

Explicit Essay Structure Instruction and Sentence-Level Errors in Arabic EFL Writing

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Abstract

Arabic-speaking learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) frequently experience difficulties in persuasive writing due to challenges in managing rhetorical organization while maintaining sentence-level grammatical accuracy. These difficulties often manifest in clause-boundary errors such as run-on sentences and comma splices, which are partly influenced by cross-linguistic differences between Arabic and English rhetorical patterns. This study investigates whether explicit instruction in persuasive essay structure can reduce sentence-level errors in Arabic-speaking EFL writing. A quantitative quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design was employed involving 60 intermediate-level Arabic-speaking undergraduates enrolled in an Intensive English Program at a Malaysian private university. Participants received a six-week instructional intervention known as the Essay Structure–Instructional Strategy (ESIS), which explicitly taught the macro-structure of persuasive essays and linked rhetorical components to relevant grammatical forms. Sentence-level errors in persuasive essays were analyzed using a structured error taxonomy and normalized per 100 words. Statistical analysis using a paired-samples t-test revealed a significant improvement in sentence-level accuracy following the intervention. The total number of sentence-structure errors decreased from 457 in the pre-test to 298 in the post-test, representing a 34.79% reduction. The most substantial improvements were observed in comma splices (51.75%) and run-on sentences (37.89%), while more moderate reductions occurred in subject–verb agreement and modifier placement errors. Mean writing scores also increased significantly from 20.50 to 25.80 ($p < .05$). The findings suggest that explicit macro-structural scaffolding can indirectly enhance micro-level grammatical control by reducing cognitive load during writing. The study highlights the pedagogical value of integrating essay organization and grammar instruction in EFL writing pedagogy for Arabic-speaking learners.

Keywords: *Arabic-Speaking EFL Learners; Essay Structure Instruction; Persuasive Writing; Sentence-Level Errors*

Introduction

Writing proficiency is a critical component of academic success in higher education, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), whose achievement is often assessed through argumentative and persuasive writing. Academic writing requires not only grammatical accuracy but also effective organization and adherence to genre conventions (Hyland, 2004). For EFL learners, developing these skills represents both a linguistic and cognitive challenge (Abdelmohsen, 2022).

Despite prolonged exposure to formal English instruction, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in academic writing. These challenges are especially pronounced among Arabic-speaking learners, who frequently struggle with sentence-level accuracy, including grammatical errors and non-target-like sentence structures, as well as with organizing ideas coherently in English (Scott, 1974; Abdel Latif et al., 2024). Such difficulties can negatively affect the clarity and effectiveness of their persuasive writing.

A key source of these problems lies in the linguistic and rhetorical differences between Arabic and English (Kaplan, 1966). At the sentence level, differences in verb tense usage, copular constructions, and word order often result in systematic grammatical errors in English writing (Mukattash, 1986; Ahmed et al., 2020). At the discourse level, Arabic rhetorical patterns tend to favor coordination and circular development of ideas, whereas English academic writing emphasizes linear organization and explicitly structured arguments (Connor, 1996; Ahmed et al., 2023). The transfer of Arabic rhetorical conventions into English persuasive essays may therefore contribute to both organizational weaknesses and sentence-level errors (Hinkel, 2004; Ait Aissa & Chami, 2023).

Traditional writing instruction in many EFL contexts has focused primarily on grammar correction and sentence-level drills (Truscott, 1996). While such approaches may increase learners' awareness of grammatical rules, they often fail to integrate form with rhetorical purpose and overall text organization (Han & Selinker, 1996; Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020). From a cognitive perspective, writing is a demanding activity that requires learners to manage planning, organization, and language production simultaneously. When learners lack control over essay structure, their cognitive resources may be overloaded, resulting in increased sentence-level errors (Al-Hamzi et al., 2023; Kellogg, 1996).

Recent pedagogical approaches suggest that explicit instruction in genre and essay structure can reduce this cognitive burden by providing clear organizational frameworks (Alqasham et al., 2021). In persuasive writing, guidance on the functions of introductions, thesis statements, body paragraphs, and conclusions may allow learners to allocate greater attention to sentence construction and grammatical accuracy. However, despite growing interest in structure-based instruction, empirical evidence examining its direct impact on sentence-level errors—particularly among Arabic-speaking EFL learners—remains limited (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Alrouji, 2020). Most existing studies emphasize overall writing quality or coherence rather than specific grammatical outcomes (Al-Rickaby, 2023).

In the context of digital transformation in education, structured writing instruction can also complement emerging AI-assisted writing tools. Many AI-based platforms provide automated feedback on grammar and sentence structure; however, they often focus primarily on micro-level linguistic accuracy rather than rhetorical organization. Explicit instruction in essay structure equips learners with foundational organizational strategies that can work synergistically with AI-driven feedback systems. By combining human-guided structural instruction with AI-supported error detection, EFL learners may benefit from more comprehensive support in developing both rhetorical coherence and sentence-level accuracy.

Review of Related Literature

Writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is widely recognized as a complex academic skill that integrates linguistic accuracy, cognitive processing, and rhetorical organization (Hyland, 2003). In higher education, academic writing—particularly persuasive and argumentative writing—is a primary means of assessment, and EFL learners often struggle to produce texts that are both grammatically accurate and rhetorically coherent (Betti & Bsharah, 2023). Research indicates that these difficulties cannot be attributed to grammatical knowledge alone but arise from the interaction of language proficiency, task demands, and instructional support (Kellogg, 1996). Among Arabic-speaking EFL learners, persistent sentence-level errors such as subject–verb agreement problems, copula omission, tense misuse, and non-target-like word order have been extensively documented and are commonly linked to first language transfer, particularly the absence of an overt present-tense copula in Arabic (Scott & Tucker, 1974; Mukattash, 1986; Hinkel, 2004). These errors are especially prevalent in persuasive writing, where learners attempt longer and more complex sentences to express logical relationships (Chaudhary & Al Zahrani, 2020).

From a contrastive rhetoric perspective, differences between Arabic and English rhetorical traditions further contribute to learners’ writing difficulties, as Arabic discourse often favors coordination and elaboration, whereas English academic writing emphasizes linear organization and explicit argument structure (Daweli, 2020; Kaplan, 1966; Connor, 1996). Cognitive Load Theory offers an additional explanation by suggesting that uncertainty about text organization increases cognitive demands, leaving fewer resources available for grammatical monitoring (Sweller, 1998; Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009). Genre-based and structure-focused instructional approaches address this issue by making rhetorical conventions explicit and have been shown to improve coherence and overall writing quality (Hyland, 2007; Derakhshan & Karimian Shirejini, 2020). However, despite their documented macro-level benefits, empirical evidence examining whether such instruction leads to reductions in specific sentence-level error types—particularly among Arabic-speaking EFL learners—remains limited (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). The present study addresses this gap by examining the impact of explicit persuasive essay structure instruction on sentence-level errors in Arabic-speaking EFL writing.

This study is informed by process-oriented writing theory and principles of cognitive scaffolding in second language learning. Process writing approaches emphasize the structured development of ideas through stages of planning, drafting, and revision, allowing learners to gradually refine both rhetorical organization and linguistic accuracy. From a cognitive perspective, scaffolding theory suggests that explicit structural guidance can reduce cognitive load during writing tasks. When learners are provided with clear rhetorical frameworks—such as thesis statements, supporting arguments, and counterarguments—they can allocate greater cognitive resources to sentence construction and grammatical accuracy. In this way, macro-level structural instruction may indirectly support improvements in micro-level sentence formation.

Objectives

This study seeks to examine the relationship between explicit instruction in persuasive essay structure and the reduction of sentence-level errors in the writing of Arabic-speaking learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Although many EFL learners possess sufficient vocabulary to convey their ideas, they frequently encounter difficulties in organizing their arguments logically while maintaining grammatical accuracy at the

sentence level. In particular, learners often produce errors involving coordination, subordination, punctuation, and sentence boundaries, which can negatively affect the clarity and coherence of their written arguments. These challenges may be further influenced by rhetorical and syntactic differences between Arabic and English, which can shape learners' writing patterns.

Within this context, the present study focuses on whether providing explicit guidance on the organizational structure of persuasive essays—such as the introduction, thesis statement, supporting arguments, counterarguments, and conclusion—can indirectly improve learners' control over sentence construction. When students are given clear structural frameworks for organizing their ideas, cognitive load during writing may be reduced, allowing them to allocate greater attention to grammatical accuracy and sentence formation. Consequently, the study aims to determine whether instruction that emphasizes macro-level essay organization can contribute to measurable improvements at the micro-level of sentence structure.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question of to what extent does explicit instruction in persuasive essay structure reduce sentence-level errors in the writing of Arabic-speaking EFL learners?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design to investigate the effect of explicit persuasive essay structure instruction on sentence-level errors in EFL writing. This design is commonly used in education research when random assignment is not feasible due to institutional or curricular constraints. By comparing learners' writing performance before and after an instructional intervention, the design allows for the identification of changes that can be reasonably attributed to the treatment (Cook & Campbell, 1979).

The independent variable was explicit instruction in persuasive essay structure, implemented through the Essay Structure–Instructional Strategy (ESIS). The dependent variable was sentence-level accuracy, operationalized as the frequency of grammatical and structural errors in learners' persuasive writing. This focus on observable linguistic outcomes aligns with empirical traditions in educational research that emphasize measurable learning gains (Mukattash, 1986; Norris & Ortega, 2000).

While the pre-test/post-test design allows for the examination of changes in sentence-level errors following instruction, the absence of a control group limits the strength of causal inference. Without a comparison group receiving traditional instruction, it is not possible to attribute improvements solely to the explicit essay-structure intervention. Nevertheless, the design provides preliminary evidence of instructional effectiveness and offers a basis for future experimental studies employing randomized or controlled group comparisons.

Participants and Educational Context

The participants were 60 undergraduate students enrolled in an Intensive English Program at a private university in Malaysia. All participants were native speakers of Arabic originating from various Middle Eastern countries and were studying English as a Foreign

Language for academic purposes. Based on institutional placement tests and course requirements, their proficiency levels were classified as intermediate (CEFR B1–B2).

The Malaysian higher education context is characterized by increasing international student mobility and a strong emphasis on English-medium instruction (Ali & Mahmud, 2018). Within this context, Arabic-speaking students are required to demonstrate competence in academic writing to progress in their studies (Alqasham et al., 2021). Participation in the study was voluntary, and students were informed that their course grades would not be affected by their decision to participate or withdraw.

Analysis

Instructional Intervention: Essay Structure–Instructional Strategy (ESIS)

The instructional intervention was conducted over a six-week period and integrated into the participants' regular writing classes. The Essay Structure–Instructional Strategy (ESIS) was designed to provide explicit guidance on the macro-structure of persuasive essays while systematically linking structural components to sentence-level grammar (Liu et al., 2024).

The intervention comprised three instructional phases. The first phase, the Blueprint Phase, introduced students to the conventional structure of persuasive essays, including introductions with clear thesis statements, body paragraphs organized around topic sentences and supporting details, and conclusions that restate and reinforce the main argument. This phase emphasized the communicative function of each section rather than rote adherence to a formula.

The second phase, the Functional Grammar Phase, explicitly connected essay sections to the grammatical structures typically required to fulfill their rhetorical purposes. For example, students were taught how copular constructions are commonly used in thesis statements, how complex sentences and cohesive devices support argument development in body paragraphs, and how modality and summarizing structures are used in conclusions. Grammar instruction was therefore embedded within authentic writing tasks rather than taught in isolation (Pham & Bui, 2022; Khan, 2022).

The final phase, the Revision Phase, focused on self-monitoring and self-editing. Students were trained to use essay structure as a checklist when revising their drafts, ensuring that each paragraph served its intended rhetorical function and that sentence structures were grammatically appropriate. This phase aimed to foster learner autonomy and reflective writing practices, which are key goals in contemporary EFL education (Hyland, 2000; Liu & Ahmad, 2024).

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected using a pre-test and post-test that formed the quantitative component of the study's quasi-experimental design. The instruments, identically titled *WRITING ERROR ANALYSIS* and each allocated 40 marks, were designed to assess sentence-level accuracy in persuasive writing. The pre-test established a baseline of participants' sentence structure proficiency, while the post-test, administered after the instructional intervention, enabled direct comparison to evaluate the effect of explicit essay structure instruction. Both tasks required participants to produce persuasive responses on familiar educational or social topics, ensuring consistency in genre and task demands.

All writing tasks were completed in the classroom under controlled conditions and written by hand on paper. The scripts were anonymized prior to analysis, and sentence-level errors were identified using a consistent error analysis framework. To control for variation in text length, error frequencies were normalized per 100 words. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a paired-samples t-test to determine whether changes in sentence-level accuracy from pre-test to post-test were statistically significant.

Error Coding and Data Analysis

A structured error taxonomy was developed to categorize sentence-level errors commonly observed in Arabic-speaking EFL writing. The taxonomy included subject–verb agreement errors, copula omission, word order errors related to the subject–verb–object structure, and sentence boundary errors such as run-on sentences and fragments. These categories were selected based on prior research and their relevance to the instructional focus of the intervention.

Each input was manually coded, and error frequencies were recorded for each category. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate mean error rates for the pre-test and post-test. Inferential statistical analysis was then conducted to determine whether observed differences were statistically significant. This approach allowed the study to identify both overall trends and category-specific changes in sentence-level accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the design and implementation of this study. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured that participation was entirely voluntary.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or negative consequences. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was removed from the data, and participants were assigned numerical codes. Electronic data were stored on password-protected devices, and access was restricted to the researcher. All collected data were used solely for academic research purposes in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

Findings and Discussion

Baseline Error Profile

Analysis of the pre-test persuasive essays (N = 60) revealed a total of 457 sentence-structure errors. Errors were categorized into five structural types. Run-on sentences (35.23%) and comma splices (24.95%) constituted the majority of errors, together accounting for over 60% of all observed structural inaccuracies. Additional error categories included missing or incorrect phrasal prepositions (19.69%), incorrect adverbial or adjectival placement (14.22%), and subject–verb agreement errors (5.91%). The predominance of clause-boundary errors suggests that difficulties in coordinating and subordinating clauses represent the primary structural challenge for this learner population prior to intervention.

Table 1 Frequency of Sentence Structure Error Types

Rank	Sentence Structure Error Type	Brief Explanation	Total Frequency (n = 457)	Percentage of Total Errors
1	Run-on Sentences	Occurs when two or more independent clauses are joined together without proper punctuation or conjunctions. The sentence continues too long without a clear break.	161	35.23%
2	Comma Splices	Occurs when two independent clauses are incorrectly joined using only a comma, instead of a semicolon, a coordinating conjunction or a period.	114	24.95%
3	Missing or Incorrect Phrasal Prepositions	Errors involving two or more words that function as a preposition, such as idiomatic expressions or phrasal verbs. The learner either omits the preposition or uses the wrong one.	90	19.69%
4	Incorrect Adverbial or Adjectival Placement	Errors where modifiers are placed incorrectly, leading to dangling modifiers or misplaced modifiers. This obscures the intended meaning of the sentence.	65	14.22%
5	Subject-Verb Agreement Errors	Occurs when the verb does not correctly match its subject in number (singular or plural). For example, a singular subject is incorrectly paired with a plural verb form.	27	5.91%
TOTAL			457	100.00%

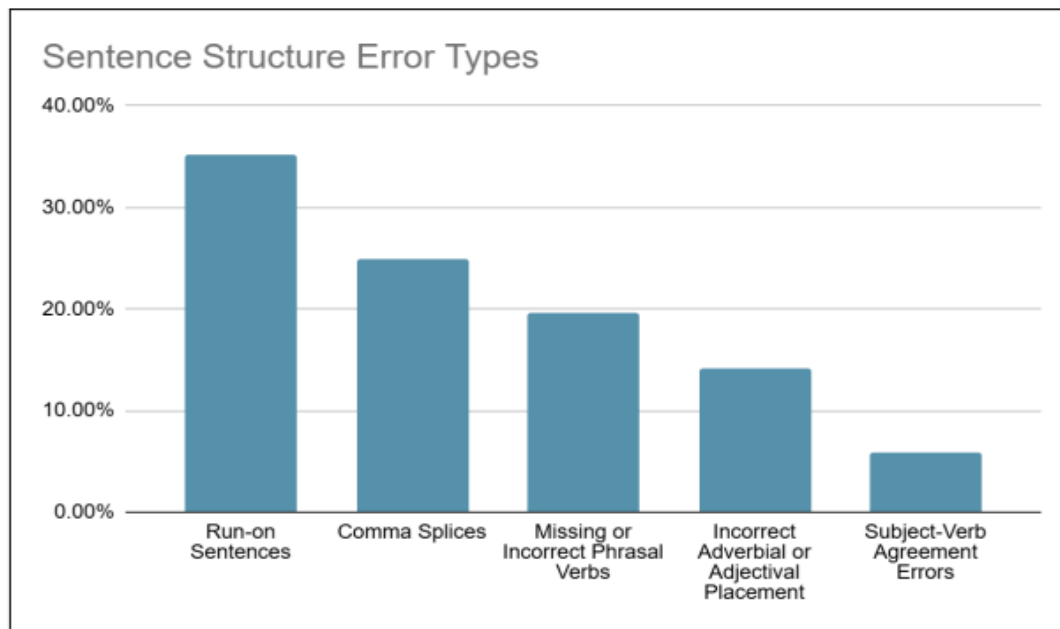


Figure1 Frequency of Sentence Structure Error Types

Effect of the ESIS Intervention

Post-intervention analysis demonstrated a substantial reduction in sentence-structure errors. The total number of errors decreased from 457 to 298, reflecting an overall reduction of 34.79%. The most pronounced improvement was observed in comma splices (51.75% reduction), followed by run-on sentences (37.89%). More moderate reductions

were noted in subject–verb agreement errors (25.93%), missing or incorrect phrasal prepositions (24.44%), and incorrect modifier placement (15.38%).

These findings indicate that the intervention was particularly effective in addressing clause-boundary violations. Quantitative score analysis further confirmed the effectiveness of the intervention. Mean sentence-structure scores increased from 20.50 (SD = 5.23) in the pre-test to 25.80 (SD = 5.09) in the post-test. Results indicate a statistically significant reduction in overall sentence-level errors following the instructional intervention ($p < .05$). Improvements were observed across several error categories, suggesting that explicit essay-structure instruction contributed to greater sentence-level accuracy.

Table 2 Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Errors

Sentence Structure Error Type	Pre-Test Errors (n=457)	Post-Test Errors (n=298)	Reduction in Errors	Percentage Reduction
Run-on Sentences	161	100	61	37.89%
Comma Splices	114	55	59	51.75%
Missing or Incorrect Phrasal Prepositions	90	68	22	24.44%
Incorrect Adverbial or Adjectival Placement	65	55	10	15.38%
Subject-Verb Agreement Errors	27	20	7	25.93%
TOTAL	457	298	159	34.79%
Average	7.62	4.97	2.65	34.78%

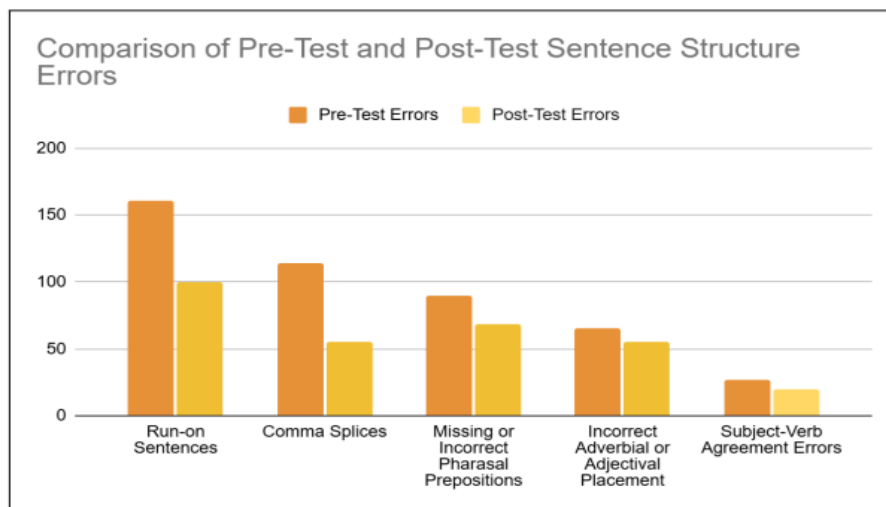


Figure2 Frequency of Sentence Structure Error Types

Analysis and Discussion

The findings provide robust empirical support for the effectiveness of explicit essay structure instruction in improving sentence-level accuracy among Arabic-speaking EFL learners. The statistically significant increase in post-test scores, combined with the 34.79% overall reduction in structural errors, indicates that the intervention had both statistical and pedagogical significance. Notably, the most substantial reductions occurred in run-on sentences and comma splices - error types strongly associated with L1 rhetorical transfer. The targeted decline in these boundary-related errors suggests that macro-level structural instruction may function as an indirect mechanism for enhancing micro-level grammatical control. By providing a fixed rhetorical blueprint, the ESIS likely reduced cognitive load associated with organizing persuasive arguments, thereby allowing learners to allocate greater attentional resources to sentence construction and boundary monitoring (RahmtAllah, 2020).

Qualitative findings further corroborate this interpretation. Participants reported that the structured essay framework reduced planning ambiguity and facilitated conscious monitoring of L1 transfer patterns. Learners also described increased confidence in regulating sentence boundaries and grammatical forms, reflecting enhanced grammatical self-efficacy.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that explicit macro-structural scaffolding can serve as an effective intervention for addressing persistent sentence-boundary errors among Arabic-speaking EFL learners. These findings support an integrated pedagogical model in which rhetorical organization and grammatical accuracy are treated as interdependent dimensions of L2 writing development (Scott & Tucker, 1974; Sweller, 1998; Nguyen & Truong, 2024; Yu, 2021).

Future research should employ controlled experimental designs and explore the integration of AI-assisted writing feedback systems to further examine how structural instruction and digital tools jointly support EFL writing development.

The findings demonstrate that explicit essay structure instruction (ESIS) produces a statistically significant and pedagogically meaningful improvement in sentence-level accuracy among Arabic-speaking EFL learners. The 34.79% overall reduction in structural errors, alongside a 5.30-point gain in assessment scores ($t(59) = 8.01$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.98$), confirms that macro-level structural scaffolding can exert a substantial influence on micro-level grammatical performance.

Importantly, the improvement was not evenly distributed across all error categories. The most pronounced reductions occurred in run-on sentences (37.89%) and comma splices (51.75%)—the very error types identified at baseline as the most frequent and strongly associated with L1 rhetorical transfer. This pattern suggests that explicit macro-structural instruction can function as a structural regulator of sentence boundaries. By providing learners with a rigid, predictable rhetorical blueprint, ESIS appears to have constrained clause expansion and reduced the tendency to reproduce Arabic-style coordinate linkage in English writing.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings offer empirical support for Cognitive Load Theory as a productive explanatory framework. The structured essay blueprint likely reduced extraneous cognitive load associated with idea generation and organization,

thereby freeing working memory resources for grammatical monitoring and boundary control. The large effect size further suggests that the instructional impact was not merely statistical but cognitively substantive.

The results also extend contrastive rhetoric research by demonstrating that L1-influenced error patterns—particularly those related to clause linkage—are not resistant to change. Rather than attempting to suppress L1 influence through isolated grammar drills, the intervention addressed rhetorical organization directly, enabling learners to consciously regulate transfer tendencies. Qualitative findings reinforce this interpretation: participants reported increased awareness of L1/L2 contrasts and described the structure as a mechanism for interrupting habitual boundary errors.

Pedagogically, the findings challenge approaches that treat grammar instruction and essay organization as separate domains. The substantial decline in boundary errors suggests that structural awareness can indirectly strengthen grammatical control when embedded within purposeful genre tasks. However, the comparatively smaller reductions in modifier placement and phrasal preposition errors indicate that not all linguistic subsystems respond equally to macro-structural scaffolding. Some micro-level forms may require targeted, form-focused instruction alongside structural guidance.

At the curriculum and teacher education levels, the study supports an integrated instructional model in which macro-level rhetorical structure and micro-level sentence accuracy are developed concurrently. Writing pedagogy for Arabic-speaking EFL learners may benefit from explicit essay blueprints that simultaneously serve as cognitive scaffolds, contrastive tools, and self-monitoring frameworks (Hyland, 2007).

Conclusion

Overall, the findings underscore that improvements in sentence-level accuracy emerge most effectively within instructional environments that align cognitive load management, rhetorical organization, and grammatical awareness. Rather than viewing sentence accuracy as a purely rule-based phenomenon, the results indicate that structural clarity at the discourse level can meaningfully reshape learners' control over sentence boundaries and grammatical precision. To conclude, this study examined the impact of explicit persuasive essay structure instruction on sentence-level errors among Arabic-speaking EFL learners. The findings revealed a statistically significant improvement in sentence-level accuracy following the ESIS intervention, including a 34.79% overall reduction in structural errors and a significant gain in writing scores ($t(59) = 8.01$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.98$).

The most substantial improvements occurred in sentence-boundary errors, particularly run-on sentences and comma splices, suggesting that macro-level structural guidance can enhance micro-level grammatical control. These results support the integration of essay structure instruction into EFL writing pedagogy as a means of improving both organizational clarity and sentence accuracy.

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