigation, this paper relied on the coding scheme developed by Levinson & Brown (1987). In fact, this model suggests two dimensions of the face; one is positive, and the other is negative, which will be analyzed in more detail in the Results and Discussion section. Levinson and Brown defined the positive face as the “individual’s wants of admiration and approval” towards the speaker and the negative one as the individual’s “wants of freedom of imposition” (p. 61). To analyze the graduate applicants’ use of both negative and positive politeness strategies, a close reading of all the samples was done. At an early stage, the statements expressing politeness were carefully identified and marked on the samples. Then, they were categorized into positive and negative strategies based on the suggested model. Politeness strategies were examined via the investigation of the students’ linguistic choices and pragmatic interpretations (Al-Ali, 2006; Thawee Wong, 2006; Upton & Connor, 2001). At the final stage, the politeness strategies’ frequency and percentage were analyzed and discussed based on the proposed model. The analysis was based on the exploration of the sentences that matched the different types of politeness strategies through the identification of politeness markers. That is, the strategies which were not reflected in the data under investigation were dropped from the categorization scheme and the linguistic analysis was limited only to the strategies appearing in the corpus. The results of the positive and negative politeness strategies used by EFL graduate students in their job application letters are illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Positive and Negative politeness strategies in EFL job application letters.

| Positive Politeness strategies | Negative politeness strategies |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Expressing interest         | 1. Giving deference            |
| 2. Being optimistic            | 2. Minimizing imposition       |
| 3. Glorifying the addressee    |                                |

### 3.3. Validity and Reliability

Since the identification of the linguistic strategies is culturally dependent and may be subjective and as it was argued by Oliver (2010), validity is a primary requirement for all types of research, two experts in the field of lexical complexity and pragmatic strategies were consulted to ensure the validity as well as the reliability of the preliminary findings. The first expert, a full professor from the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of Tunis and an Ex MA supervisor, was kindly asked to check the investigation of the lexical density found in the students’ application letters. There was an 87% agreement rate in identifying the politeness strategies investigated by the researcher. There were also some variations which were discussed and agreed upon. The second specialist, a full professor from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sfax, Tunisia, checked the validity of the identification as well as the categorization of the linguistic strategies employed by the EFL learners and discussed minor variations regarding certain negative politeness strategies. He was asked to indicate the words/ phrases that influenced his negative or positive evaluation. In both phases, the experts offered insightful comments and convincing modifications which were taken into consideration.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Lexical Density

This paper traced lexical density, as a strong index of dense academic writing performance, in a data set of job application letters produced by graduate EFL master students from the Higher Institute of Business Administration of Sfax, Tunisia. Lexical density is linguistically defined as “the proportion of lexical words found in a text” (Read, 2000, p. 203), revealing the information content of a text (Biber et al, 2012). The length of letters ranged between 107 - 258 words.

Table 3 presents the statistical data about the lexical density score found in 30 graduate application letters. Based on the calculations provided by AntConc software, the result in Table 3 indicates that the

lexical density index ranges between 42% and 61% with an average of 48%. It can also be concluded that the students' letters, irrespective of their total number of words, are characterized by a relatively low academic lexical background. This implies that the learners' vocabulary profile in the target language, English, is limited and still at a basic stage.

**Table 3:** Lexical density results in students' application letters

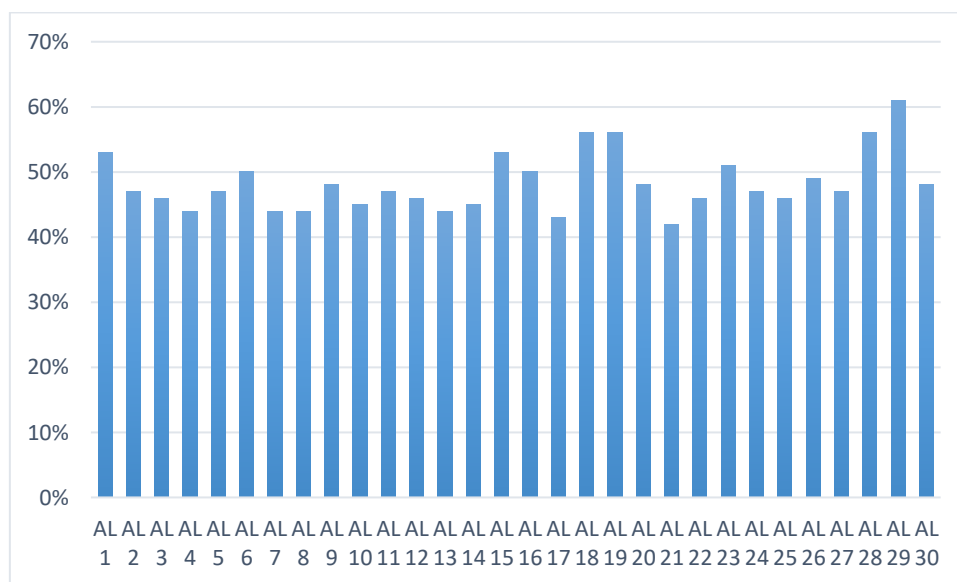
| <b>ALS</b>   | <b>Total n of words</b> | <b>Function words</b> | <b>Content words</b> | <b>Lexical Density</b> | <b>Interpretation</b> |
|--------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| AL 1         | 167                     | 78                    | 89                   | 53%                    | Less Dense            |
| AL 2         | 128                     | 67                    | 61                   | 47%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 3         | 129                     | 69                    | 60                   | 46%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 4         | 137                     | 76                    | 61                   | 44%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 5         | 135                     | 71                    | 64                   | 47%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 6         | 120                     | 59                    | 61                   | 50%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 7         | 166                     | 92                    | 74                   | 44%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 8         | 183                     | 101                   | 82                   | 44%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 9         | 171                     | 88                    | 83                   | 48%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 10        | 141                     | 77                    | 64                   | 45%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 11        | 155                     | 82                    | 73                   | 47%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 12        | 144                     | 77                    | 67                   | 46%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 13        | 125                     | 69                    | 56                   | 44%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 14        | 160                     | 88                    | 72                   | 45%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 15        | 110                     | 51                    | 59                   | 53%                    | Less Dense            |
| AL 16        | 258                     | 127                   | 131                  | 50%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 17        | 135                     | 76                    | 59                   | 43%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 18        | 108                     | 47                    | 61                   | 56%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 19        | 107                     | 47                    | 60                   | 56%                    | Less Dense            |
| AL 20        | 185                     | 95                    | 90                   | 48%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 21        | 182                     | 104                   | 78                   | 42%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 22        | 124                     | 66                    | 58                   | 46%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 23        | 193                     | 93                    | 100                  | 51%                    | Less Dense            |
| AL 24        | 223                     | 116                   | 107                  | 47%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 25        | 121                     | 65                    | 56                   | 46%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 26        | 168                     | 85                    | 83                   | 49%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 27        | 107                     | 60                    | 47                   | 47%                    | Not Dense             |
| AL 28        | 144                     | 63                    | 81                   | 56%                    | Less Dense            |
| AL 29        | 159                     | 63                    | 96                   | 61%                    | Dense                 |
| AL 30        | 205                     | 106                   | 99                   | 48%                    | Not Dense             |
| <b>Mean</b>  | 165                     | 77                    | 87                   | 48%                    | Not Dense             |
| <b>Total</b> | 4950                    | 2312                  | 2638                 | -                      | -                     |

Note:

- From 41% to 50% is considered to be Not Dense.*
- From 51% to 60% is considered to be Less Dense.*
- From 61% to 70% is considered to be Dense.*
- Above 70% is considered to be Very Dense.*

Higher lexical density is clearly noticed in the students' letters where the content words are more than function words. For instance, if we take the example of AL 29, where lexical density reached the highest score, 61%, it can be observed that the difference between them is statistically significant. This is also applicable to AL 28, where lexical density scored 56%. The software statistics illustrate a considerable gap between the content words and function words, 81 out of 63. On the contrary, in the other letters where the lexical density rate is low, such as the case of AL 27, it is clearly noticeable that the total number of function words outweighs the number of content words, as it is illustrated in Table 3. This suggests that the students successfully made extensive use of more diverse lexical word classes in

their writings instead of relying simply on the use of nouns. The same interpretation can be done for the writings which were categorized as **Less Dense**, where the content words overweight the function words. 23 out of 30, that is 76.6% of the applicants' letters are considered as **Not Dense**, whereas only 6 letters are **Less Dense** and one letter is **Dense**.



**Figure 3:** Lexical density in EFL application letters

An overall linguistic evaluation of the collected corpus demonstrates that the letters did not reveal a high level of lexical density, and thus, they may be considered sparse, where the majority of students made extensive use of function words at the expense of content words. This is in accordance with the linguistic rule of language acquisition. As it was argued by Halliday (2002), lexical density can be employed to assess the text's levels in its oral and written forms as it serves to reveal how informative the text is. In other words, the text's formality depends on the proportion of the lexical words. A good writing quality may reveal that learners with a broader vocabulary dictionary may have a higher level of English language proficiency, as discussed by Kim (2014) and Lemmouh (2008). This phenomenon may be ascribed to the candidates' limited vocabulary and linguistic repertoire, which affected their writing performance and made their letters less informative, as lexical density is considered "a high information load" (Halliday, 1989, p. 62). In fact, the students' language proficiency is commonly affected by their lexical proficiency which has a central role in the learners' linguistic performance. It is deemed as a basis for communicating either in verbal or non-verbal forms. On the other part, EFL students enrolled in graduate master programs are expected to produce well-structured and contributive texts where they are supposed to use the appropriate vocabulary for the topic and also select precise items to orient their ideas. Besides, the noticeable lack of lexical density in this corpus could be explained by the genre's specific features which have a considerable role in affecting the text's lexical density and can influence the writer's choice of lexical words. Indeed, the nature of the self-promotional genres, such as the case of the job application letters, is characterized by the intensive use of repetitive formal phrases to express politeness and show deference which makes the writings more monotonous and less cohesive. This is in accordance with Biber's (1988) theory of Type-Token Ratio (TTR) index of lexical variation, assuming that the appearance of repeated words leads to low density of content. Heng, Pu, and Liu 's (2022) research also confirmed the influence of genre on the lexical density by revealing that the lexical density's rate was higher in argumentative compositions than in the expository ones, which are cognitively less demanding.

Accordingly, it could be inferred that graduate students still have a limited consciousness of the language used in writing a successful application letter for a job advertisement. This view is confirmed by earlier studies, which proved that non-native English learners struggle to find the necessary required vocabulary in various academic writing activities (Kroll, 1991; Mukattash, 2003; Ullah et al., 2019; Bacha, 2020e). Many English learners faced problems in writing and struggled with their lack of knowledge about writing (Fauzan et al., 2020, 2022). Further, producing high-quality job application letters is still a challenging and demanding task, especially for novice students, as it requires not only appropriate linguistic use but also an adequate vocabulary repertoire. Thus, the conclusion that could be inferred is that EFL IT Management learners lack an extensive lexical background related to the target genre and a clear familiarity with the genre's requirements. In other words, they do not have sufficient experience in presenting "a well-used vocabulary text" (Laufer & Nation, 1995). The implication of this research is that EFL learners need to give special attention to the linguistic aspect of their writings in general and to such self-promotional genres in particular.

Another central factor that may significantly contribute to the students' low density is the interference of their mother tongue and their clear tendency to the literal translation from Arabic to English while producing a piece of writing. In fact, a proficient academic style is supposed to be direct, explicit, and straightforward (Day, 1988). Yet, the data analysis revealed that Tunisian graduate students commonly relied on an implicit, indirect style as well as heavy use of content words, which led to a decrease in the lexical density rate in their letters. This view was confirmed by Wallwork (2011), who argued that the indirect style and the preference for long sentences increase the score of function words, and as such, the lexical density decreases.

Thus, it can be deduced that lexical density has an effective role in enhancing linguistic performance among EFL students. Their language needs to be richer and more varied in lexis. This implies that more emphasis needs to be devoted to the teaching of vocabulary in EFL and ESL contexts. More importantly, the pedagogic methods of teaching vocabulary are supposed to be changed from receptive to productive. Indeed, students are supposed to learn new lexical items and should be encouraged to deliberately apply them in their academic writings. This approach was confirmed by Papadopoulou (2007), who carried out research on the effect of vocabulary teaching on the vocabulary knowledge and writing performance of undergraduate learners. She found out that vocabulary instruction has a central function in improving the students' writing quality and enhancing a larger use of lexical items in different contexts.

It is worth mentioning also that the length of the text does not affect its lexical density. That is, the letter's length does not determine its high density or the high number of words does not signify that a letter can get higher density. The findings indicated that the longest letter (205 words), had a lower density rate compared to shorter letters.

The statistically noticeable low lexical density could be attributed to the English language content taught to EFL learners all through their academic levels. The main teaching focus used to turn around the grammatical and syntactic accuracy of the sentence/ text. However, it seems obvious that more emphasis should be put on the mechanics of writing and the semantic aspect of the text, focusing mainly on the students' lexical progress and richness in ESP classes. This would enhance the learners' linguistic competence and enable them to become more aware and familiar with the English text's lexical and syntactic requirements and peculiarities.

Overall, it may be inferred that the lexical density scores of the participants in this corpus-based lexical analysis are just below the average range, implying that non-English students are still unable to master the technique of using variant vocabulary and compound words, with few exceptions. They simply resorted to the preference of simple words, limited lexis and plain style to the fact that lowered the variables of lexical density, thus resulting in poor proficiency level. \*Evans and Greens (2007) argued in their research on Language that lexical issues, more particularly, represent a major obstacle for ESL learners in academic writings. The majority of students, in their first experience of academic writing,

tend to be unaware of the common features of the target genre, resulting in their total focus on content at the expense of language.

## 4.2. Politeness Strategies

Dealing with self-promotional genres, such as the case of job application letters, the majority of applicants find themselves facing an academic challenge to maintain a certain balance between portraying themselves as “perfect” applicants and presenting themselves as modest and suitable to the target position. In fact, the appropriate use of both positive and negative politeness strategies is certainly challenging in one’s first language, let alone in an ESL or EFL context. Accordingly, the efficient use of politeness strategies may help them achieve this balance in their letters. In the present research, politeness strategies were investigated through the exploration of linguistic choices and pragmatic interpretations (Al-Ali, 2006; Thaweewong, 2006; Upton & Connor, 2001). The analysis revealed that the 30 applicants employed 3 positive politeness strategies, namely, Expressing Interest, Being Optimistic, and Glorifying the addressee, and only two negative politeness strategies, which are Giving Deference and Minimizing Imposition.

### 4.2.1. Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness strategies have an efficient role in establishing good interpersonal relationships. As argued by Holtgraves (2002) “the essence of positive politeness is the staking of a claim for some degree of familiarity with one’s interlocutor. It is thus the language of intimacy” (p. 46). The obtained findings indicated that graduate students employed two types of politeness strategies to persuade their readers of their suitability for the target position. The results revealed the presence of a total of 79 instances of specific politeness strategies, including 41 positive politeness strategies and 38 negative politeness strategies as tabulated in Table 4. It can also be noticed that EFL learners resorted to the use of more positive politeness strategies than negative ones. Additionally, graduate students aimed at minimizing the FTA with their potential employers through the intensive use of positive politeness strategies in their application letters.

**Table 4:** Positive politeness strategies in EFL students’ job application letters

| Positive Politeness Strategies | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Expressing Interest            | 20        | 66%        |
| Being Optimistic               | 11        | 36%        |
| Glorifying the Addressee       | 10        | 33%        |

### Expressing Interest

According to Levinson and Brown (1987), one of the most prominent elements utilized in positive politeness interactions is *showing interest*. It is commonly employed in self-promotional genres such as job and university application letters when candidates clearly demonstrate their interest in the desired position or field. In the analyzed corpus, and as illustrated in Table 4, 66% of the graduate students used this strategy in their application letters. In fact, 20 applicants (out of 30) announced their high interest in the applied position from the opening of the letter. Hence, they pave the way to legitimately express their desire for application and consideration by the prospective recruiter. This strategy could be illustrated in the following statements:

*I am sending this letter to express my sincere interest in the software engineer job advertisement posted on your company’s website [AL 1].*

*I am highly interested in your advertisement... [AL 8].*

According to previous studies on job application letters (Khan & Tin, 2012; Maier, 1992; Upton & Connor, 2001), Expressing interest is generally realized in the opening phrases of self-promotional genres, as they introduce the writer’s main claim which is offering candidature to the target position.

The linguistic exploration of the corpus revealed that more than half of the EFL students shared the same tendency to initiate their letters with this pragmatic technique. It is commonly achieved by employing clauses and expressions such as the use of intensifiers “very interested”, “so interesting” or lexical items such as “important”, “sincere”, “perfectly” or the inclusion of some verbs like “apply”, “look for”. Other applicants opted to emphasize their intention to apply for the job offer by including some hedging devices in their letters such as “I believe”, “I think”, “certainly” etc. As such, all these students proved a considerable awareness of the importance of the “Expressing interest” technique in convincing their readers of their suitability to the applied position. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that this strategy should be well structured and appropriately presented so that it will not put the applicant “at a disadvantage” by showing a high degree of interest in the position which may threaten the potential recruiter’s positive face (Maier, 1992; Yani, 2015). As a matter of fact, applicants are supposed to express their sincere interest in the target job to their prospective employers without imposing any pressure on their freedom of action. On the other part, it is worth mentioning that approximately one-third of the participants (34%) did not include this strategy in their application letters, which is certainly a high rate. This may be explained by the students’ lack of awareness of the readers’ needs and expectations.

### **Expressing Optimism**

This strategy is deemed by Brown and Levinson (1987) as a positive strategy as it seeks to reduce the distance between the addresser and the addressee by demonstrating that they are equals with shared common goals. In this context, Upton and Connor (2001) argued that “it connects with the addressee’s desire to have his or her needs met and shows the common goals between the addresser and the addressee” (p. 324). In the case of self-promotional genres, optimism is generally realized through the use of the expressions “look forward to” and “would like” as well as the words “hope” and “wish” to emphasize the candidate’s willingness and self-determination to excel in the applied job, which may increase his/ her chances of landing the position. This strategy could be exemplified in the statements below:

*I look forward to hearing from you soon [AL 25].*

*I hope to hear from you soon [AL 24]*

In the course of data analysis, it was noticed that Expressing optimism strategy generally occurs in the closing of the letter where the candidates look forward to being a part of the hiring company. It consists mainly in the writers’ attempts to emphasize their willingness to cooperate while equally expecting a positive response. This may lead to the conclusion that “Expressing optimism” is generally marked by expressions indicating the applicants’ enthusiasm, hope and willingness to cooperate between the addresser and the addressee. This may increase social proximity and contribute to a decreased social distance (Li, 2012). This tactic can be regarded as the applicants’ last chance to win the favor of their prospective employers of their suitability to the target position. In fact, Wang (2005) asserted that closing the letter with an optimistic attitude about the candidature may positively establish goodwill in the prospective recruiter’s mind. As a matter of fact, it can be inferred that some applicants opted to end their application letters politely to create a positive atmosphere and foster a mutual cooperation with their employers. Surprisingly, despite its significance in conferring a favorable impression of the candidate, this strategy tallied lower presence compared to the previous positive politeness strategy as it appeared only in 36% of the corpus, that is 11 letters out of 30. This implies that some of the participants of this study may not recognize the appropriateness of this strategy in particular in such an interactional communicative context. It can be also argued that the remarkable neglect of this step by the majority of EFL applicants may be expected as they are not only unfamiliar but also unaware of the influential function of this step. Indeed, at this level, Tunisian students are still unable to master or utilize the basic pressure tactics in their persuasive writing. However, Li (2011) found that 92.3% of Canadian and 80 % of Taiwanese Hospitality Management majors used this strategy in their English

internship cover letters so as to minimize the distance between the sender and receiver and reach a common ground.

Interestingly, it is worth noting that the candidates' use of positive politeness strategies as far as this strategy is concerned seems to be inappropriate in some cases. Indeed, sometimes, the writers' word choice appears to be too imposing and thus limiting the readers' freedom of action and failing to leave sufficient space for a free decision. Although their statements seem to be grammatically correct, they are situationally inappropriate when submitting a professional candidature as they tend to threaten the reader's negative face. This may be best illustrated in the extract below where the writer is expecting a prompt response from the reader, hence unintentionally failing to preserve a positive face with the addresser. This may be attributed to the fact that Tunisian EFL students did not receive proper teaching of the use of politeness strategies. Hence, the pragmatic failure is likely to occur. Bhatt and Mesthrie (2008) argued that "patterns of expressing politeness, apologies, compliments, and face-saving devices are often carried over from L1 practices to New English" (p. 141).

### **Glorifying the Addressee**

In order to save the reader's positive face, some students included the "Glorifying the addressee" strategy, which consists mainly of praising the prospective recruiter to solicit a positive response. As it was argued by Lakoff (1973), this maxim of politeness is commonly used in different speech acts, assuming that we praise to make our hearer feel good. The analysis of data indicated that around 10 applicants, that is 33%, purposefully included this strategy in their letters as a pressure tactic not only to convince the potential recruiter of their merit of the applied job offer but also to distinguish them from the large pool of applicants, and thus landing the position. This strategy is commonly realized by the use of intensifiers and adjectives expressing the applicants' undue admiration for the target organization as in the examples below:

*I believe that your institution has all the required characteristics that best suit my professional and practical development [AL 20].*

*I will be honored to be accepted in such a successful and well-known company [AL 5].*

Accordingly, this strategy served as a motivational tactic that generally includes flattering expressions centering around eulogizing the company's achievements, values, and culture (Haji, 2023b). This may create a positive impression of the candidates as it reveals their genuine interest in the target position and also their comprehensive knowledge of the organization's details.

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that this strategy was not utilized by English applicants in other contexts. Indeed, Haji (2022) in her pragmatic analysis of politeness strategies of university application essays produced by English (British and American) graduate applicants, found out that students did not employ this strategy in their personal statements in any of the disciplines. This result is also in agreement with Al-Ali (2004)'s research on application letters. Indeed, he observed the presence of this strategy only in the Arab data, whereas the English applicants avoided using this strategy. This divergence might be attributed to certain cultural specificities where the addressers deliberately opt to give praises to their "superiors," offer them compliments, and emphasize admiration for their belonging to get their needs met. In this sense, this strategy will make the addressee more willing to guarantee the applicant's requests and serve "to implement the speaker's goals" (Kasper, 1998, p. 678). As such, in some professional and academic contexts, the applicants' unconsciousness of the cultural norms and variations may be face-damaging and thus may impede their acceptance to the target job.

### **4.2.2. Negative Politeness Strategies**

Brown & Levinson (1987) considered negative politeness as "a redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded" (p. 129). They theorize that this type of politeness is achieved through the addresser's

respect for the addressee while maintaining a social distance to acknowledge the addressee's independence and authority to perform an action.

**Table 5:** Negative politeness strategies in EFL students' job application letters

| Negative Politeness Strategies | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Giving Deference               | 26        | 66%        |
| Minimizing Imposition          | 12        | 36%        |

### Giving Deference

This strategy consists in the fact of being aware of the addressee's authority and position, and it suggests that the speaker is intended to be modest and abase himself while boosting the hearer, thereby promoting the hearer's positive face. In the current study, 86% of the EFL graduate students deployed this strategy in their application letters to show their deference to the addressee and to highlight their consciousness of the prospective employer's power and status. The analysis revealed that the Giving deference strategy is commonly realized by the use of some formulaic and honorific expressions such as "Dear Sir", "Dear ....". By opening their letters with these phrases, it seems clear that the majority of Tunisian applicants shared the same tendency to establish a respectful as well as a distant relation with their addressee, that is positioning themselves in a lower level to maintain a hierarchical relationship with the reader from the beginning of the letter. Indeed, candidates had a significant propensity to humble themselves, whereas raising their readers hence setting up a social distance between them. It is important to note that the students' reliance of the deference expressions is successful, to some extent, as in the self-promotional genres in particular, applicants are expected to use such 'softeners' to mitigate the imposition and maintain the distance from the addressee. Interestingly, the majority of candidates entailed their letters by the extensive use of other formulaic expressions to show the impression of deference to their readers such as the phrases of thanking and gratitude which are best illustrated in the statements below:

*Thank you very much for time, I really appreciate your time and consideration [AL 8].*

*I look forward to hearing from you [AL 14].*

These expressions are considered as the applicants' last effort to get accepted to the applied job. However, not all applicants realized the significance of this strategy in such a contextual communicative interaction. Around 13% of the participants lacked the basic pragmatic and linguistic knowledge of this genre and failed to show a high mastery of politeness strategies, especially when addressing a superior, who is the potential recruiter. This may lead some readers to consider that these letters are organized inappropriately and do not fulfill the communicative purpose of the genre under investigation, a fact that may negatively affect the selection choice (Al-Ali, 2004).

The recurrence of this strategy in the data could be explained by the fact that the majority of applicants were aware of the social hierarchy and the power relations; that is, showing deference and respect to a superior is an integral part of their culture. Nonetheless, this may imply a certain degree of risk in the sense that the overreliance on highly ritualized and formulaic expressions would lead, in some contexts, to threatening the addresser's face by showing a high degree of submission and withdrawal.

### Minimizing Imposition

This strategy refers to the act of reducing or avoiding the imposition on one's decision, authority or preferences on others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It includes respecting the autonomy, choices, and perspectives of individuals or groups without necessarily forcing or burdening them with external influences. Minimizing imposition in job application letters consists of introducing the candidate effectively while respecting the employer's choice, time, and decision. In fact, the ultimate aim of an application letter is to persuade the addressee to recruit the candidate without showing too much

imposition and to valorize the professional competencies expected by the employers. In the present study, this strategy was deployed by 40% of the applicants where they attempted to save the addressee's face by making the least possibility of imposition. To this end, some students resorted to conventional politeness markers such as 'please' to mitigate imposition on their readers and to minimize the threat to the addressee's negative face. Besides, this strategy is commonly realized through the use of deference, apologies, impersonalizing and variant hedging devices (Baresova, 2008) such as 'can', 'would', 'appreciate' etc. in order to offer readers more options and lessen the threat of their requests.

*Please take a moment to review my attached resume. [AL 28]*

*Please go through my CV [AL 29].*

*In the hope of a favorable response, please believe my experience and effort in the last three years to accept me to this job [AL 4].*

In the following extracts, it is noticeable that the weight of imposition is lessened through the use of the 'submissive' stance 'the time you want'. The candidate positions himself below the addressee, indirectly leaving the initiative of any further decision or action to the total freedom of the reader.

Despite the significance of this strategy in the job application letters in acknowledging the distance from the reader, it was not accessible for more than half of the applicants (60%). This may be attributed to the fact that students did not realize the role of this negative strategy in such a professional communicative interaction.

## 5. Conclusion

This study employed a corpus-based analysis to investigate graduate EFL learners' application letters for lexical density. The obtained findings revealed that the participants' lexical density is generally categorized as not dense as they significantly lack an adequate vocabulary repertoire in the target language, English, the fact that affected their linguistic proficiency. The research demonstrated also that the text's length does not necessarily determine the lexical density of the content. This study offers significant insights for ESL and EFL learners by providing evidence for possible improvements in their writing performances in terms of lexical density in self-promotional genres, more particularly. Indeed, EFL teachers are supposed to raise the students' awareness of the significance of having lexically dense writings by providing more practical exercises for foreign language learners to encounter various lexical word classes in different contexts.

As far as the politeness strategies are concerned, the linguistic investigation of the present study has revealed the EFL learners' use of both positive and negative politeness strategies to foster their stances in their application letters and to persuade their prospective employers of their suitability to the target position. Indeed, Tunisian graduate applicants opted to employ two positive politeness strategies mentioned in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of politeness, namely, Expressing Interest and Being Optimistic. The first positive strategy was used by two-thirds of the applicants who opted to declare their sincere interest in the applied position from the opening of their letters and hence tried to legitimately express their willingness for admission by their prospective employers. As for the second positive politeness strategy, Being optimistic, it featured lower frequency as it appeared in only one-third of the analyzed letters. The linguistic investigation also revealed the appearance of another positive politeness strategy, which is not mentioned in Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, which is Glorifying the employer. This strategy was employed by ten candidates who attempted to offer some compliments to the potential employer and intended company. Regarding the negative politeness strategies, EFL Tunisian students deployed two main strategies: Giving Deference and Minimizing imposition. The data analysis exhibited insufficient use of positive and negative politeness strategies. A considerable number of students did not show a minimum awareness of the significance of these pragmatic strategies in such social and professional communicative events. Nonetheless, the analysis indicated that these

strategies were poorly utilized and managed by the candidates the fact that led to pragmatic failures in different letters. In this sense, students were unsuccessful, in some cases, in the use of these strategies. In addition, their writings lacked creativity and successful variation in the use of politeness expressions. Interestingly, this inappropriate use of both positive and negative politeness strategies may be explained by the candidates' unawareness of the effective pragmatic strategies and expressions required in such professional contexts and also their lack of proficiency in the target language. This suggests that it is highly significant for EFL students to be knowledgeable not only of grammar rules and lexical accuracy but also of the appropriate pragmatic structures of the target language. In fact, foreign ESP instructors have to enhance the student's awareness of the sociocultural context of the communicative events and the situational constraints that may determine the effective use of pragmatic strategies. As argued by Yu (2011), tutors should pay close attention to the pragmatic aspect of the genre is as important as the grammatical one since pragmatic problems may significantly influence the addressee's impression regarding the candidate's personality or behavior and thus may affect the overall evaluation of the application. Accordingly, this study may help novice applicants to revisit their use of politeness strategies to suit their own contexts on the one hand and enable English language instructors to provide more comprehensive and inclusive material to better prepare their students for the professional world.

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