



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

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ABSTRACT

DOI: doi.org/10.60072/ijeissah.2026.v4i02.003

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Received: 16 Feb 2026
Revised: 17 Mar 2026
Accepted: 19 Mar 2026

This study investigates the effectiveness of explicit essay structure-instructional strategies (ESIS) in improving English sentence structure accuracy among Arabic-speaking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Arabic speakers frequently encounter challenges in academic writing due to significant linguistic dissimilarities and First Language (L1) transfer. The research employed a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design involving 60 Arabic ESL students in an academic writing course. The intervention utilized a Genre-Based Approach (GBA) to provide a macro-level organizational blueprint for persuasive essays, combined with the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) to address micro-level syntactic errors. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews to explore learner perceptions. The findings indicated that the ESIS intervention led to a notable reduction in sentence-level errors. Learners reported that the structural scaffolding reduced cognitive load, allowing them to focus more effectively on grammatical precision. The study demonstrates that coupling macro-level structural guidance with micro-level instruction is an effective pedagogical model for mitigating L1-based writing errors. This approach suggests that improvements in sentence accuracy emerge most effectively when learners are provided with a clear organizational framework that assists in managing the complexities of English academic discourse.

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

Background

Learning English presents distinct difficulties for Arab students, with writing often perceived as the most challenging skill due to the required command of grammar and vocabulary (Hyland, 2007). Arabic speakers frequently demonstrate insufficient competence as writers, often making errors and lacking awareness of how to logically connect ideas into well-formed sentences (Abdelmohsen, 2022). A primary source of these errors is interference from their mother tongue, as the structural differences between Arabic and English are considerable (Scott & Tucker, 1974; Latif, Alghizzi & Alshahrani., 2024). For instance, Arabic sentence patterns differ significantly from English, leading learners to transfer L1 structures that result in grammatical inaccuracies.

Specific systemic disparities include the placement of adjectives after nouns, the absence of the verb 'to be' in the present tense, and a less complex present tense system compared to English (Mukattash, 2001; (Ahmed, *et al.*, 2023); Al-Hamzi *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, rhetorical and cultural differences in styles like argumentative writing can make it difficult for Arabic learners to meet the structural expectations of English academic discourse (Ahmed, *et al.*, 2023). Research suggests a link between idea organization and sentence-level construction; thus, poor organization often complicates text comprehension. Persuasive writing relies heavily on a well-organized structure to effectively present arguments.

Current instruction may prioritize grammar over deeper rhetorical understanding, which may not adequately prepare students for complex essays (Ait Aissa & Chami, 2023). This study addresses the need to explore how targeted instructional strategies focusing on overall essay structure can mitigate sentence-level errors by providing a clear organizational framework.

Literature Review

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, 2007). 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. Among Arabic-speaking EFL learners, persistent sentence-level errors, including 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, 2001). 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, 2022). 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). 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, 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.

Methods

Research Design

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach involving 60 intermediate Arabic-speaking EFL learners. The quantitative component consisted of a single-group pre-test and post-test to measure changes in sentence-level errors. The intervention, conducted over a short duration, utilized the ESIS model to teach macro-level persuasive essay blueprints and micro-level syntactic accuracy. The analysis focused on a specific taxonomy of sentence-level errors: run-on sentences, comma splices, missing or incorrect phrasal prepositions, incorrect adverbial or adjectival placement, and subject-verb agreement. These categories were manually coded in both pre-test and post-test essays to track frequency changes.

A qualitative subsection involved data collection through semi-structured interviews and student reflections. Participants responded to a reflection guide regarding their use of the organizational blueprint and participated in interviews to share their perceptions of the instruction's effectiveness. Qualitative data analysis focused on thematic coding to identify patterns in learner experiences. Error coding was conducted manually; however, it is acknowledged that only one rater performed the coding, and inter-rater reliability coefficients are not available.

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. Within this context, Arabic-speaking students are required to demonstrate competence in academic writing to progress in their studies. 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.

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, Ismail & Ahmad, 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 (Alrouji, 2020).

The second phase, the Functional Grammar Phase, explicitly connected essay sections to the grammatical structures typically required to fulfil 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 at fostering learner autonomy and reflective writing practices, which are key goals in contemporary EFL education (Hyland, 2007; Liu, Ismail & Ahmad, 2024).

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were gathered using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative testing with qualitative insights. Students completed a pre-test and a post-test, both titled Writing Error Analysis and scored out of 40, to measure sentence-level accuracy in persuasive writing. The pre-test captured their initial writing ability, while the post-test, given after explicit instruction on essay structure, allowed for direct comparison. In both tasks, students wrote persuasive texts on familiar social or educational topics under controlled classroom conditions, by hand. To ensure fairness, scripts were anonymized, errors were analyzed using the same framework, and results were standardized per 100 words. Statistical analysis included descriptive measures and a paired-samples t-test.

To complement the test data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students representing different proficiency levels. These conversations explored how students experienced the instruction, how they corrected their own errors, and whether they noticed first-language interference. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically. Together, the quantitative and qualitative data provided both measurable evidence of improvement and richer insight into students' learning processes, offering a more complete picture of how the intervention shaped their writing.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics guided every stage of this study. Participants were fully informed about the research, gave voluntary consent, and could withdraw at any time. Their identities were protected through anonymization, and all data were securely stored and used only for academic purposes in line with institutional guidelines.

Results and Discussion

The study's analysis of sentence structure errors revealed a substantial reduction in linguistic inaccuracies following the instructional intervention. At the baseline, participants produced a total of 457 distinct sentence-level errors in their persuasive essays. The most frequent errors identified were run-on sentences and comma splices, which collectively accounted for 35.23% of the total, suggesting that rhetorical and linguistic transfer from Arabic discourse—which favours coordinate linkage—is a primary source of difficulty for these learners. Following the ESIS intervention, the total error count decreased to 298, representing a 34.79% overall reduction. A paired-samples t-test confirmed that the increase in mean sentence structure accuracy scores was statistically significant, with a large effect size of $d=0.98$ demonstrating that the instructional impact was cognitively substantive.

Specific improvements were noted across the targeted error taxonomy, which included missing or incorrect phrasal prepositions, incorrect adverbial or adjectival placement, and subject-verb agreement. The results indicate that while the error coding was conducted manually and lacked multiple raters or inter-rater reliability coefficients, the measurable reduction in error frequency remained consistent across all participants (Han & Selinker, 1996).

The qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews and student reflections further validated the quantitative gains. Students reported an increased sense of grammatical self-efficacy, stating that they felt more confident in their ability to produce correct sentence structures. A central theme emerged regarding the reduction of cognitive load; participants felt that having a "structured, predictable rhetorical blueprint" served as an effective macro-level scaffolding tool. This organizational framework allowed learners to redirect their mental energy away from the complexities of essay organization and toward the technical monitoring of micro-level sentence grammar and mechanics.

The results support an interaction mechanism between macro-structure and micro-accuracy. Students noted that the "blueprint" acted as a "system for organizing" that helped them decide which ideas to include or remove, thereby facilitating more focused and grammatically accurate sentence construction. This suggests that providing a clear rhetorical framework helps learners consciously interrupt habitual L1 transfer errors, such as the use of run-on sentences, by imposing the structural constraints of English academic writing. The large effect size is consistent with the hypothesis that explicit structural instruction provides a critical scaffolding mechanism that enhances a learner's ability to manage complex sentence boundaries (Al-Rickaby, 2023).

Table1: 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%

	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%
4	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%

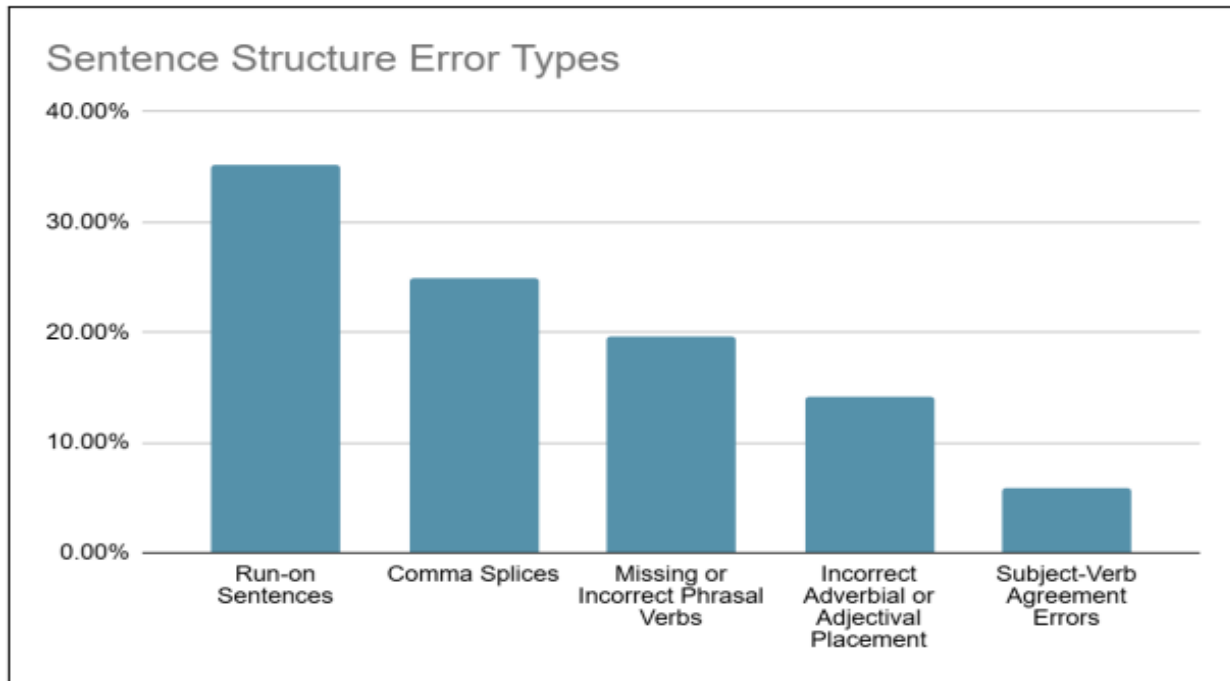


Figure 1: Frequency of Sentence Structure Error Types

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%

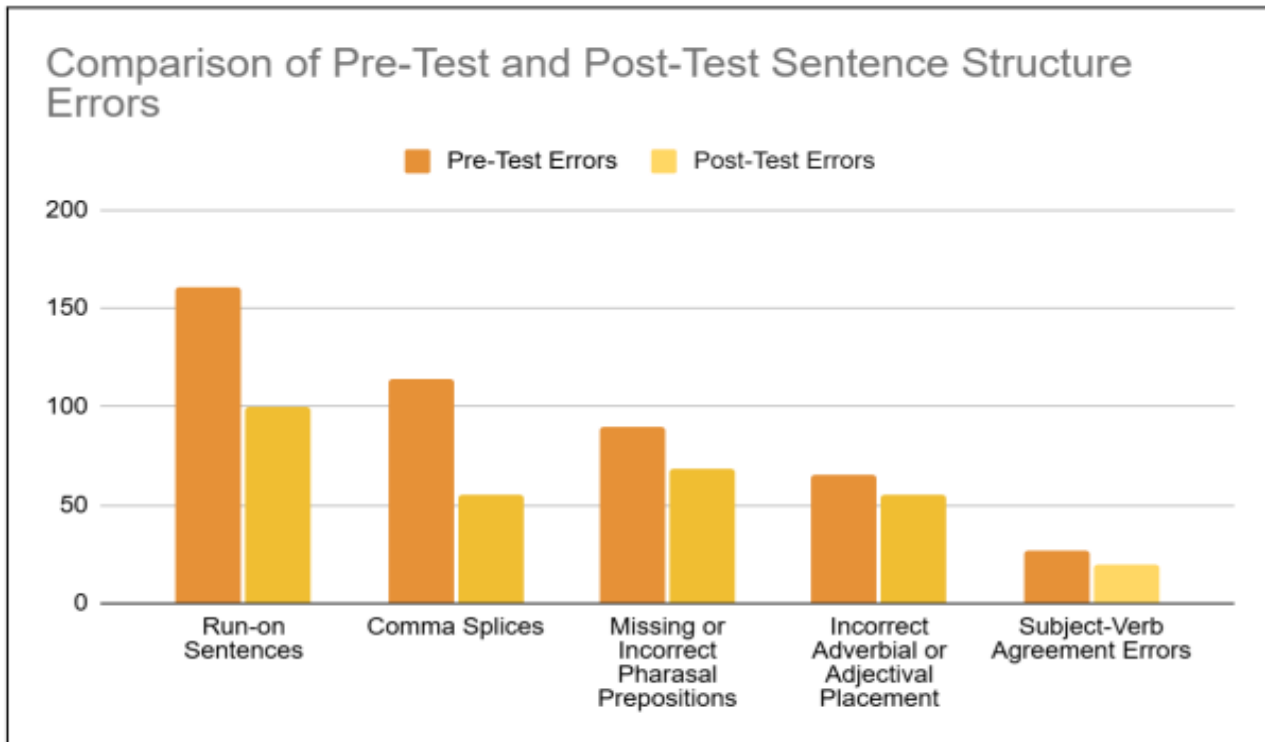


Figure 2: Frequency of Sentence Structure Error Types

Table 3: Themes from Semi-structured Interviews

Rank	Emergent Theme	Key Mechanism/Rationale	Frequency of Mention (n=10)
1	Increased Grammatical Self-Efficacy	Learners universally reported a significant boost in confidence regarding their ability to produce persuasively written English with correct sentence structures.	9
2	Macro-Level Scaffolding	Participants felt that having a clear essay blueprint (structure) reduced the mental effort required for organization, allowing them to	9

	Reduces Cognitive Load	redirect focus to monitoring sentence grammar and mechanics.	
3	Explicit L1/L2 Contrast for Error Control	Students noted that the rigid English structure helped them consciously interrupt and correct habitual L1 transfer errors (like run-on sentences).	7

The high frequency of Theme 2 reinforces the idea that the ESIS worked as a scaffolding tool. By externalizing the organizational demands, the instruction allowed learners to focus on the technical details of sentence construction. This finding validates the study's core hypothesis: the perceived effectiveness of the structural framework is rooted in its ability to enhance cognitive control over complex sentence boundary management (Wu, & Alrabah, 2023).

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).

Interpretation and Implications

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 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 systematic, predictable rhetorical blueprint, ESIS appears to have constrained clause expansion and reduced the tendency to reproduce Arabic-style coordinate linkage in English writing (Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020).

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; Zhang & Zhang, 2021).

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.

The study is limited by its use of a single-group pre-test/post-test design without a control group, making it difficult to attribute improvements solely to the ESIS intervention. A control group was not feasible due to institutional constraints and the small available population of eligible participants. Further limitations include a single institutional context, a short intervention duration of six weeks, the use of handwritten essays which may affect legibility and error identification, and a focus limited exclusively to sentence-boundary errors.

Conclusion

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, 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.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Ethical approval was granted by the host institution. The study followed institutional guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants received clear information about the study, provided written informed consent, and were notified that participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time without penalty or academic disadvantage.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the students who participated in this study for their time and cooperation. Appreciation is also extended to the academic staff and administrators of the Intensive English Program for their support and assistance during the data collection process.

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